

Rethinking the “Retreat from Marriage” in Japan

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Declining marriage rates, and associated increases in age at first marriage and proportions who never marry, have been observed across industrialized societies. Often referred to as a “retreat from marriage,” these trends have been studied extensively by demographers and other social scientists. Among the many posited explanations for later and less marriage are women’s growing economic independence and associated reduction in the gains to marriage, increasing economic uncertainty (especially for men) that makes it harder for young couples to reach the “economic bar” for marriage, the rise of cohabitation as an alternative to marriage, and ideational change associated with the second demographic transition.

While it is clear that a variety of social, economic, and cultural forces underlie the decline in marriage rates, it is not clear that all are part of a retreat from marriage. The word “retreat” suggests an active avoidance or rejection of marriage rather than the difficulty or failure of realizing a desire to marry. To understand the nature and magnitude of a retreat from marriage, it thus makes good sense to examine marriage intentions. The scarcity of research on this topic is understandable in countries like the U.S. where evidence of a decline in desire for marriage is actually quite limited (e.g., Cherlin 2009). Nevertheless, there is some suggestive evidence that some men and women are increasingly likely to “opt out” of marriage (Raley, Sweeney, and Wondra 2015), pointing to the importance of better understanding the correlates of intentions to not marry and the degree to which marriage intentions are associated with actual behavior.

Japan is a particularly interesting country in which to pursue this line of inquiry. Marriage rates have declined markedly in recent decades and the proportion projected to never marry is over 20% for both men and women, but the large majority of unmarried Japanese men and women express an intention or desire to marry at some point. At the same time, there is a good deal of evidence, both anecdotal and empirical, to suggest that non-marriage is increasingly an

active choice in Japan rather than the result of failure to realize desires or intentions to marry. Government surveys indicate that the proportion who do not intend to marry has increased over time (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research 2017a) and the popular media is replete with provocative accounts of young Japanese men's and women's declining interest in "bothersome" romantic relationships and the emergence of "herbivore men" more interested in platonic relationships or hobbies than in sex and marriage (e.g., Baer 2015; The Economist 2016; Hoffman 2016, Tomikawa 2011). Similar claims are made about young women who now enjoy greater opportunities for economic independence and may have little interest in relationships leading to "traditional" marriages characterized by highly asymmetric roles for men and women (McDonald 2009).

Our goal in this study is to use multiple sources of data to develop an empirical understanding of the prevalence and correlates of intentions to never marry in Japan as well as the longer-term life outcomes associated with such intentions. Despite major policy efforts directed at the promotion of marriage and family formation, there has been no empirically rigorous effort to understand the prevalence and correlates of different marriage intentions. From a social scientific perspective, this information is particularly interesting in the Japanese context given the coexistence of longstanding normative expectations of marriage (or stated differently, stigmatization of those who never marry) and a social infrastructure that increasingly caters to the unmarried and to single-person households.

Data and Method

We begin by using data from multiple rounds of the Japanese National Fertility Survey (JNFS) to describe trends in the prevalence of intentions to remain unmarried and how these trends vary by sex, age, and educational attainment, employment status, and living arrangements. This survey

asks 18-49 year-old unmarried men and women “Thinking about your life as a whole, which of the following matches your thoughts on marriage?” The response options are “I intend to marry at some point” and “I have no intention of ever marrying.”

We then use data from the Japanese Life Course Panel Surveys (JLPS), an eight-wave panel survey of men and women age 20-34 years old at the initial survey in 2007. Our preliminary analyses of the JLPS data address two different goals. The first is a replication of the analyses based in the JNFS using a slightly different question about marriage intentions. Unmarried respondents were asked “How do you feel about marriage?” and given the following response options: “I definitely want to marry,” “I would like to marry if possible,” “I don’t care if I marry or not,” “I don’t want to marry,” and “I am not thinking about marriage.” We are particularly interested in assessing the extent to which the proportion responding “I don’t want to marry” may differ by sex, age, educational attainment, socioeconomic background, employment status, and family-related attitudes.

The second goal focuses on assessing the stability of intentions. Using the panel structure of the survey, we examine the proportion of respondents who initially stated an intention not marry but later reported intentions to marry (and the proportion that actually married). We also examine the reverse pattern – what proportion of those who initially intended to marry reported less clear intentions to marry at a later wave? This latter question allows us to empirically evaluate the prevalence of the pattern that Yoshida (2017) refers to as “drifting” into lifelong singlehood.

Results

As shown in Figure 1, the proportion of men (upper panel) and women (lower panel) who intend to never marry has increased steadily over time (at most ages). Among younger unmarried respondents (20-29), the proportion has increased from very low levels in the mid-1980s to .06-

.10 for women and .09-.15 for men in 2015. Not surprisingly, the proportion of unmarried respondents age 30-39 who do not intend to marry is much higher – reaching roughly one-fourth of men and women in their late 30s. Tabulations of marriage intentions with other variables shows that the increase in intentions to not marry has been somewhat more pronounced at lower levels of education (especially for men), but is not strongly associated with the other variables we considered (employment status and coresidence with parents).

Table 1 summarizes data on marriage intentions from the JLPS, separately by sex, for never married respondents age 20-34 in 2007. The first rows show that only a very small proportion (.02) of respondents report that they do not intend to marry. Definite intentions to marry are stronger among women (.48) than among men (.39), but ambivalence or lack of concern (which we define as the combination of “doesn’t matter” and “not thinking about it”) is more common among men. The relatively low prevalence of clear intentions not to marry (in comparison with the JNFS data) and the non-trivial proportions who report not caring or not thinking about marriage point to the importance of how questions are asked. These data also underscore the prevalence of relatively passive attitudes toward family formation documented in earlier studies of fertility intentions in Japan (Raymo, Musick, and Iwasawa 2015).

Tabulations of intentions by age show somewhat higher intentions not to marry in the early 30s along with much higher levels in the intermediate response of “it doesn’t matter.” Although cross-sectional, this pattern is potentially consistent with the notion of drifting into lifelong singlehood (Yoshida 2017). Tabulations by educational attainment show little difference in the prevalence of intentions not to marry, but very large differences for men in strong intentions to marry. The proportion of highly-educated men with clear intentions to marry (.47) is a good deal larger than that of men with a high school education or less (.35) and this difference is largely

accounted for by the higher prevalence of “doesn’t matter” and “not thinking about marriage” among men with less education. Educational differences in marriage intentions are less pronounced among women.

Not employed men are more likely than their employed counterparts to say that they intend not to marry (.04 vs. .02) whereas not employed women are more likely to report not thinking about marriage. Similarly, we see that income is strongly related to intentions not to marry – 5% of men and 7% of women with no reported income state that they do not want to marry, compared to only 1% or 2% of those in the highest income group. Low income appears to also be associated with not thinking about marriage for men, but not for women.

Living with parents is unrelated to men’s desire not to marry, but women living apart from parents are more likely to say that they do not want to marry (4% vs. 2%). Although the absolute numbers are small, this pattern is less consistent with an emphasis on parasite singles (Yamada 1999) than it is with one in which committed singles are more likely to live independently. The JLPS contains several questions about gender attitudes and family attitudes, but most are not strongly associated with a desire not to marry. Table 1 includes the distribution of intentions for one exception – a question that asks respondents whether they agree or disagree that “Children hinder couples’ ability to live as they like.” Very few men or women strongly agree with this statement, but large proportions of those who do also report not wanting to marry (.19 of men and .26 of women). This is suggestive of the close link between marriage and childbearing in Japan and a link between not wanting to have children and not wanting to marry. Tabulations of desire for children and marriage intentions show that the two are strongly correlated. Among those who do not want to have children, 12% of men and 14% of women also do not want to marry.

Tables 2a-2c present tabulations of initial marriage intentions in 2007 information about subsequent observations of intentions and marriage outcomes. Table 2a shows stability and change in intentions between 2007 and last observed year never married. For both men and women, it is clear that marriage intentions are not very stable. With the exception of definite initial intentions to marry, nearly two-thirds of men and women in the other initial intention categories reported different intentions at some point during the panel period.

Table 2b summarizes the prevalence of subsequent intentions by initial intentions. That is, what proportion of men and women in a given initial intentions group reported any of the other intentions across the panel period? It is immediately clear that those who reported intentions to marry (either definitely want to marry or want to marry if possible) were very unlikely to subsequently report that they do not want to marry (only 1-2%). A larger proportion of those with ambivalent initial intentions subsequently reported (at least once) that they do not want to marry (9% of both men and women). A non-trivial percent of those who reported not thinking about marriage at the initial wave also reported not wanting to marry at a subsequent wave (11% of men and 13% of women). Among those reporting no desire to marry at the initial wave, relatively large proportions reported other intentions at later waves, including 20% of men and 14% of women who reported (at least once) that they definitely want to marry. This again is evidence that intentions not to marry may not be strongly held.

Table 2c shows the tabulation of initial marriage intentions and final intentions (if still unmarried) or marital status. Keeping in mind that the number of men and women who report not wanting to marry in 2007 is very small, we see that a substantial proportion moved closer to marriage. Among men, 28% reported definitely wanting to marry, wanting to marry, or happy to marry or not, but only 1 individual actually married. Among women, 43% moved closer to

marriage (although none reported “definitely” wanting to marry) and 4 individuals (19%) actually married. Interestingly, very few respondents who initially indicated a (strong) desire to marry in 2007 reported not wanting to marry at last observation. Less than 1% of men or women changed in this way. This pattern does not appear to be consistent with the notion of drifting toward non-marriage.

Next steps

Three key findings from our preliminary analyses are: the prevalence of intentions not to marry has increased over time, intentions not to marry are only weakly related to most of the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics we examined, and marriage intentions are not particularly stable within individuals. We intend to build upon these preliminary results in several ways. The first is to conduct multivariate analyses of the correlates of intentions not to marry – especially controlling for age and estimating interactions between birth cohort and characteristics of interest. A second important step is to assess the sensitivity of results to alternative treatments of missing values on questions about marriage intentions and to examine correlates of ambivalence or lack of concern about marriage. Because non-trivial proportions of respondents choose not to answer questions on marriage intentions (in the JNFS) and choose “don’t care” or “not thinking about” it (in the JLPS), it is essential that we understand how these respondents differ from (or resemble) others whose intentions are less ambiguous. Any effort to understand trends in marriage intentions and their implications for marriage behavior must deal with this data issue. Finally, we intend to use the panel structure of the JLPS to estimate transition rate models to assess how strongly marriage intentions predict marriage behavior and to examine the life events associated with changes in marriage intentions (in both directions). All

of this will provide a heretofore missing empirical basis with which to evaluate claims of a “retreat from marriage” in Japan.

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Figure 1: Trends in the proportion of men and women who intend to never marry, 1982-2015



Source: NIPSSR (2017c)

Table 1: Marriage intentions in wave 1 of JLPS, by sex

	Definitely want to marry		Want to marry if possible		Don't care if I marry		Don't want to marry		Not thinking about marriage	
	Male	Fem.	Male	Fem.	Male	Fem.	Male	Fem.	Male	Fem.
Age										
20-24	0.41	0.52	0.37	0.32	0.11	0.09	0.02	0.02	0.09	0.05
25-29	0.42	0.47	0.34	0.36	0.12	0.09	0.02	0.01	0.10	0.06
30-35	0.34	0.41	0.39	0.32	0.15	0.18	0.03	0.04	0.09	0.04
Education										
H.S. or less	0.35	0.47	0.39	0.32	0.13	0.12	0.01	0.02	0.11	0.07
JC/Voc	0.31	0.48	0.40	0.36	0.16	0.09	0.03	0.02	0.11	0.05
University	0.47	0.49	0.33	0.33	0.10	0.13	0.03	0.03	0.07	0.02
Employment status										
Employed	0.40	0.48	0.37	0.34	0.12	0.11	0.02	0.02	0.08	0.04
Not employed	0.30	0.47	0.36	0.28	0.15	0.13	0.04	0.03	0.15	0.09
Income										
None	0.17	0.47	0.40	0.33	0.17	0.12	0.05	0.07	0.20	0.02
Low	0.42	0.48	0.35	0.32	0.11	0.12	0.02	0.02	0.09	0.06
Middle-low	0.41	0.46	0.35	0.36	0.11	0.11	0.01	0.02	0.12	0.05
Middle-high	0.38	0.49	0.44	0.35	0.13	0.11	0.03	0.02	0.03	0.03
High	0.46	0.52	0.33	0.32	0.14	0.12	0.01	0.02	0.06	0.01
Living arrangements										
Independent	0.47	0.43	0.36	0.32	0.09	0.16	0.02	0.04	0.06	0.04
Coresiding w/ parents	0.36	0.49	0.37	0.34	0.13	0.10	0.02	0.02	0.10	0.05
Desire for children										
Yes	0.49	0.55	0.41	0.36	0.07	0.07	0.00	0.00	0.03	0.01
No	0.06	0.09	0.18	0.20	0.33	0.36	0.12	0.14	0.31	0.22
Children hinder couples										
Strongly agree	0.22	0.38	0.22	0.34	0.25	0.16	0.22	0.04	0.08	0.08
Somewhat agree	0.38	0.45	0.35	0.39	0.16	0.09	0.02	0.01	0.09	0.05
Neutral	0.34	0.44	0.40	0.37	0.16	0.10	0.01	0.00	0.08	0.07
Somewhat disagree	0.44	0.68	0.41	0.24	0.08	0.04	0.01	0.01	0.06	0.03
Strongly disagree	0.54	0.53	0.31	0.22	0.09	0.15	0.01	0.02	0.05	0.06
Don't know	0.17	0.34	0.36	0.37	0.20	0.09	0.06	0.02	0.20	0.18

Table 2a: Stability and change in marriage intentions, by sex

Intentions at first wave (2007)	No change		Any change	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
Definitely want to marry	0.54	0.64	0.36	0.46
Want to marry if possible	0.41	0.39	0.61	0.59
Don't care if I marry	0.32	0.33	0.67	0.68
Don't want to marry	0.25	0.38	0.63	0.75
Not thinking about marriage	0.31	0.27	0.73	0.69

Table 2b: Marriage intentions at first wave (2007) and subsequent waves, by sex

Intentions at first wave	Definitely want to marry		Want to marry if possible		Don't care if I marry		Don't want to marry		Not thinking about marriage	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Definitely want to marry	1.00	1.00	0.40	0.31	0.07	0.05	0.02	0.01	0.06	0.03
Want to marry if possible	0.37	0.40	1.00	1.00	0.23	0.22	0.02	0.02	0.18	0.10
Don't care if I marry	0.13	0.20	0.37	0.49	1.00	1.00	0.09	0.09	0.34	0.25
Don't want to marry	0.20	0.14	0.20	0.38	0.40	0.62	1.00	1.00	0.40	0.43
Not thinking about marriage	0.20	0.19	0.40	0.47	0.39	0.40	0.11	0.13	1.00	1.00

Table 2c: Marriage intentions at first wave (2007) and last wave, by sex

Intentions at first wave	Definitely want to marry		Want to marry if possible		Don't care if I marry		Don't want to marry		Not thinking about marriage		Married	
	Male	Fem.	Male	Fem.	Male	Fem.	Male	Fem.	Male	Fem.	Male	Fem.
Definitely want to marry	0.48	0.42	0.18	0.10	0.03	0.02	0.01	0.00	0.02	0.00	0.27	0.45
Want to marry if possible	0.13	0.16	0.52	0.42	0.09	0.07	0.01	0.01	0.07	0.04	0.19	0.31
Don't care if I marry	0.08	0.07	0.16	0.16	0.43	0.44	0.07	0.05	0.17	0.09	0.09	0.19
Don't want to marry	0.12	0.00	0.04	0.24	0.12	0.19	0.60	0.33	0.08	0.05	0.05	0.19
Not thinking about marriage	0.08	0.06	0.14	0.17	0.17	0.17	0.07	0.04	0.47	0.36	0.09	0.19