

## **Changing Expectations: Increasing Happiness and Unhappiness in Japanese Marriages.**

Japanese marriage has traditionally been an essential adult status. Based on a functional division of labor, marriages remained intact out of obligation rather than personal choice. There was little point to evaluating one's marriage: many couples were indeed happy or unhappy, but in general, "ok" was good enough. Nevertheless, the Japanese family system is undergoing major changes associated with increasing freedom of choice, including decisions to delay marriage and childbearing, to never marry or have children, or to divorce.

It is not surprising, therefore, that responses to a question about the happiness of marriage have been heavily concentrated in a middle category of "so-so." Analyzing data from national surveys in 1994 and 2000, we document movement away from this middle category towards more marriages being reported as either happy or unhappy. Multivariate analyses are conducted with respect to responses in the middle category, and of a five-point scale measuring happiness. We conclude with a content analysis of articles on marriage in the Japanese media between 1990 and 2000, and discuss our multivariate results in terms of the interplay of micro and macro forces in social change.

### *Background*

Dramatic changes are occurring in Japanese families, changes that appear to be Japan's version of the "Second Demographic Transition." Whatever the forces behind these changes, one central aspect is the increasing legitimacy of individual choice in decision-making as opposed to obligatory compliance with social expectations. It is critical to keep in mind that forces appearing to lead to similar outcomes in various societies are filtered through the unique cultures of those societies. This is what makes Japan such an important case study. Its Confucian heritage places heavy emphasis on obligations to family and society, leaving little room for self-interest.

Nonetheless, it is exactly behaviors involving individual choice where the recent changes are occurring. Marriage and childbearing are being markedly delayed, with increasing proportions likely to never marry or have children. Divorce is rapidly increasing, and appears to have reached a level that falls in the middle of the distribution of divorce rates across European countries. Coresidence of married couples with a parent/in-law is declining. At the same time, the young people who have delayed marriage are living with their parents, employed, and spending their earnings on themselves. Such delayed marriage is made easier, not only by parental subsidy, but also by the very high prevalence of premarital sex. The prevalence of such behaviors is increasingly well-known, as substantial proportions report that they personally know someone who has cohabited or engaged in other non-traditional family behaviors.

An essential factor in the context of these changes is the traditional rigid division of labor in marriages, which places heavy obligations on women for household maintenance and childrearing—which are now combined with high levels of wives' employment. Men contribute through long work hours, but provide very little assistance at home. Most of men's employment experience would remain the same if they were neither married nor had children, whereas women's lives would be greatly different in this circumstance. The increasing divorce rate is clear evidence that many are examining what they personally get out of their marriage, and finding it wanting.

### *Data and Measures*

This study uses two national surveys on the family in Japan: the 1994 National Survey on Work and Family Life (NSWFL) and the 2000 National Survey on Family and Economic Conditions (NSFEC). The analysis is based on 2443 currently married women and men aged 20-49 in 2000 and 1242 in 1994. Both surveys asked how happy the respondent was with their marriage, with the response categories: "Very Happy, Somewhat Happy, So-So, Somewhat Unhappy, and Very Unhappy." Variables included in the multivariate analyses are: wife's age, wife's education, husband's education, age of youngest child, coresidence with parents/parents-in-law, wife's employment, husband's employment hours, husband's income, whether the husband does any housework and wife's hours of housework.

### *Analysis*

As noted above, responses are concentrated in the middle category, but there is an increase by 2000 in the proportions reporting their marriage as either happy or unhappy. Consistent with our perspective on the role of perceived individual well-being in the context of the traditional rigid division of labor, it is particularly relevant that the direction of these changes differs by gender. We find that men increasingly report their marriage as happy while women increasingly report theirs as unhappy.

The analysis progresses to a multivariate examination of this movement away from the middle, "so-so" category. The most important result is that the middle category is little patterned by social characteristics in 1994 but had become more so by 2000. This, also, is consistent with our expectation of increasing attention to the evaluation of marriage. In particular, age has a strong negative relationship with being in the middle category in 2000 but not in 1994. As we would expect, it is younger people who are especially adopting new expectations of marriage.

Using ordered logit, we then examine the relationship of these variables with individuals' reports of how happy they see their marriage to be. Again, the changing patterns are consistent with our expectation of emerging attention to self-interest. In 2000, age, education, age of youngest child, coresidence with parents, husband's income, and whether the husband does any housework are all related to reported happiness among women. Among men the significant variables are age, wives' and husbands' education, and age of youngest child. In 1994, none of these variables had any relationship with

reported happiness among men, and only age, age of youngest child, and husband's housework did so among women. We also find important relationships of marital happiness with variables on knowledge of persons who have engaged in innovative behaviors such as cohabiting or having a child while unmarried.

Finally, we discuss these results in the context of the interplay between micro and macro processes in social change. This section draws on original research in which we have conducted a search and content analysis of Japanese newspapers with respect to how much attention is given to marriage, and marital relationships, and to how these are characterized. Media attention to changes that are occurring both reflect the growing prevalence of these changes and may stimulate conversation about and individual consideration of alternatives. Further, media reports may often include positive or negative evaluations of these changes, and in so doing, influence public opinion.