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Research Article

Living alone: One-person households in Asia

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Abstract

BACKGROUND

The one-person household (OPH) is the fastest-growing type of household in many regions of the world, but no systematic work on it has been done outside of Europe and North America. This special collection consists of ten articles that examine the living-alone phenomenon in Asia.

OBJECTIVE

This paper summarizes their findings, highlights unique features found in Asia, and discusses the implications of the increase in OPH in Asia for individuals' well-being and societies' resource distribution.

METHODS

Census data are used for an international comparison of the prevalence of one-person households.

RESULTS

The papers reveal vast heterogeneity across regions and within nations. While widows remains a major group of OPH, the rising prevalence of OPH in Asia is mainly fueled by the increase of young urban adults who live alone as a consequence of delayed or declining marriage, increasing divorce, and increasing geographic mobility. Many of them are working class individuals or migrant workers. The impact of living alone varies by cultural, demographic, and policy contexts. The papers identify groups that are potentially vulnerable to social isolation and financial distress and challenge the generally negative stereotypes of the OPH living arrangement.

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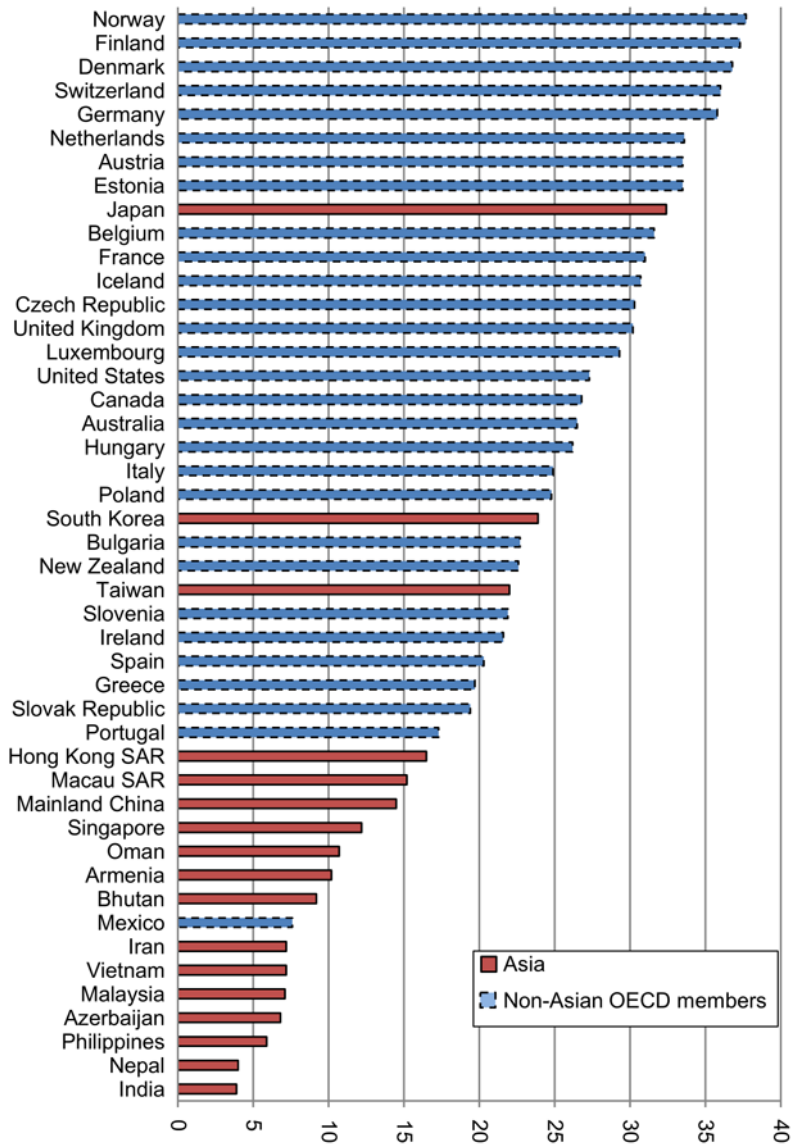
CONCLUSIONS

OPH will continue to increase in Asia in the next few decades due to the rapid aging trend, declining marriage and fertility rates, and increase in divorce and migration. More theoretical development and empirically-based work is needed to understand the complexity and impact of such a living arrangement.

1. Introduction

The one-person household (OPH) is the fastest growing type of household in many regions of the world, due to changes in the past few decades in institutional arrangements, demographic behaviors, and labor migration. Not only widowed people but also many young and middle-aged adults who are divorced or have never been married live alone these days. There are also an increasing number of married couples living apart, who constitute a growing share of those who live alone. According to the latest statistics, in many economically advanced countries such as Norway, Finland, Denmark, Switzerland, and Germany more than one-third of households contained only one person at the end of the last decade (OECD 2013). While the prevalence of OPH in Asia is generally lower than in Europe and North America, it is estimated that, by 2020, 4 out of the top 10 countries with the highest number of one-person households will be in Asia, with China and India leading the trend (Euromonitor International 2012). Figure 1 provides an international comparison of the prevalence of one-person households around 2010. As shown, the more economically developed societies in East Asia such as Japan, South Korea (thereafter Korea), and Taiwan have the highest proportion of one-person households in Asia, at 32.4%, 23.9%, and 22% respectively. These represent a dramatic growth from the corresponding rates in 1980 – 19.8%, 4.8%, and 11.8% respectively. The prevalence of OPH in other Asian regions is substantially lower, with South, Southeast, and West Asia having around 10% or less one-person households (United Nations Statistics Division 2014).

Figure 1: Percentages of one-person households in all family households: OECD members and Asia



Source: OECD (2013); United Nations (2014).

Beneath these statistics lie the institutional and behavioral adaptations of families around the world to the dramatic changes in demographic, socioeconomic, and cultural landscapes of the last few decades. This increase in OPH has raised grave concerns among policymakers and scholars as it has significant implications for a society's institutional set up and individuals' well-being, such as the efficiency of a society's resource utilization or welfare system, the functioning of the family system, and individuals' physical health and psychological well-being.

We know little about those who live by themselves. Statistics show a high level of heterogeneity among groups who live alone, some of them by choice, others out of need. While the widowed remain a large proportion of those who live alone, research shows that an increasing number of young and middle-aged people who are divorced or never-married live alone too (Klinenberg 2012; Jamieson and Simpson 2013). In addition, due to increased geographic mobility or a choice of urban life styles, there are more family members who are living apart (Levin 2004). However, official figures often do not allow distinguishing the different types of OPH by demographic or socioeconomic characteristics. It is likely that some of the OPH population is at a higher risk of financial stress or social isolation, as commonly portrayed in the public media. However, a recent study by Klinenberg (2012) paints a more positive picture of living alone, characterizing it mainly as an urban middle-class life style. With data from the UK, Jamieson and Simpson (2013) also question the negative stereotypes of living alone commonly held in public discourse. Little demographic research has examined this demographic trend and its determinants and impact on the population. In particular, studies on solo living of young adults are rare in Asian contexts.

Given that 60% of the world's population lives in Asia and there are vast institutional and cultural differences both within Asian countries (Jones 2012; Yeung and Alipio 2013) and between Asian and Western countries, a careful look at Asia will help us gain new knowledge of the impact of social change on families across the world.

This special collection aims to add new knowledge about the formation of one-person households in Asia, their impact on individual well-being, and the policy implications. The ten papers in this collection examine one-person households in 15 countries in East Asia (China, Japan, and Korea), Southeast Asia (Vietnam, Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, and the Philippines), and South Asia (Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Pakistan). These analyses are based on data from censuses and large-scale household surveys, with many of them involving longitudinal or comparative analyses. Together they provide an excellent basis for international comparison and future investigation, thus making theoretical and empirical contributions to this field.

The papers are organized into three parts: (1) Trends, pattern, and determinants of solo living; (2) Living alone, health, and psychological well-being; and (3) Policy implications. As this is a relatively new topic in most Asian countries, we focus on historical trends in Asia in Part I. The results from these papers reveal considerable heterogeneity across different socioeconomic, cultural, and demographic contexts. We then turn to examine the relationship between living alone and individual well-being, including health, subjective well-being, and intergenerational relations for both the older and young adults. Finally, we include an article that explores the impact of public policies on the prevalence of solo living for older adults in Korea.

2. The trends, patterns, and determinants of living alone in Asia

Part I begins with a paper by Podhisita and Xenos (2015), who point to several methodological challenges related to studies of “living alone”, particularly when census data or large survey data are used. They note that in most studies the concept of “living alone” is operationalized as living in a one-person household, excluding those who live away from family members but live with others in a non-family household such as group quarters. This limitation is particularly salient in Asian contexts, as living in non-family (institutional) group quarters is common in certain regions, where many migrant workers, particularly young migrants, have such a living arrangement. Another important conceptual issue that Podhisita and Xenos raise is that living in OPH does not necessarily indicate the “alone-ness” that, in public discourse, is often associated with such living. Furthermore, censuses measure the living arrangement of the respondents at a certain time-point without knowledge of their history of living arrangements, thus providing insufficient information on whether the arrangement of living in OPH is temporary, transitory, or long-term. Given these limitations, the authors recommend using multiple data sources including in-depth analysis with a small, specialized sample that will provide valuable information on the changing pattern of this particular type of living arrangement.

Podhisita and Xenos examine the trends and patterns of living alone in ten countries in South and Southeast Asia. They observe that the broad patterns in South and Southeast Asian countries are similar to the situation in Europe in the 18th century. The pattern is gendered, with older women more likely to live alone due to widowhood. There is also a higher prevalence of young male residents living alone in urban than in rural areas. The authors show that living in group quarters (and hence living away from any family member or relative) is a common and unique characteristic for young urban adults in the South and Southeast Asian contexts. In countries such as Bangladesh, Cambodia, and Thailand, in particular, as high as 60% to 80% of those aged 15 to 25

who live alone in urban areas live in group quarters. Omitting those who live in group quarters (as many studies on the topic of OPH do) underestimates the impact of the rapid transition happening in this region. While a substantial heterogeneity within the region is documented in this paper, factors that contribute to these differences have yet to be examined.

Guilmoto and de Loenzien (2015) focus on trends in Vietnam. They stress the sociodemographic heterogeneity of those who live alone. Using cluster analysis they identify four major categories of OPH in Vietnam: 1) Widowed non-migrants; 2) Other non-migrants; 3) Young single migrants; 4) Ever-married adult migrants. The authors find that the proportion of widows who live alone is as high as 17% in 2009 and largely involuntary as a result of a smaller number of offspring and their regional mobility. There is also a significance increase of migrant workers who live alone. But there is also a significant proportion of OPH who are migrant workers. Guilmoto and de Loenzien show that the rise in OPH in Vietnam is related to delayed marriages, increase in geographic mobility, and weakening of traditional family patterns. The authors suggest that cultural factors may explain the ethnic and regional variations observed: for example, widows are encouraged to live with the rest of their family more among ethnic minority groups and in South Vietnam. They also caution that widows in Vietnam are particularly vulnerable.

Two papers in this collection examine the historical trend in East Asia. Based on census data, Park and Choi (2015) track the trend over the past half century in South Korea for different age and gender groups. They show an overall increase in OPH for all subgroups, with a particularly sharp rise in two subgroups, young single men and widows. Focusing on widowed and never-married adults, they find that, in contrast to studies in many Western countries, Koreans with lower education are more likely to live alone than those who are better educated. This is especially true for single Korean women, with better-educated single women less likely to live on their own. Park and Choi speculate that the strong family culture in East Asia, which favors co-residence with family members, may explain this pattern. They found that this educational differential persists over time despite the rapid economic transformation, reflecting the influence of the strong family norm in Korea.

Cheung and Yeung (2015) examine the trend in China based on historical census data. Although not as prevalent as in Korea, OPH in China has also increased sharply over the past three decades, from 4.9% of total family households in 1990 to 14.5% in 2010. Today, 60 million people are living alone in China. Based on both individual-level and aggregate-level data, Cheung and Yeung depict the temporal and spatial patterns of this rising trend between 1982 and 2005, distinguishing the different types of OPH. While the widowed has historically been the largest group of OPH, the single and married OPH have outnumbered the widowed OPH in recent years, as shown in the

2005 data. In addition, the authors document an increasing regional heterogeneity of OPH over time, with a particularly sharp rise of OPH in the economically developed coastal areas where a large number of rural migrants, many of them married, live alone, having left their family members behind. Cheung and Yeung show the temporal and geographic variations in OPH patterns in China are largely accounted for by three sets of factors: demographic change, economic development, and internal migration.

Moving to the patterns in South Asia, Dommaraju (2015) examines how socio-demographic factors affect the propensity to live alone in India by age and gender. Although the prevalence of OPH in India is low relative to other countries (3.7% of total households in 2011), the number of individuals involved is large (about 9 million in 2011). As in other countries, Indian women face a higher risk of solo living, mainly due to widowhood. However, Dommaraju finds that after marital status is controlled for, Indian men have a higher propensity of living alone in almost all demographic and socioeconomic categories. One unique social context in Indian is the caste system. Those who live in the North and Northeast regions are more likely to live alone than their counterparts in other regions. Scheduled tribe has the lowest odds of living in an OPH than other caste groups even after controlling for other socio-demographic characteristics, suggesting that cultural or economic factors are important in shaping living arrangement in India, with the poorest having the highest odds of living alone. Dommaraju shows that wealth is negatively related to the risk of living in OPH in India. In contrast to OPH being observed as a lifestyle for wealthy urbanites, Indians who live alone tend to have lower economic resources.

3. Living alone, health and psychological well-being

After surveying the landscape of prevalence in living alone, the next four papers explore how the experience of living alone relates to individual's health and psychological well-being. Recent literature has started to question the negative stereotypes attached to the living alone arrangement often found in the popular press and has called for further empirical investigation (Jamieson and Simpson 2013; Klinenberg 2012). As studies in this collection show, those who live alone in Asia tend to be more socio-economically disadvantaged (migrant workers, the less educated, and those who cannot afford to own a house), and how such a living arrangement relates to an individual's well-being has both theoretical and policy implications.

Previous literature tends to focus on examining the well-being of older adults who live alone. Few papers investigate the well-being of young men and women living in OPH. Living alone may have different meanings for and a different impact on young adults and older adults. Raymo (2015) and Ho (2015) investigate the relationship

between living alone and well-being among young adults in the Japanese and Korean contexts respectively.

Raymo (2015) focuses on the situations in Japan. As noted earlier, Japan has the highest prevalence of living alone among Asian countries, with OPH being the most common type of family household in the country. Raymo finds that the increase in living alone among young adults between 1985 and 2010 in Japan can be largely explained by the decline in the marriage rate during this period. He also finds that those who live alone are less happy than those living with others, though the size of the effect is not substantively large. However, he finds no significant difference in self-reported health status and social participation among those with different living arrangements. The author could not explain the poorer subjective well-being among those living alone by their level of social participation. More work is needed to examine the mediating pathways.

Ho (2015) finds that unmarried young Koreans who live alone in general have lower life satisfaction than young adults who are married. Among singles, those who live alone tend to have higher life satisfaction than singles who live with their family members. However, Ho underscores the importance of young Korean's attitudes toward marriage as a mediator of the relationship between living alone and subjective well-being. Among singles who feel they have to marry or it is better to marry, those who live alone tend to have lower life satisfaction than those living with their family members. Ho finds no significant difference in the likelihood of having suicidal thoughts among young people with different living arrangements. These analyses are based on cross-sectional data; hence no causal relationship can be established with confidence.

The two papers by Raymo and Ho reveal the complex relationships between living alone arrangement, social network participation, lifestyles, and different dimensions of well-being. For young adults, living alone is not necessarily associated with loneliness, social isolation, or lower socioeconomic status. It remains unclear to what extent the opposite direction of the association between living alone and subjective well-being found in these two papers can be explained by the different sets of covariates, different measures of subjective well-being (happiness versus life-satisfaction), or by the different cultural and structural contexts. Future empirical studies are warranted.

The next two papers examine the well-being of the elderly who live alone, addressing some aspects generally ignored in previous research such as the geographic proximity of children. Teerawichitchainan, Knodel, and Pothisiri (2015) find that many older adults who live alone in Myanmar, Vietnam, and Thailand are actually living close to their child or children. Therefore, living alone is not necessarily associated with financial distress, loneliness, lack of support, less social participation, or poorer well-being; though in general solo dwellers report more psychological distress than those

living with others. The authors argue that older adults who live independently may be more socially active as they have less family obligations to look after grandchildren. Their comparative analysis provides mixed evidence on the relationship between living alone and subjective well-being, though they consistently show that older adults who live alone and have no children are the most vulnerable group in all three countries. Their findings underscore that the association between living alone and well-being among the elderly is context-dependent.

Given the importance of geographical proximity and urban/rural context in relating living alone to well-being, Singapore, a highly urbanized city-state with a modern healthcare system, provides an interesting setting for further investigation of this relationship. Chan, Raman, Ma, and Malhotra (2015) examine how loneliness, living alone, and social participation are related to mortality among older adults in Singapore. They find that older Singaporeans living alone are more likely to feel lonely, and that the feeling of loneliness is a significant risk factor of all-cause mortality during a two-year period. However, living alone does not have a direct effect on mortality risk, as the correlation becomes non-significant after the elderly's health status is held constant. The authors show that in a densely populated city-state like Singapore where the healthcare system is good and children often live close by, living alone does not imply social disconnection or lack of support from children. The authors call for more scholarly work to better theorize the relationship and mechanisms connecting living arrangement, social isolation, and health condition, and how these vary across contexts.

Last but not least, we include one paper that examines potential policy changes that may influence the propensity of older adults to live alone. Kim (2015) analyzes longitudinal data on the Korean elderly and finds that public transfer helps those who are widowed to remain living with their children and mitigates the increasing trend of independent living for the elderly. Her findings corroborate those in Park and Choi (2015) that those with more strained resources are more likely to live alone in Korea. Both papers suggest that this may reflect the cultural ideal of multigenerational coresidence in Korea. Yet those with limited resources are less likely to live up to this traditional family ideal. Kim's analysis, using DID design, suggests that additional resources from public welfare can help older Koreans to continue living with family members, lending support to the potential impact of public policy in shaping the living arrangement and well-being of older adults.

4. Conclusion

This collection of papers is the first systematic examination of the living alone phenomenon outside of Europe and North America. Studies in this collection reveal

vast across-nation and within-nation heterogeneities in the living alone phenomenon in Asia. The papers provide a rare look into situations in countries such as India, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Singapore, and Myanmar. Together, they show both similarities with, and differences from, what has been observed in Western societies. As in the West, age and gender are the main stratifying factors in the patterns of one-person households. However, while widows remain a major group in OPH in many Asian countries, the rising prevalence of OPH in Asia is mainly fueled by the increased propensity of the young urban adults who live alone as a consequence of delayed or declining marriage, increasing divorce, and increasing geographic mobility. The Asian young adults who live alone in urban areas are not necessarily middle-class professionals who choose solo living as a new lifestyle. Rather, many of them are migrant workers and working-class individuals who cannot afford the high cost of housing in the cities. This is likely related to the persistently cherished cultural ideal of co-residence with family members, or pressure to abide by such a tradition, in many Asian societies. Such a pattern underscores the potential vulnerability of those who live alone in Asia.

Living alone in Asia is also not always the urban phenomenon found in Western societies. While this is true in economically advanced societies such as Japan and Korea, in Myanmar and Vietnam older men and women from rural areas are more likely to live alone than those in urban areas. A prominent and unique reason for the rise of OPH in Asia is the rapid increase in migrant labor, which has produced an increasing number of younger married and single adults who live alone in urban areas, leaving more older adults to live on their own in rural areas. In China and many Southeast Asian countries a large number of young adults live in group quarters with no core family members. Another unique feature in Asia is that a significant proportion of older adults who live alone have children or relatives who live close by.

The mixed findings on the impact of living alone on individual's well-being suggest that the impact may vary according to cultural, demographic, and policy contexts, and the dimension of well-being under investigation. These papers suggest that whereas living alone may be related to lifestyles and feelings of loneliness and life satisfaction, the negative impact on subjective well-being and health status may not be as large as is often perceived by the public. More theoretical development with empirical evidence is needed to understand the complex relationship between living arrangement, social network, and psychological, behavioral, and physical well-being in different contexts. There is also some evidence of the potential effect of public policy on living arrangements and perhaps on the well-being of those who live alone.

This special collection provides an excellent starting point for international comparison and further investigation of the antecedents and consequences of living alone for different age groups in different developmental contexts. Scholars are also

cautioned that the investigation of this topic involves conceptual and methodological pitfalls such as the omission of those who live in group quarters and the intricate relationship between 'living alone', 'aleness', and 'loneliness'. As most Asian countries are experiencing a rapid aging trend, declining marriage and fertility rates, and increased migration, one-person households will continue to increase in the next few decades. To advance in this area, more coordinated theoretical development and empirical work based on multiple methods will be particularly fruitful. While longitudinal data that captures individual life histories and family circumstances are vital, in-depth qualitative studies that explore the process, attitudes, and impact of living alone for different subgroups of population who live alone are also crucial. It is our hope that this body of work will stimulate more dialogue around the world on this fastest growing type of household.

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