

The Problem Group?

Psychological Wellbeing of Unmarried People Living Alone in the Republic of Korea

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Abstract

Background

Unmarried one-person households have increased rapidly among young adults living in the Republic of Korea since 2000. How this rise in solo living is related to psychological wellbeing is of importance to both individuals and society as a whole.

Objective

This study examined how living alone is related to psychological wellbeing and how the associations differ across attitudes toward marriage among young adults aged 25-39.

Methods

We relied on repeated cross-sectional data from the Korea Social Survey (2010 and 2012) to compare unmarried solo residents to both unmarried and married individuals living with family members. Psychological wellbeing was measured in terms of life satisfaction and experience of suicidal thoughts over the past twelve months.

Results

In general, unmarried solo residents experienced greater life satisfaction than did unmarried family coresidents. For those who have a positive attitude toward marriage, unmarried solo residents had lower life satisfaction than did married family coresidents. For those with ambivalent or negative attitudes toward marriage, however, there was no difference in the level of life satisfaction between unmarried solo residents and married family coresidents. Experiencing suicidal thoughts, however, did not differ across living arrangements.

Conclusions

Unmarried solo living does not necessarily predict lower psychological wellbeing for Korean young adults. Stages of life course and attitudes toward marriage should be considered when

examining the associations between living arrangement and psychological wellbeing.

Keywords: young adulthood; marital status and living arrangements; one-person household; psychological wellbeing; life satisfaction; suicidal thoughts; attitudes toward marriage; Korea Social Survey

1. Introduction

The term “one-person household” (OPH) has become a key phrase in describing the pervasive family-related changes that have occurred in the Republic of Korea since 2000. The proportions of OPH compared to the region’s total number of households have increased about six times, from 4% in 1980 to 23% in 2010 (Korea National Statistical Office 2014a). The rapid increase in OPHs signals changes not only in living arrangements but also in the very sociocultural background of the heavily family-oriented Korean society, where marriage and family coresidence have been key family norms. Discovering how this rise in solo living is related to the psychological wellbeing of those who live alone is of importance to both individuals and society as a whole.

Social and academic discussions on solo living in Korea have focused on the older adult population, those aged 65 or older, which comprised 25.6% of all OPHs in 2010 (Korea National Statistical Office 2014a). As the family is the main, and for some people the only, source of financial resources and social support in older age, a consideration of living arrangements is critical to understanding overall quality of life. Living alone in old age is, in general, negatively related to quality of life, which includes such factors as economic status, physical health, and emotional and social wellbeing (Ann 2005; Ban 2012; Lee and Kim 2014; Lee and Oh 2008). At the same time, living alone in old age deviates far from traditional norms of filial piety which expects older adults to live with adult children (Phua and Loh 2008).

The OPH increase, however, has been not only witnessed among older adults, but also on the other end of the age spectrum: those between the ages of 25 and 39. These individuals comprised approximately 31.3% of the total OPH population in 2010 (Korea National Statistical Office

2014a). Among own age group of 25 and 39, the proportions of OPHs have increased almost twice from 7.7% to 14.1% for men and 4.3% to 8.8% for women between years 2000 and 2010. High tertiary education enrollment rates, increased job attainments away from home, delayed marriages, as well as the weakening of marriage and residential norms, are suggested main reasons of the OPH increase in young adulthood (Ban 2012; Nahm and Namgood 2012). In 2013, about 70.7% of high school graduates have attained tertiary level education (Korea National Statistical Office 2014b). As educational institutions and job opportunities for young adults are concentrated in large cities, increasing numbers of young adults leave their parental homes and move to cities for better educational and career opportunities (Byeon, Shin, and Cho 2008). Young adults' preference for independent life style also motivates young adults to form OPHs (Jung and Lee 2011). With increase in OPHs, social attitudes toward living alone have become more accepting. Cultural discourse on solo living in Korea has focused on people with high educational attainments and high-paying careers, with mass media often portraying unmarried solo living as an attractive new way of life (Mo 2008; Son, Lee, and Lee 2007).

As their needs and resources differ from those of older people, it is questionable whether—and to what extent—the negative link between living alone and wellbeing in old age is applicable to young adulthood. First, living alone in young adulthood does not necessarily predict social isolation, as is often the case with the older age population. Young solo residents maintain close contact with their family of origin (Choi and Park 2012; Jung and Lee 2011). Unlike older adults who experience limited access to non-family social networks, young adults have wider and more active social networks, such as friends and coworkers (Jeong et al. 2012). Moreover, living alone can increase feelings of self-sufficiency and independence, which are critical for achieving an independent adult status, a main developmental task to accomplish in young adulthood (Kins and

Beyers 2010). This is especially relevant in Korea, as it is taking longer to achieve other markers of adulthood with the increasing demands for higher education, rising unemployment rates, and delayed marriage and parenthood (Nahm and Namgoong 2012; Xenos et al. 2006). Despite the social and academic importance of this issue, research into the associations between living arrangements and psychological wellbeing in young adulthood have been sparse, even in Western societies where leaving the parental home in young adulthood has become the social norm (Kins and Beyers 2010). Also, to the author's knowledge, no study has yet examined how unmarried solo living is related to psychological wellbeing for Korean young adults.

How young adults perceive marriage is an important factor in examining the links between their living arrangements and their psychological wellbeing. Although marriage has been delayed and/or avoided (Jones 2007), it is still considered a normal, if not mandatory, life status achievement. With the mean ages of first marriages in Korea rising to 32.2 years for men and 29.6 years for women in 2013 (Korea National Statistics Office 2014c), the late 20s and early 30s are now seen as the prime period for marriage. Unmarried young adults in this age group often feel the expectations of, or pressures placed on them by, either family members or the overall sociocultural atmosphere. Thus the evaluations or assessments of current living arrangements would be affected by how close or how far they are from what a person perceives as ideal or normal. If a person perceives marriage as a mandatory or positive life status, then living alone as a single person would be viewed negatively. On the contrary, if a person does not accept the traditional family norms of marriage and family coresidence, solo living may not predict poor wellbeing. Examining attitudes toward marriage is more critical for young adults, who tend to have less traditional, and a larger variety of, attitudes toward marriage.

This paper examines how living arrangements and marital status of Korean young adults

aged 25 to 39 are related to their psychological wellbeing, as measured by life satisfaction and experience of suicidal thoughts within the previous twelve months. We focused on unmarried solo residents and compared them to unmarried people living with family (unmarried family coresidents) and married people living with family (married family coresidents). The latter groups were selected because their living arrangements correspond to the social norms of marriage and family coresidence for unmarried young adults. Moreover, this paper examines whether, and to what extent, the associations between living arrangements and psychological wellbeing differ across attitudes toward marriage. We relied on pooled data from two waves of the Korea Social Survey (2010 and 2012), a nationally representative repeated cross-sectional social survey on contemporary social issues.

2. Background

2.1 Living arrangements and psychological wellbeing

A large body of research has examined how marital status and living arrangements relate to wellbeing, and most studies have found that family coresidents and those who are married have a better quality of life than solo residents and those who are not married. Married individuals are likely to have better subjective health status (Liu and Umberson 2008), lower mortality rates (Manzoli et al. 2007), fewer numbers of depressive symptoms (Jang et al. 2009; Yan et al. 2011), and more feelings of happiness (Sassler and Schoen 1999). Research on the benefits of family coresidence has focused on the older population, as family is the main source of support in old age (Li 2013). Older adults living alone are less likely to receive social support from children, relatives, and friends (Ann 2005) and are more likely to experience loneliness (Greenfield and Russell 2010), feelings of precariousness (Portacolone 2013), and suicidal ideation (Lee and Oh

2008).

The positive links between marriage, family coresidence, and quality of life are attributed to the fact that spouse and family members provide economic, social, and emotional support, which all lead to a better quality of life. People living with a spouse and/or other family members are more likely to have better health, as the family motivates and monitors health behaviors. The sharing of a residence and household goods enables economy of scale and family often serves as the key distributor of economic resources. In Korea, the probability of falling under the absolute poverty line in 2010 was 41.4% for solo households and 10.1% for multiple-person households (Ban 2012). Family coresidence is more critical for the wellbeing in old age in countries such as Korea with a weak public old-age welfare system, such as the old-age pension system and public long-term care support (Li 2013). The family also provides affection and emotional support in cases of distress, thus reducing loneliness (Yang and Victor 2008) and buffering the negative consequences of the distress. Because of their limited physical mobility, the older adults' social network is often constrained to family members and close friends, and living alone often predicts poor quality of life in old age.

The associations between living alone and psychological wellbeing, however, are contingent on societal factors such as cultural attitudes toward family, and individual-level factors such as gender and quality of the family relationship. For example, the importance of marital status and the presence of children on psychological wellbeing vary according to societal attitudes toward marriage and family (Vanassche, Swicegood, and Matthijs 2013). In Korea, married middle-aged men are more likely to report better health and are more likely to participate in health-improving behaviors than are their unmarried counterparts (Lee 2013). Middle-aged women, however, do not experience significant differences in health status across marital status. Never-married

women are likely to have even better life satisfaction compared to their married counterparts. For older adults, the negative relationship between living alone and quality of life disappeared after controlling for satisfaction with a parent-child relationship (Lee, Kim, and Kang 2012).

2.2 Solo living in young adulthood

Previous literature on living arrangements and quality of life has focused on older adulthood and may not reflect the experiences of young adults who have needs and resources that are very different from those of older adults. Living alone does not predict poor economic status and/or social isolation for young adults, as they are economically independent and have wider and more active non-family social networks, such as friends and professional networks within the workplace (Wrzus et al. 2013). Living alone also does not mean they are detached from their families of origin. Young solo residents in Korea keep in close contact with parents and siblings through daily telephone calls and weekly visits, and frequently exchange financial and emotional resources (Choi and Park 2012; Kim et al. 2007).

For young adults, gaining a sense of self and the social identity of being an independent adult is a major developmental task that needs to be accomplished (Jordyn and Byrd 2003; Kins and Beyers 2010). In Western societies, leaving the parental home and forming one's own household is one of the main markers of independent adulthood, along with other role transitions such as finishing education, starting a career, and getting married and having children (Aassve, Arpino, and Billari 2013; Spéder, Murinkó, and Settersten 2014). By making everyday decisions away from the control of their parents, young adults living alone may gain a sense of independence which, in turn, is related to better psychological wellbeing (Galambos and Krahn 2008). The link between residential independence and adulthood status is increasingly applicable to experiences

of Korean young adults.

The residential independence of unmarried Korean young adults has been neither a common nor a socially expected part of the transition to adulthood. Traditionally, young adults—especially women—are expected to live with their parents until they marry. Only after forming their own families with marriage are people expected to leave their parental home and form their own households. Thus, the majority of Koreans have never experienced living alone. As mentioned earlier, the proportions of OPHs among own age group of 25 and 39 in 2010 are 14.1% for men and 8.8% for women in 2010 (Korea National Statistics Office 2014a). Although they have increased more than twice from 7.7% for men and 4.3% for women in 2000, they are relatively low compared to those of western countries (Byeon, Shin, and Cho 2008). On an institutional level, due to high housing prices and a lack of suitable housing units for young solo residents, living alone has not been a widely available option for young adults with limited economic means. This traditional residential norm, however, faces many challenges, as it does not address changing social situations and preferences toward independent living (Jung and Lee 2011). The transition to adulthood usually starts with the completion of education, followed by career entry, marriage, and parenthood, in that order. With prolonged education and rising unemployment rates for young adults, the transition to adulthood has increasingly been initiated later and takes longer to complete, as marriage and subsequent parenthood have been delayed (Xenos et al. 2006). According to research on the transition to adulthood in Korea by Nahm and Namgoong (2012), the whole process took about 15.4 years for the men surveyed in 1990. The average was 18.8 years in 2000 and 21 years in 2005. This prolonged transitional period means that young adults spend more time in ambiguous, or partial, adulthood status. For example, in their early 30s, most young adults have finished their highest level of education and are

financially independent with jobs. Because they are still living with their parents as unmarried children, however, they rarely make their own household decisions such as balancing household accounts or do household chores (e.g., preparing meals). They may be viewed as dependent by parents and sociocultural standards.

In this situation, residential independence may secure a sense of independence for them, thus contributing to their improved psychological wellbeing. Previous research on the transition to adulthood in the West has shown that the accomplishment of the main markers for adulthood, such as residential independence, securing a job, and starting a romantic relationship, predicts better psychological wellbeing in young adulthood (Galambos and Krahn 2008; Kins and Beyers 2010; Schulenberg, Bryant, and O'Malley 2004). Despite the growing number of young adults living alone, studies on the links between living arrangements and psychological wellbeing in Korea have been rare both in South Korea and in the broader heavily family-oriented Asian context.

2.3 Attitudes towards marriage

Satisfaction with current living arrangements is often influenced by how similar the arrangements are to what is regarded as the ideal or the norm. If current living arrangements are similar to the ideal, feelings of great satisfaction or psychological wellbeing may result. If the current situation deviates much from what one thinks of as normative or ideal, one might engage in poor self-evaluations and experience less wellbeing (Warr et al. 2004). In the same way, the link between living arrangements and psychological wellbeing may be contingent on attitudes toward marriage. For unmarried solo residents who perceive marriage as a positive norm to follow, current marital and living arrangements may not be satisfactory and result in decreased

psychological wellbeing. The same living arrangement, however, may predict better psychological wellbeing for people who do not have favorable attitudes toward marriage. For example, Kim and colleagues (2007) demonstrated that unmarried solo residents who are more open to non-traditional families, such as the stepfamily and divorced parents, are likely to perceive their current solo living situation as more favorable. At the same time, how young adults perceive marriage and family is closely related to family behaviors. For example, unmarried young adults with positive marriage attitudes are more likely to have marriage intentions at younger ages (Chin and Chung 2012) and are more likely to get married (Sassler and Schoen 1999).

In general, Koreans have traditional attitudes toward marriage, which remains an important social norm. About 76% of men and 63% of women aged 15 and older held positive attitudes towards marriage in 2008, saying that “people must marry,” or “it is good to marry” (Korea National Statistical Office 2009). No academic research in Korea so far has examined how attitudes toward marriage differ across marital status and living arrangements. Unmarried solo residents are assumed to have less traditional and less favorable attitudes toward marriage. Living alone has often been understood as an expression of preferences based on individualism and denial of family care responsibilities. Few but increasing numbers of studies on solo residents and the unmarried, however, suggest that marriage and family continue to be central foci of their lives. As mentioned earlier, Korean solo residents keep in close contact with their families of origin (Choi and Park 2012; Kim et al. 2007; Jung and Lee 2011). In fact, feeling responsible for supporting their parents and younger siblings is often cited among young adults’ main reasons for delaying marriage (Kim 2013). This suggests that unmarried solo residents may have relatively poor psychological wellbeing in Korea, and this would be more so for people

with strong marriage norms.

3. Data and methods

3.1 Data

We used data from the two most recent waves of the Korea Social Survey (KSS, 2010 and 2012), a nationally representative repeated cross-sectional survey of people aged 15 and older in 2010 and 13 and older in 2012. The KSS has been conducted every two years since 1977 and covers contemporary social issues such as family, education, health, and general quality of life. The analytic sample consisted of people aged between 25 and 39 at the time of the interview who live in any of the following situations: never married and living alone (unmarried solo residents), never married and living with family members (unmarried family coresidents), and married and living with family members (married family coresidents). A total of 18,083 respondents between the ages of 25 and 39 completed either wave of the KSS. We excluded 135 respondents who were married and living alone and 461 respondents who were either divorced or widowed. Among married people, living apart from family is not common, and experiences of divorce or widowhood are quite rare for young adults. These conditions result in sample sizes that are too small to warrant meaningful findings and may, in fact, introduce confounding factors. After further excluding 145 cases of individuals living in non-family household settings such as dormitories and 83 cases of missing or incorrect information concerning the variables used in the analyses, the final study sample consisted of 17,259 respondents.

3.2 Variables

Living arrangements. Living arrangement was a key independent variable in our analyses and, as stated earlier, participants were grouped into three categories: unmarried solo residents

(8.1%), unmarried family coresidents (27.6%), and married family coresidents (64.3%). The majority of unmarried family coresidents (81.8%) were living with their parents.

Attitudes toward marriage. The other key independent variable was attitudes toward marriage. To measure this variable, we assessed whether people perceived marriage as a positive family norm by asking the following question: “What do you think about marriage?” Response options included: “One must marry,” “It is better to marry,” “It is okay either? to marry and not to marry,” “It is better not to marry,” “One must not marry,” and “I don’t know.” The first two responses were grouped into the positive attitude toward marriage category, and the remaining responses were classified as non-positive attitudes toward marriage. Only 2.8% of all respondents had negative attitudes toward marriage (answering either “one must not marry” or “it is better not to marry”). As this may have resulted in sample sizes too small to ensure reliable statistical analyses, we grouped the expressed negative attitudes together with ambivalent attitudes into the category of “non-positive attitudes.” We conducted a sensitivity test with different categorizations and models yielded similar results. Detailed descriptions and variable distributions included in the analyses are presented in Table 1.

Psychological wellbeing. Both positive and negative aspects of psychological wellbeing were measured by self-reported life satisfaction and experiences of suicidal thoughts. Life satisfaction was measured by the following question, with responses rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale: “Considering things such as financial situation, job, and overall health, how satisfied are you with your life? (1 = very dissatisfied, 5 = very satisfied).” Experience of suicidal thoughts was a binary variable, where 1 indicated that the individual had considered committing suicide at least once during the past twelve months, and 0 indicated that they had not. Suicidal ideation is an important measure of psychological wellbeing as Korea has the highest suicidal rates among

OECD countries in 2013 (OECD 2013) and suicide is of important social concern in Korea.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Control variables. Based on previous studies of living arrangements and psychological wellbeing, we included the following variables in the analyses: gender, age, survey year, educational attainment, subjective health status, health-related behaviors, city residence, occupation type, and home ownership type. We controlled gender and age as family norms and the degree of pressure to abide by them differ across gender and age in Korea (Chang and Song 2010; Kim 2013). Educational attainment and health are positively related to better psychological wellbeing. Educational attainment was divided into four categories: less than high school, high school, 2-year college graduate, and 4-year university-level education or higher. Subjective health status was measured on a five-point Likert scale based on the following question: “In general, how is your health status? (1 = very poor health, 5 = very good health).” Health-related behaviors were measured by the two binary variables of regular exercise participation and current smoking status.

As people living in urban areas tend to have less traditional attitudes towards family norms, we included city residence in the analysis. This was measured by a binary variable where 1 indicates living in one of eight metropolitan cities of Korea. One limitation of the KSS is its lack of detailed information on economic status, such as individual income and household wealth. Thus, we used occupation type and home-ownership type to gauge economic status. Occupational status had five categories: managerial, professional, and administrative occupations; office and administrative support occupations; service and sales workers; plant and machine operators; and not working. The last category of “not working” included students and

homemakers as well as the unemployed. Types of home ownership included owning a house, having leased a house by making a lump-sum payment, and having leased a house by making monthly payments. The KSS did not include information on who the actual home owner is, thus the home could belong to either the respondents or their family members. In the case of unmarried family coresidents, it may be reasonable to assume that the home could belong to the parents of the respondents, since most of them were young and living with family.

3.3 Methods of analysis

We used a series of multivariate logistic regression models to analyze psychological wellbeing. First, we used ordered logistic regression models for life satisfaction. Odds ratios (ORs) larger than 1.0 indicated higher log odds of choosing a one-point higher response in life satisfaction with every one-unit change in the independent variable. For experiences of suicidal thoughts, we used binary logistic regression models. ORs larger than 1.0 indicated higher log odds of ever having thoughts of committing suicide during the past twelve months with every one-unit change in the independent variable. For both measures, we used the two-step nested modeling approach. The first model aimed to measure the baseline relationship between living arrangements, attitudes toward marriage, and psychological wellbeing after controlling for the above-mentioned covariates. In the second model, we introduced interaction terms between living arrangements and attitudes toward marriage. Statistically significant coefficients of interaction terms and improved model fit indicate that the associations between living arrangements and psychological wellbeing vary across attitudes toward marriage.

4. Results

4.1 Life satisfaction

Table 2 presents ORs from the ordered logistic regression analyses of life satisfaction. Model 1 estimates baseline associations between living arrangements and life satisfaction. The reference category of living arrangements is unmarried solo residents. The results suggest that unmarried solo residents experience less life satisfaction than married family coresidents but more life satisfaction than unmarried family coresidents. In line with previous studies on the positive links between marriage and psychological wellbeing, married family coresidents tend to report higher levels of life satisfaction than unmarried solo residents do. Compared to unmarried solo residents, married family coresidents show 1.39 times the odds of having higher life satisfaction. Interestingly, unmarried family coresidents who live in accordance to the traditional norm of family coresidence report 0.65 times the odds of having higher life satisfaction compared to unmarried solo residents. Attitudes toward marriage are significantly related to life satisfaction. People with positive attitudes toward marriage have 1.40 times the odds of having higher life satisfaction compared to their non-positive counterparts.

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

In Model 2, we introduced interaction terms between living arrangements and attitudes toward marriage. The OR of the interaction term between married family coresidents and positive attitudes toward marriage was negative and statistically significant. It indicates that associations between living arrangements and life satisfaction differ by marriage attitudes for unmarried solo residents and married family coresidents. The ORs from Model 2 are presented graphically in Figure 1 for better understanding. First, the respondents were categorized into two groups according to their attitudes toward marriage, and they were re-categorized according to their living arrangements, resulting in a total of six groups. The reference category was unmarried solo residents with non-positive attitudes toward marriage. For people with positive

attitudes toward marriage, the links between living arrangements and life satisfaction were similar to what was found in Model 1. Unmarried solo residents were likely to experience less life satisfaction than were married family coresidents, but more life satisfaction than were unmarried family coresidents. As discussed earlier, this lower level of life satisfaction among unmarried solo residents in comparison to married family coresidents was in line with previous research on the positive links between marriage and wellbeing. Contrary to previous research on the negative associations between solo living and wellbeing, however, young adults living alone were likely to enjoy more life satisfaction than were their unmarried counterparts living with family members.

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Somewhat different patterns, however, emerged for people with non-positive attitudes toward marriage. There was no statistically significant difference in life satisfaction between unmarried solo residents and married family coresidents (ORs 1.00 and 1.08, respectively), while unmarried family coresidents continued to have the least life satisfaction among three groups of living arrangements (OR 0.59). This is because unmarried family coresidents and married family coresidents with non-positive marriage attitudes tended to have less life satisfaction than their counterparts with positive attitudes did, while the unmarried solo residents had similar levels of life satisfaction across marriage attitudes. Thus the low level of life satisfaction of married family coresidents with non-positive attitudes was similar to that of unmarried solo residents. It suggests that attitudes toward marriage play an important role in shaping life satisfaction of both unmarried and married family coresidents whose living arrangements conform to traditional family norms of marriage and family coresidence. Interestingly, however, the life satisfaction of unmarried solo residents did not differ across marriage attitudes, suggesting that marriage norm

may not be an important factor in forming life satisfaction. This is in line with public discourse on unmarried solo residents in Korea that they have non-traditional family norms based on individualism. Also it indicates that links between living arrangement and life satisfaction are contingent on whether people perceive marriage as a positive norm. Results of the likelihood ratio test between Models 1 and 2 indicated that Model 2 fits the data significantly better.

The covariates, in general, were related to life satisfaction in expected ways. Women and people with higher educational attainment were more likely to report more life satisfaction than men and people with lower educational attainments. People with good health and people who adopted health-promoting lifestyles such as regular physical exercise and non-smoking were more likely to report better life satisfaction. Those living in metropolitan areas tended to report lower life satisfaction. People living in their own houses were likely to report higher life satisfaction compared to people living in leased homes. This suggests that residential stability, as well as economic status, is important factors for life satisfaction. People in managerial or professional occupations were also better off regarding life satisfaction compared to the other occupational groups and the unemployed.

In Korea, family norms and the pressure to abide by them differ across gender and age (Chang and Song 2010; Kim 2013). For example, the norms of marriage and family coresidence are more strongly enforced for women than they are for men. Residential independence would be more favorably accepted for people in their late 30s than in their 20s. Thus, we conducted additional analyses examining whether, and to what extent, the associations between living arrangements and life satisfaction differ across gender and age. Results not presented in this paper, however, suggest that the associations between life satisfaction, living arrangements, and marriage attitudes did not differ significantly across gender and age groups.

4.2 Experiences of suicidal thoughts

We conducted binary logistic regression analyses on experiencing suicidal thoughts. The results are presented in Table 3. As was the case for the life satisfaction analyses, we first examined baseline associations between living arrangements, attitudes toward marriage, and experiencing suicidal thoughts in Model 1. Unlike life satisfaction, living arrangements were not significantly related to experience of suicidal thoughts over the past twelve months. Although unmarried solo residents tended to have the highest proportion of experiencing suicidal thoughts, according to the simple cross tabulation presented in Table 1, living arrangements were not significantly related to suicidal thoughts after controlling for covariates. Marriage attitudes, however, were significantly related to experiences of suicidal thoughts. People with positive attitudes had 0.56 times the odds of having suicidal thoughts. This finding is in line with previous literature on the links between a positive outlook on life and the optimistic anticipation of marriage possibilities (Li et al. 2011).

In Model 2, we introduced interaction terms between living arrangements and attitudes toward marriage to examine whether the links between living arrangements and suicidal ideation differ across marriage attitudes. We found no statistically significant interaction term and this suggests that links between living arrangements and suicidal ideation are similar across attitudes toward marriage. Our finding that living arrangements are not significantly related to suicidal ideation was contrary to previous research on older population, in which living alone was related to decreased wellbeing and increased suicidal thoughts (Fukuchi et al. 2013; Han, Kang, and Jeong 2012; Masocco et al. 2008). This suggests that we need to carefully consider the stages of life when generalizing the links between living arrangements and wellbeing across age groups.

Several covariates were significantly related to experiences of suicidal thoughts in expected ways. Women and people with lower educational attainment tend to have higher odds of ever having had suicidal thoughts compared to men and people with lower educational attainments. Considering that women reported higher life satisfaction in the previous analyses, this finding suggests that women tend to have wider ranges of psychological wellbeing. People with good health and non-smokers were less likely to have suicidal thoughts. People living in their own homes were less likely to experience suicidal thoughts compared to their counterparts living in a leased home with a monthly payment. Considering that this type of living situation often indicates residential instability and poor economic status, this finding suggests that poor economic situations may lead to poor psychological wellbeing.

TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

5. Discussion

Unmarried solo living is on the rise in Korea, and this challenges the traditional family norms of mandatory marriage and family coresidence during singlehood. This study aimed to examine the psychological wellbeing of unmarried solo residents, relying on data from two waves of the nationally representative KSS (2010 and 2012). Unmarried and married family coresidents were selected as comparison groups, as they represent conformity to traditional family norms and living arrangements. We also examined whether the associations between living arrangements and psychological wellbeing vary across marriage attitudes.

Our results suggest that unmarried solo residents are likely to have higher life satisfaction than are unmarried family coresidents. In fact, unmarried family coresidents had the lowest life satisfaction among the three groups examined in the analyses, and these associations did not vary

across marriage attitudes. This finding is contrary to what has been predicted in previous academic literature and Korean public discourse on the negative links between living alone and quality of life (Ann 2005; Lee and Oh 2008). As discussed earlier, a large body of literature on living arrangement has focused on older adulthood, in which the family is the main provider of resources for an individual's wellbeing. Young adults have needs and resources different from those of older adults. They often have access to financial resources from their own work, participate actively in non-family networks, and maintain close contact with their families of origin. Thus, living alone does not necessarily lead to poor economic status, loneliness, or social isolation. At the same time, with higher unemployment rates and delayed marriage and childbearing, the transitional period to adulthood has become longer and fuzzier (Nahm and Namgood 2012; Xenos et al. 2006). Residential independence may help young adults gain a sense of self and social identity as autonomous adults, thus leading to better psychological wellbeing. This suggests that research into living arrangements should pay careful attention to the stages of life and the changing cultural norms when generalizing links between living arrangements and wellbeing.

Social interest in young adults' solo living continues to rise in Korea, with increasing numbers of TV dramas and books on solo living portraying it as an attractive new lifestyle. The relatively low life satisfaction of unmarried family coresidents suggests that the traditional norms of family coresidence may not address the changing needs and preferences of the unmarried young. The numbers of young adults living alone may continue to increase, since this lifestyle is related to better psychological wellbeing and since the social climate has become more favorable with regards to solo living. Social policies are required to address the needs of the rising young solo residents, such as smaller and more affordable housing units.

Then, how do unmarried solo residents fare in terms of psychological wellbeing compared to married family coresidents? The link between living arrangements and psychological wellbeing depends on marriage attitudes. Among those with positive attitudes toward marriage, unmarried solo residents tend to have less life satisfaction compared to married family coresidents. Among those with non-positive attitudes toward marriage, however, unmarried solo residents have similar levels of life satisfaction to married family coresidents. This is because married people with non-positive attitudes tend to have lower life satisfaction than their married counterparts with positive attitudes, and this lower level of life satisfaction is similar to that of unmarried solo residents. Interestingly, however, life satisfaction levels did not vary across marriage attitudes among unmarried solo residents. Several interpretations are possible concerning the weak associations between marriage attitudes and life satisfaction for unmarried solo residents. It may be that marriage is not an important covariate for life satisfaction for Korean unmarried solo residents as they have chosen this living situation for themselves. Also experience of living alone may have promoted changes in attitudes toward marriage. Research on living arrangements and family values is limited, and it has not yet been extensively examined whether, and to what extent, the experience of solo living leads to, or is perhaps caused by, less traditional value orientations in comparison to other living situations (Poortman and Liefbroer 2010). More extensive research is needed to examine the links between solo residents and their family value orientations.

Our findings that the links between life satisfaction and living alone are contingent on marriage attitudes raise questions regarding the universal benefits of marriage. The positive associations between marriage and wellbeing may be applicable only to people who view marriage as a positive, desirable norm. At the same time, we found no significant differences in

the odds of having suicidal thoughts across living arrangements. This suggests that marriage and living arrangements do not affect all aspects of psychological wellbeing (Marks 1996). Our findings that the positive links between marriage and wellbeing are contingent upon other factors such as life stages and measures of wellbeing are in line with previous studies on marriage and wellbeing in different cultural settings. For example, the positive links between marriage and health status were not found for Korean middle-aged women who have heavy role overloads due to gender inequality within their families and in other social settings (Lee 2013). Furthermore, the links between the presence of children and/or a spouse and happiness varied across society according to the perceived importance of marriage and children (Vanassche, Swicegood, and Matthijs 2013).

We would like to note several limitations of this paper and, based on them, propose areas for future research. Since we relied on pooled data from a repeated cross-sectional survey, it was not possible to examine within-individual changes in key variables. How psychological wellbeing changes with transition to different types of living arrangements was not examined in this study. Thus, it is not clear whether the experience of solo living leads to more life satisfaction compared to unmarried family coresidence or if people with better psychological wellbeing choose solo living rather than living with their families. Good-quality panel data are needed for future studies in order to observe changes in psychological wellbeing and living arrangements within an individual to identify causal relationships. Moreover, the economic resources of both young adults and their families are important correlates of the probability of living alone and of psychological wellbeing. With little public support in establishing solo households for young adults, such as a small housing unit with low rent, the opportunity to live alone relies heavily on economic capacity of young adults and their family (Jung and Lee 2011).

Having poor economic resources is also an important covariate of psychological wellbeing. Due to a lack of information on financial aspects such as individual earnings or household wealth, economic factors were not extensively examined in this study. Finally, it would be important to assess the links between voluntariness of living alone and psychological wellbeing. If a person's current living arrangements are voluntary, they are more likely to have greater psychological wellbeing. Related to the previous discussion on the positive links between economic resources and opportunities for independent living, the relatively low psychological wellbeing of unmarried family coresidents may be due to the low possibility of realizing their preference for independent living.

In conclusion, there are unique links between marital status, living arrangements, and the psychological wellbeing of young adults, which differ from individuals in other phases of life. For the young, living alone does not necessarily predict poor wellbeing, as has been assumed in academic research and public discourses. Living alone may even be beneficial to their psychological wellbeing via enhancing their feelings of independence. At the same time, the benefits of marriage and family coresidence on psychological wellbeing are contingent on how people perceive marriage. As social norms of mandatory marriage and family coresidence weaken in Korea, and as the transition towards independent adulthood takes longer than ever, the need for residential independence will get stronger, and unmarried solo living will continue to increase. Our findings suggest that the current, less favorable, cultural discourses on solo living do not adequately address changes in living arrangements both on the individual and social levels well, and it is argued that more extensive research into this growing group of young adults is needed.

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Table 1. Variable descriptions and distributions

		Unmarried solo residents	Unmarried family coresidents	Married family coresidents	χ^2 or F-value
Total (N = 17,259)		8.1 (1,401)	27.6 (4,764)	64.3 (11,094)	
Female (0 = male)		35.3	42.6	58.6	519.0***
Surveyed in 2012 (0 = 2010)		52.8	47.1	45.8	24.9***
Age (year)		31.3 (4.2)	29.5(3.8)	34.2(3.6)	2766.0***
Education	High school or lower	2.9	1.9	2.2	112.7***
	High school	38.5	32.8	39.9	
	College-level graduates	21.1	24.5	24.9	
	University-level graduates or higher	37.5	40.7	33.0	
Good health (0 = fair, poor, very poor health)		55.8	57.8	52.0	46.8***
Regular physical exercise (0 = not having)		31.3	29.3	24.3	64.0***
Smoking (0 = not smoking)		46.0	31.7	23.5	371.93***
Metropolitan city (0 = non-metropolitan city)		55.5	59.0	46.3	232.48***
House ownership type	Owned (by respondents or by family)	13.3	73.9	51.3	1889.5***
	Leased w/ lump-sum deposit payment	58.7	20.1	39.2	
	Leased w/ monthly payment	28.1	6.0	9.5	
Occupation type	Not working (e.g. unemployed, students, or homemakers)	21.6	30.5	35.9	209.0***
	Managerial, professional, and administrative occupations	22.4	21.7	17.4	
	Office and administrative support occupations	16.4	19.5	15.7	
	Service or sales occupations	16.6	11.7	13.4	
	Machine operators, skilled agricultural workers, or unskilled occupations	23.0	16.6	17.6	
Positive attitudes toward marriage (0 = non- positive)		53.0	54.1	55.5	7.6*
Life satisfaction (1 = very dissatisfied, 5 = very satisfied)		3.1 (0.9)	3.1 (0.9)	3.3 (0.9)	114.5***
Ever had thoughts of committing suicide over the past twelve months		9.5	7.6	8.1	5.6

Note: Variable means and standard deviations in the parentheses were presented. P-values: *** <.001, ** <.01, and * <.05.

Table 2. Odds ratios from the ordered logistic regression analyses of life satisfaction

	Model 1		Model 2	
Surveyed in 2012 (0 = 2010)	1.23 (0.029)	***	1.22 (0.029)	***
Female (0 = male)	1.25 (0.038)	***	1.25 (0.038)	***
Age	0.99 (0.004)	**	0.99 (0.004)	*
Education (0 = high school graduates)				
Less than high school	0.78 (0.101)	**	0.78 (0.101)	*
College-level graduates	1.17 (0.038)	***	1.17 (0.038)	***
University-level graduates or higher	1.72 (0.038)	***	1.72 (0.038)	***
Good health (0 = fair, poor, very poor)	3.14 (0.021)	***	3.14 (0.021)	***
Regular physical exercise (0 = not having)	1.39 (0.034)	***	1.40 (0.034)	***
Smoking (0 = not smoking)	0.79 (0.040)	***	0.79 (0.040)	***
Metropolitan city (0 = non-metro.)	0.92 (0.029)	**	0.92 (0.029)	**
Home ownership type (0 = owned)				
Leased w/ lump-sum deposit payment	0.76 (0.033)	***	0.76 (0.033)	***
Leased w/ monthly payment	0.63 (0.052)	***	0.62 (0.052)	***
Occupation (0 = managerial/professional)				
Not working	0.71 (0.044)	***	0.72 (0.044)	***
Office and administrative support occupation	0.91 (0.049)		0.91 (0.049)	
Service or sales occupations	0.79 (0.054)	***	0.79 (0.054)	***
Machine operators, skilled agricultural, or unskilled workers	0.78 (0.053)	***	0.78 (0.053)	***
Positive attitudes toward marriage (0 = non-positive)	1.40 (0.030)	***	0.98 (0.101)	
Marital and living arrangements (0 = unmarried solo residents)				
Unmarried family coresidents	0.65 (0.061)	***	0.59 (0.082)	***
Married family coresidents	1.39 (0.057)	***	1.08 (0.077)	
Interaction terms				
Positive attitudes toward marriage × Unmarried family coresidents			1.19 (0.115)	
Positive attitudes toward marriage × Married family coresidents			1.62 (0.107)	***
-2 Log Likelihood (<i>df</i>)	40983.04 (19)		40947.62 (21)	
LR test Model 1 vs. Model 2 (<i>df</i>)		35.42 (2)	***	

Note: N = 17,259. Standard errors are given in parentheses. P-values: *** <.001, ** <.01, and * <.05.

Table 3. Odds ratios from the binary logistic regression analyses of experiencing suicidal thoughts

	Model 1	Model 2
Surveyed in 2012 (0 = 2010)	1.14 (0.058) *	1.14 (0.058) *
Female (0 = male)	1.92 (0.084) ***	1.92 (0.084) ***
Age	0.98 (0.008) **	0.98 (0.008) *
Education (0 = high school graduates)		
Less than high school	1.59 (0.150) **	1.59 (0.151) **
College-level graduates	0.84 (0.076) *	0.84 (0.076) *
University-level graduates or higher	0.83 (0.076) *	0.83 (0.076) *
Good health (0 = fair, poor, very poor)	0.48 (0.039) ***	0.48 (0.040) ***
Regular exercise (0 = not having)	0.94 (0.073)	0.94 (0.073)
Smoking (0 = not smoking)	1.37 (0.089) ***	1.37 (0.089) ***
Metropolitan city (0 = non-metro.)	1.07 (0.058)	1.07 (0.058)
Home ownership type (0 = owned)		
Leased w/ lump-sum deposit payment	1.09 (0.065)	1.09 (0.065)
Leased w/ monthly payment	1.41 (0.093) ***	1.42 (0.093) ***
Occupation (0 = managerial/professional)		
Not working	1.13 (0.088)	1.12 (0.088)
Office and administrative support occupation	0.83 (0.107)	0.83 (0.107)
Service or sales occupations	1.04 (0.110)	1.03 (0.110)
Machine operators, skilled agricultural, or unskilled workers	0.87 (0.115)	0.87 (0.115)
Positive attitudes toward marriage (0 = non-positive)	0.56 (0.060) ***	0.59 (0.195) **
Marital and living arrangements (0 = unmarried solo residents)		
Unmarried family coresidents	0.85 (0.118)	0.81 (0.147)
Married family coresidents	0.87 (0.108)	0.91 (0.134)
Interaction terms		
Positive attitudes toward marriage × Unmarried family coresidents		1.13 (0.226)
Positive attitudes toward marriage × Married family coresidents		0.88 (0.208)
-2 Log Likelihood (<i>df</i>)	8879.85 (19)	8876.48 (21)
LR test Model 1 vs. Model 2 (<i>df</i>)	3.32(2)	

Note: N = 17,259. Standard errors are given in parentheses. P-values: *** <.001, ** <.01, and * <.05.

Figure 1. Odds ratios from the ordered logistic regression analyses of life satisfaction

