Educational Differentials in the Risk of Divorce and Their Trends across Marriage Cohorts of Korean Women*

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ABSTRACT

Little research in Korea has systematically examined trends in the risk of marital dissolution, especially trends in educational differentials in divorce. Using individual-level data from the Korean Longitudinal Survey of Women and Family (KLoWF), we investigate how the association between education and divorce has changed across three marriage cohorts of women who married in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, after taking into account various individual controls. The result from the Cox proportional hazard models of the divorce risk shows that the association between educational attainment and divorce has become more negative for younger marriage cohorts. In other words, divorce is increasingly concentrated among women with lower educational attainment than among their counterpart with higher education. We discuss implications of the growing concentration of divorce among low-educated women for socioeconomic differentials in children's education and well-being.

Key Words: Divorce, Educational Differentials, Korea

Background

Studies in several industrial countries such as the United States and Japan have found that divorce is increasingly concentrated among women with lower educational attainment than among their counterpart with a higher education (Martin 2004; Castro Martin and Bumpass 1989; Raymo, Iwasawa, and Bumpass 2004). The growing concentration of divorce among low educated women has important implications for educational and social inequality across generations, to the extent that marital disruption due to divorce is negatively associated with children's schooling and other indicators of well-being (Amato 2000; McLanahan and Sandefur

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1994). The educational divergence in divorce rates is an element of broad family changes that potentially exacerbate social inequality across generations. McLanahan (2004) has described two trajectories of family change in western industrial countries that have different implications for children. One trajectory, which has potentially positive impacts on children's well-being such as the delay in childbearing and increase in mother's employment, is followed by the most-educated women, while the other, which has potentially negative impacts such as divorce and non-marital birth, is followed by the least-educated women. In other words, family stability has become an important mechanism through which social inequality is reproduced across generations (McLanahan and Percheski 2008).

The potential implications of growing educational differentials in divorce for social inequality are of particular importance in contexts where public welfare support to single parents and their children is relatively limited. The lack of income support, subsidized child care and other kinds of welfare provisions to single parents may render the negative consequences of growing up with a single parent particularly profound. Although in most industrial countries, single-parent families are at greater risk of poverty than their counterparts of two-parent families, countries substantially vary in the degree of public support to single parents and thus the economic standing of single-parent families relative to two-parent families (McLanahan 2004; Rainwater and Smeeding 2003). The cross-national variation in economic and social environments for single-parent families makes it interesting to compare across countries the extent to which single parenthood affects children's education and well-being.

In this paper, we examine trends in marital dissolution across women with different educational attainment in South Korea (hereafter Korea). Specifically, we compare the strength and pattern of association between educational attainment and marital dissolution across marriage cohorts. The family and social environments in Korea, which are quite distinct from those in western societies, make the Korean case interesting to test the generalizability of diverging trends in divorce between the most- and the least-educated women found in the United States and some other western countries. First, despite rapid social and family changes during the past few decades, the prevalence of non-marital birth has consistently been negligible. Along with the sharp decline in mortality, the extremely low prevalence of non-marital births has led divorce to a major cause of single parenthood in recent years. Second, although the negative perception of divorce, associated with traditional Confucian norms, is still substantial (Chang and Min 2002), evidence suggests that the divorce rate has sharply increased since the mid-1990s. The crude divorce rate increased 2.5 times during a decade from 1 (per 1,000 persons) in 1990 to 2.5 in 2000. The rate further increased to the peak of 3.5 in 2003, followed by the slight decline to 2.6 in 2005. Important is that the recent rate in Korea is similar to or even higher than many western countries. In other words, the traditional perception of Korea as a low divorce country (Park and Cho 1995) does not hold any longer.

The considerably weak public welfare system in Korea makes particularly important the implications of the rapidly growing divorce for intergenerational social inequality. The Korean welfare system is conservative, characterized by comparably low levels of public spending, a

strong reliance on the market, and an occupation-based social insurance system (Aspalter 2001). For instance, in 2003 Korea showed the lowest level of public spending on tertiary education among OECD countries (OECD 2006). Public funds accounted for only 23 percent of total expenditures for tertiary education in Korea, which was the lowest. In various countries such as Austria, Finland, Greece, Sweden, and Turkey, public funds accounted more than 90 percent of total expenditures. Indeed, only three countries (Austria, Japan, and the United States) among OECD countries, beside Korea, showed the share of public funds less than 50 percent. Not only the considerably low level of overall public spending but welfare provisions specifically targeted for single-parent families are very limited (Kim et al. 2005).

Previous Research

Previous studies have found that growing up with a divorced-single parent has negative consequences for children's education in the Korean context (Park 2007, 2008). Given the negative impacts of parental divorce, it is of paramount importance to carefully document socioeconomic differentials in divorce and their trends over time. Has the recent increase in divorce been uniform across different socioeconomic groups? The current literature of divorce in Korea is very limited. As far as we are aware of, there is no study that explicitly addresses trends in socioeconomic differentials in divorce, except for Park and Raymo (2008)'s study that will be discussed below.

As compared to most studies in Korea that relied on simple measures of divorce such as crude divorce rates or percentages of divorced people (Chung 2004; Park 2000), Lee's study (2006) is one of the rare studies in Korea that examined the risk factors of divorce among women by taking into account the duration of exposure to divorce. The major risk factors examined in the study include women's education, employment status, age at marriage, child birth, and duration of marriage. In particular, comparing the risk of divorce across four periods of calendar years (1987 or earlier, 1988-1992, 1993-1997, and 1998-2002), Lee found the increasing risk of divorce across the four periods. However, she did not address at all how the effects of risk factors (i.e., education) changed across the periods, providing no information on the extent to which the recent increase in divorce is varying or uniform across different socioeconomic groups.

The work of Park and Raymo (2008) is the only study that explicitly investigated trends in divorce across different educational groups. Using annual counts of marriage and divorce by the year of marriage and marriage duration from vital statistics, Park and Raymo (2008) found that the increase in the risk of divorce was more substantial among the least-educated than the most-educated men and women, leading to growing educational differentials in divorce. Specifically, among the 1993 marriage cohort, the percentage of the least-educated (middle school or less) women who ended in divorce within 3 years was 9 percent higher than the corresponding percentage of the most-educated (tertiary education) women. However, the gap between the least-educated and the most-educated women increased to 19 percent among the 2003 marriage cohort. The growing educational differential, primarily driven by more substantial increase

among the least-educated than the most-educated, in divorce was found at the marriage duration of 7 years as well. The analysis by Park and Raymo provides the most direct information on trends in educational differentials in marital dissolution.

In the current study, we supplement the analysis of Park and Raymo with individual-level data. Note that Park and Raymo (2008) estimated the risk of divorce using vital statistics, i.e., the number of marriages and divorces registered from 1991 to 2006 for each educational group. Using individual-level data from the Korean Longitudinal Survey of Women and Family (KLoWF), we investigate in this study how the association between education and divorce has changed across the three marriage cohorts of women who married in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. We take into account differences between educational groups in age at marriage and child presence to assess the trends in educational differentials in divorce, which is a major departure from the previous study by Park and Raymo (2008).

Data and Method

Data

The Korean Longitudinal Survey of Women and Family (KLoWF) is a nationally representative survey, gathering information on various demographic events among 10,000 Korean women aged 19-64 who resided in households, regardless of their marital status. The baseline survey was conducted in 2007 and respondents will be resurveyed every year to establish a longitudinal dataset. Currently, only data from the baseline survey are available. On the basis of the Computer Aided Personal Interview (CAPI), a large set of demographic and socioeconomic variables, including retrospective marital histories, was collected. In this study, we focus on marital dissolution only from the first marriage, in light of potential differences between the first marriage and the second (or higher) marriage in the way in which education and other factors affect marital dissolution. After deleting never-married women and married women who have missing information on any of major variables included in the analysis, we end up with 7,964 women who remain at their first marriage as of the survey time or have divorced from their first husbands. We assess the risk of divorce up to 20 years after marriage. Among total 7,964 marriages, 240 cases ended in divorce within 20 years of marriage.

In order to examine educational differentials in divorce, we distinguish women who had a tertiary education (including both two-year junior college and four-year university) from those who did not. In the baseline survey, respondents were asked to indicate the highest level of education they ever attended. Although we could use a more detailed classification of educational attainment, we consider it more appropriate to focus on the effect of tertiary education given a fairly small number of divorces in our dataset. To investigate trends in educational differentials in divorce, the effect of tertiary education is allowed to vary across three marriage cohorts by including interactions between tertiary education and marriage cohort. The oldest marriage cohort consists of women who married in the 1970s (or earlier), the second

cohort in the 1980s and the youngest cohort in the 1990s (or later). Therefore, the major focus of our study is to assess the direction and magnitude to which the difference in the risk of divorce between women with a tertiary education and those with less than a tertiary education has changed across the three marriage cohorts.

In estimating the association between education and the risk of divorce, we take into account other demographic variables that may be associated with both education and divorce. We control for the age at first marriage by distinguishing four groups of women: those who married at age 15-19, 20-24 (reference category), 25-29, and 30 or older. Studies in the United States have consistently shown that early marriage is associated with the increase risk of divorce (White 1990; Thornton and Rodgers 1987). However, some evidence suggests that the relationship between divorce and age at marriage is non-linear, resulting in a U-shaped pattern (Teachman 2002). In a study of divorce in Korea, Lee (2006) also found the greater risk of divorce in two extreme age groups than the middle. We also include a variable of child presence,tapped as a time-varying variable that has 1 since the birth of first child or 0 before the birth. Given that literally all the births occur within marriage in Korea, child presence is expected to reduce the risk of divorce (White 1990).

Methods

We use a Cox proportional hazard model to estimate the effects on divorce of education, marriage cohort, interactions between education and marriage cohort, age at marriage, and child presence (Cox and Oates 1984). The Cox model postulates the hazard as a function of covariates:

$$log\ h(t)+\alpha(t)+\beta_1 x_1+\beta_2 Z_1+\beta_3 Z_2+\beta_4 x_1 Z_1+\beta_5 x_1 Z_2+\beta_6 x_2+\beta_7 x_3$$

where a(t) is the unspecified baseline hazard rate, x_1 is tertiary education, z_2 and z_1 indicate the marriage cohort of 1980s and 1990s, respectively (as compared to the reference category of 1970s marriage cohort). Therefore, the coefficients of β_4 and β_5 refer to interaction effects between tertiary education and the two marriage cohorts. x_2 is the age at marriage and included in the model as three dummy variables representing 15-19, 25-29, and 30 or older (as compared to the reference category of 20-24). Finally, x_3 is the time-varying variable of child presence that has a value of 1 after the birth of the first child. Except for child presence, all the variables included in the model are time-invariant. It is straightforward to treat age at marriage fixed. In the Korean context, it is very rare for married women to return to school for further education. Therefore, the final level of educational attainment reported by a currently married woman is likely the final level as of the timing of first marriage, which has unlikely changed since the first marriage.

To preface the results from the Cox hazard model, we present educational differences in the current marital status using data from Korean Census 1995 and 2005. Specifically, we calculate the percentage of divorced women among ever-married (i.e., sum of currently married and

divorced) women aged 35-44 for each educational group, and compare them between 1995 and 2005 to address trends in divorce separately by educational groups. Of course, the census data of the current marital status have several critical limitations in addressing trends in divorce. As Raymo et al. (2004) point out, two issues are particularly serious. First, currently married women include those who have divorced and remarried, thus underestimating the prevalence of divorce. Second, the census data do not provide information on the duration of marriage. Given the younger age at marriage among women with a lower education than those with a higher education, low educated women have a longer period of risk of divorce than their counterparts of high educated women. Despite such limitations, however, the census data may be still useful to obtain an insight into trends in divorce by educational groups, considering the advantage of large data that allows reliable and refined analysis (see Martin 2004). In interpreting the result from the census data, the limitations of data should be kept in mind.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics of the variables used in the Cox proportional hazard models by marriage cohorts. Except for the frequency, all the statistics indicate percentages. First, the percentage of women with a tertiary education has substantially increased across three marriage cohorts: it increased from 3.9 percent for the 1970s cohort to 48.7 percent for the 1990s cohort. Along with the considerable increase in education, the age at marriage has also substantially increased across marriage cohorts. Although 18 percent of the 1970s marriage cohort married at age less than 20, the corresponding figure for the 1990s cohort is only 1 percent. Contrastingly, the percentage of women who married at age 30 or older increased from 0.8 percent for the 1970s cohort to 13.4 percent for the 1990s cohort. The statistics for childbirth indicate the extent to which a woman has ever had a birth before censoring (i.e., whichever earlier among 20 years of marriage, the survey date, or divorce). Finally, at the bottom of the table, presented are the unweighted numbers of divorces and women for each marriage cohort. Apparently, the number of divorces for each cohort is fairly small, requiring caution to interpret the results in our study.

The Percentage of Divorced Women in Census

Before examining the results of the Cox hazard model, we present the percentage of divorced women aged 35-44 from the census data. Due to the large size of data, we present the percentages for each of five educational groups, although in the Cox model, we focus on the difference between those with a tertiary education and those without. In **Figure 1**, white bars indicate the percentage of divorced women in each educational group in 1995, while dark bars correspond to 2005. In 1995, 3.2 percent, 3.0 percent, 2.6 percent, 2.7 percent, and 1.8 percent of ever-married women with a primary or less education, middle school, high school, 2-year junior

college, and 4-year university, respectively were in divorce. Although those with a university education show relatively lower prevalence of divorce than other educational groups, the differences within the other four educational groups are not substantial.

As compared to white bars for 1995, dark bars indicating percentages in 2005 clearly show increases in the prevalence of divorce between the two years in every educational group. However, the degree of increase is more substantial in lower educational attainment. The percentage of divorced women among ever-married women with a primary or less education increased from 3.2 percent in 1995 to 11.7 percent in 2005 (266 percent increase). The corresponding increase among women with a middle school education is from 3.0 percent to 10.2 percent (240 percent increase). Two highest educational groups show much smaller increases from 2.7 percent to 4.6 percent among women with 2-year junior college (70 percent increase), and from 1.8 percent to 3.0 percent among women with 4-year university (67 percent increase). In the result, educational differentials in divorce have diverged in 2005. In 1995, the percentage of divorced women among the least-educated was only 1.8 times the percentage among the most-educated, while in 2005 the percentage was 3.9 times.

Cox Proportional Hazard Models

The changes in the proportion of divorced women between the two census data suggest growing educational differentials in divorce. As pointed out, however, the result from the census data requires caution because of data limitations described above. Now, we move to discuss the results of the Cox proportional hazard models presented in **Table 2**. Model 1 includes tertiary education, marriage cohorts, and interactions between tertiary education and marriage cohorts. Because the 1970s marriage cohort is the reference category, the coefficient of tertiary education pertains to the effect for the 1970s marriage cohort. Although the coefficient of tertiary education is positive, suggesting the greater risk of divorce among women with a tertiary education than their counterparts without a tertiary education for the 1970s cohort, the coefficient is not statistically significant. The two coefficients of marriage cohort show that the risk of divorce increased for the two later cohorts than the earliest cohort.

The major focus of this study is the magnitude and direction of the interaction terms between tertiary education and marriage cohorts. The two interaction terms are negative and statistically significant. Considering that the coefficient of tertiary education for the 1970s cohort is 0.79, the coefficient of interaction between tertiary education and the 1980s cohort, -1.22, indicates that the effect of tertiary education becomes negative (-0.43). In other words, for the 1980s cohort, tertiary education reduces the risk of divorce, while it increases the risk of divorce for the 1970s cohort (however, the effect for the 1970s is not statistically significant). The more negative coefficient (-1.78) for the 1990s cohort indicates that the protective role of tertiary education becomes even stronger for the most recent cohort. In other words, the greater risk of divorce among women without a tertiary education than their counterparts with a tertiary education has become more substantial.

In order to examine the extent to which educational differentials in the risk of divorce are

explained by differences in the age at marriage, Model 2 controls for age at marriage. Model 3 includes a control of child presence in addition to age at marriage. The coefficients of tertiary education, marriage cohorts, and interaction terms between tertiary education and marriage cohorts change little after taking into account differences in age at marriage and child presence. In other words, model comparisons indicate that the growing educational differentials in the risk of divorce are robust even after controlling for major demographic variables. Turning to the effects of age at marriage and child presence, the results in **Table 2** show that age at marriage is non-linearly related to the risk of divorce. Marriages at very young or old ages are associated with the increased risk of divorce relative to marriages at middle ages. This finding is consistent with Lee's (2006) result. As expected, having a child significantly reduces the risk of divorce.

Conclusion

In this study, we have carefully documented trends in divorce for different educational groups of women. Comparisons between 1995 and 2005 census data clearly show much substantial increases in the proportion of divorced women with a lower education than among their counterparts with a higher education. The result of the Cox proportional hazard model shows that the protective effect of tertiary education on the risk of divorce has become stronger for recent marriage cohorts, suggesting the growing concentration of divorce among women without a tertiary education than those with a tertiary education. The trend in educational differentials in divorce found in our current study, which relied on individual-level survey data, is consistent with the trend found in the previous study of Park and Raymo (2008), which used vital statistics.

The trend of growing educational differentials in divorce has important implications for the well-being of children growing up with a single parent. As McLanahan (2004) describes family changes in the United States, the growing concentration of divorce among low educated women implies growing disparities in children's resources that are essential for their education and well-being. A growing number of students from families of low socioeconomic strata also have to deal with disadvantages associated with family instability. The diverging educational (or socioeconomic) differentials in the risk of divorce have particularly serious implications for social stratification in the Korean context where public support for single-parent families is meager. In other words, without significant changes in public support for single-parent families, the recent trend in divorce likely leads to growing disparities in children's resources and ultimately worsening social inequality.

Obviously, the fairly small sample size of divorced women in the KLoWF is a critical problem that prevents reliable estimates of the risk of divorce across marriage cohorts. As a longitudinal dataset, the KLoWF is an excellent source for studying changing family structure and behaviors in Korea. However, the relatively small sample size, especially of divorced women, restricts a systematic analysis of historical changes in determinants of divorce. Along with this kind of longitudinal data collection, large-scale, repeated cross-sectional surveys such as the June Current Population Survey (CPS) or the National Survey of Family Growth in the United States, which provide marital history

information for a fairly large number of women, would be useful for studies of divorce in Korea (Martin 2004; Teachman 2002). The literature on demography of divorce in Korea is very limited, partially reflecting that the rapid increase in divorce is a very recent trend. Considering the rapidly changing family structure and its implications for social inequality, more research should carefully document changing rates of divorce and address causal factors affecting the risk of divorce.

Figure 1. Percentages of Divorced of Women Aged 35-44 by Education (Census Data)

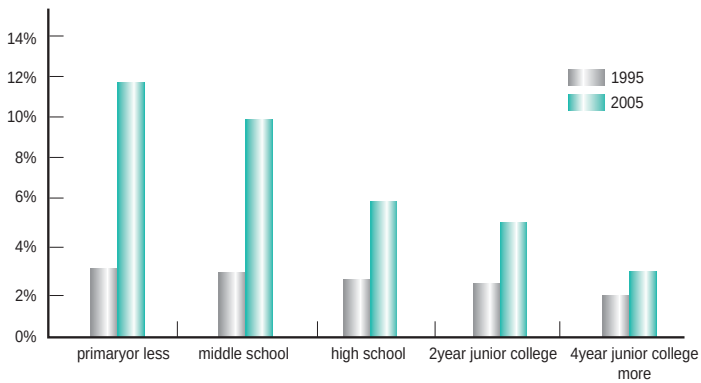

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics (Percentages) by Marriage Cohort

	Marriage Cohort			
	1970s	1980s	1990s	All
Tertiary education	3.9	15.7	48.7	30.4
Age at marriage				
< 20	18.2	4.0	1.1	6.1
20-24	65.0	52.5	27.3	42.2
25-29	15.9	39.9	57.6	43.3
30 or higher	0.8	3.7	13.4	8.5
Having at least a child before censoring	98.2	98.0	92.8	95.2
N of divorce	38	102	100	240
N	2,021	1,684	4,259	7,964

Table2. The Risk of Divorce Coefficients of Cox Proportional Hazard Models

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Tertiary	0.790 (0.602)	0.851 (0.606)	0.828 (0.605)
Marriage cohort(ref. 1970s)			
1980s	1.325 (0.201)***	1.378 (0.210)***	1.375 (0.210)***
1990s	1.681 (0.215)***	1.684 (0.232)***	1.687 (0.232)***
Tertiary X marriage cohort			
Tertiary X 1980s	-1.213 (0.682) ^	-1.245 (0.683) ^	-1.224 (0.683) ^
Tertiary X 1990s	-1.771 (0.649)**	-1.804 (0.651)**	-1.785 (0.650)**
Age at marriage(ref. 20-24)			
< 20		0.514 (0.264) ^	0.488 (0.264) ^
25-29		-0.010 (0.150)	-0.004 (0.151)
30 or higher		0.871 (0.221)***	0.801 (0.222)***
Child presence			-0.896 (0.232)***
-2*log lik elihood	4021.8	4004.0	3991.6

***p<.001 **p<.01 *p<.05 ^p<.10

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