Research Article

The problem group? Psychological wellbeing of unmarried people living alone in the Republic of Korea

Jeong-Hwo Ho

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Jeong-Hwa Ho[1]

Abstract

BACKGROUND
The number of unmarried one-person households has 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 this association differs 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 suicidal ideation over the past twelve months.

RESULTS
In general, unmarried solo residents experienced greater life satisfaction than did unmarried family coresidents. Of those with a positive attitude toward marriage, unmarried solo residents had lower life satisfaction than did married family coresidents. For those with a non-positive attitude toward marriage, however, there was no difference in the level of life satisfaction between unmarried solo residents and married family coresidents. Suicidal ideation did not differ by living arrangement.

CONCLUSIONS
Unmarried solo living does not necessarily relate to lower psychological wellbeing among young adults in Korea. Life stage and attitudes toward marriage should be considered when examining the association between living arrangements and psychological wellbeing.

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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 OPHs compared to the region's total number of households have increased almost fivefold, from 4.8% in 1980 to 23.9% in 2010 (Korea National Statistical Office 2014a). The rapid increase in OPHs signals a change not only in living arrangements, but also in the very sociocultural background of the heavily family-oriented Korean society in which marriage and familial coresidency have been key family norms. Social and academic discussions on solo living in Korea have focused on the older adult population, and found a negative association between living alone and quality of life. This is not surprising, given that family is the main, and for some people the only, source of financial resources and social support during old age as a result of Korea's weak public old-age welfare system (Ann 2005; Ban 2012; Lee and Kim 2014; Lee and Oh 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 30.9% of the total OPH population in 2010 (Korea National Statistical Office 2014a). The general social discourse on solo living among young adults in Korea has been negative, reflecting the experience of older adults. Solo living is often identified with loneliness and feelings of emptiness, or at least a separation from conventional living practices (Nho 2014; Ryu and Wang 2010; Yi and Park 2003). This especially applies to those that have completed their education and are at prime marital age. This unfavorable view also reflects social concerns that unmarried solo living is one of the main causes of low marriage rates and very low fertility in Korea, where childbearing is closely related to marriage. Surprisingly, however, no study has examined how solo residents fare in terms of psychological wellbeing in comparison to other forms of living arrangements, such as unmarried individuals living with family and married individuals living with family (Nho 2014). In general, research on the links between living arrangements and psychological wellbeing in an Asian context are sparse (Fukuda 2009; Park 2013), despite the social expectations and patterns of solo residency substantially differing from those of Western societies.

As the needs and resources of young people 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. Living alone in young adulthood does not necessarily relate to social isolation, as young solo residents maintain close contact with their family of origin (Choi and Park 2012; Jung and Lee 2011) and have active social networks of friends and coworkers, for example (Jeong et al. 2012).

Moreover, studies on Western societies in which residential independence among young adults is common have shown that living alone can increase feelings of self-sufficiency and independence, both of which are critical for achieving an independent adult status (Galambos and Krahn 2008; Jordyn and Byrd 2003; Kins and Beyers 2010). This is increasingly relevant in Korea, as it is taking longer for them to achieve markers of full adulthood as a result of the demands of higher education, rising unemployment rates, and delayed marriage and parenthood (Nahm and Namgoong 2012; Xenos et al. 2006). It is important to understand how young adults at prime marital age perceive this new trend in living arrangements, especially considering that Korea has experienced rapid changes in family behaviors, such as delayed marriage and ultra-low fertility (Jones 2007). Such an understanding will also expand our comprehension of the associations between living arrangements and wellbeing in various cultural backgrounds and socioeconomic environments.

How young adults perceive marriage is an important factor in examining the relationships between their living arrangements and psychological wellbeing. Although marriage is starting to be postponed and/or avoided (Jones 2007), it is still considered a normal, if not mandatory, life status achievement in Korea. As the late 20s and 30s are now seen as the prime marital period, unmarried young adults in this age group often feel the expectations or pressures placed on them by either family members or the overall sociocultural atmosphere (Nho 2014). Unmarried young adults in Korea are expected to live with their parents until they marry, only after which they are free to form their own household and move away. Thus, evaluations or assessments of current living arrangements are contingent on how close or how far one is from what is perceived as ideal or normative. If an unmarried solo resident perceives marriage as a positive norm to follow, one may perceive current living arrangements less favorably.

This paper examines how living arrangements and marital status of young Korean adults aged 25 to 39 are related to their psychological wellbeing, as measured by life satisfaction and suicidal ideation 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 universal marriage and family coresidence for unmarried young adults. We further examine 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 (KSS 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 living arrangements and marital status relate to wellbeing in adulthood, and most studies have found that those who are married and coreside with family have a better quality of life than those who are not married and live alone. Married individuals are likely to have better subjective health status (Liu and Umberson 2008), lower mortality rates (Manzoli et al. 2007), more feelings of happiness (Sassler and Schoen 1999; Soons, Liefbroer, and Kalmijn 2009), a fewer number of depressive symptoms (Jang et al. 2009; Yan et al. 2011), and a lower likelihood of suicidal ideation and attempts (Crump et al. 2014). Research on the benefits of family coresidency in adulthood has heavily focused on the older population, as family is the main source of support in old age (Li 2013). Older adults living alone are more likely to experience loneliness (Greenfield and Russell 2011) and suicidal ideation or attempts (Crawford, Kuforiji, and Ghosh 2009; Lee and Oh 2008).

The positive associations between marriage, family coresidency, and quality of life are attributed to the fact that spouses and family members provide economic, social, and emotional support and serve as a buffer against distress. The sharing of a residence and everyday household goods enables economy of scale, with the family serving as the key distributor of economic resources. In Korea, for example, the proportion of households under absolute poverty line in 2010 was 41.4% for solo households, and 10.1% for multiple-person households (Ban 2012). 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 (Lee et al. 2005). Families also provide affection and emotional support during times of distress, thus reducing loneliness (Yang and Victor 2008) and minimizing the negative consequences of distress.

The associations between living alone and psychological wellbeing 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 are contingent on societal attitudes toward marriage and family. According to Vanassche, Swicegood, and Matthijs (2013), married women are more likely to report greater happiness than their cohabiting counterparts. The difference in happiness across marital status, however, tends to decrease in societies where alternative family types, such as cohabitation, are more accepted. 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 by marital status. Never-married women are likely to have even better life satisfaction compared to their married counterparts.

2.2 Solo living in young adulthood

Associations between living arrangements and wellbeing also vary across life stages. A body of research conducted in Western societies has shown that living alone is positively related to wellbeing among young adults. For young adults, especially for those in their late teens and early 20s, 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 often initiates a transitional process towards adulthood, followed by other role transitions, such as completing education, starting a career, and getting married and having children (Aassve, Arpino, and Billari 2013; Spéder, Murinkó, and Settersten Jr. 2014). The accomplishment of the main markers for adulthood, such as residential independence, securing a job, and starting a romantic relationship, are related to better psychological wellbeing in young adulthood (Galambos and Krahn 2008; Kins and Beyers 2010; Schulenberg, Bryant, and O'Malley 2004). By making everyday decisions away from the control of their parents, young adults living alone may gain a sense of independence that, in turn, is related to better psychological wellbeing (Galambos and Krahn 2008). Additionally, 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).

The relationship between residential independence and adulthood status in Western societies is increasingly applicable to experiences of Korean young adults. The residential independence of unmarried young adults in Korea 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 through marriage are people expected to leave the parental home and establish their own households. The majority of Koreans have never experienced living alone. Moreover, marriage has been a key norm within the family-oriented Korean culture. Thus living alone, as well as singlehood, has been viewed less favorably, and has been often associated with feelings of loneliness, emptiness, and a lifestyle motivated by individualism which deviates from social norms (Nho 2014; Ryu and Wang 2010; Yi and Park 2003). At the same time, the increase in the number of unmarried solo residents is viewed negatively, as this is often identified as one of the

main reasons behind delayed marriage and low fertility that, in turn, exacerbates the burden of rapid population aging.

The negative views on solo living in Korea, however, are in need of re-examination due to demographic and socioeconomic changes. The proportion of OPHs among those aged 25 to 39 has risen rapidly from 7.7% to 14.1% for men, and from 4.3% to 8.8% for women, between 2000 and 2010 (Korea National Statistical Office 2014a). Although these figures are much lower compared to those of European countries and neighboring Asian countries, such as Japan and China (Fukuda 2009; Iacovou 2010; Yi et al. 1994), this transition has never been witnessed before in Korea. High tertiary education enrollment rates, increased job attainment away from home, delayed marriages, and the weakening of the sanctity of marriage, have been suggested to be the main causes of this increase in OPHs among young adults (Ban 2012; Nahm and Namgoong 2012). In 2013, about 70.7% of high school graduates have continued to 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 in search of better educational and career opportunities (Byun et al. 2008).

The traditional norms associated with adulthood transitions and living arrangements thus face many challenges, as these do not address changing social situations and preferences for independent living (Jung and Lee 2011). The transition to adulthood in Korea 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 is being increasingly delayed and takes longer to complete, as marriage and subsequent parenthood are being postponed (Xenos et al. 2006). According to research on the transition to adulthood in Korea by Nahm and Namgoong (2012), this process took about 15.4 years for men surveyed in 1990. They were 18.8 years in 2000 and 21.0 years in 2005, meaning that young adults spend more time in an ambiguous, or partial adulthood, status. For example, in their early 30s, most young adults have finished their highest level of education and are employed and financially independent. As they are still living with their parents as an unmarried child however, they may seldom participate in household chores or make household decisions in the same way as solo residents (Seo 2010), but yet 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. Despite the growing number of young adults living alone, studies on the links between living arrangements and psychological wellbeing have been rare both in Korea and the broader heavily family-oriented Asian context (Fukuda 2009).

Conducting research in Korea will contribute to our understanding of the relationship between living arrangements and wellbeing. Increasing numbers of studies have shown cultural and temporal variations on the association between living arrangements and psychological wellbeing in Western societies (Billari and Liefbroer 2010; Furstenberg Jr. 2013). Reher (1998) argued that two broad patterns of family ties exist in Europe: areas with strong family ties where family has priority over individuals, and areas with weak family ties where individual needs and independence are highly valued. The former pattern can be found in Southern European countries, such as Italy, and the latter in Northern areas. Norms and actual patterns of home-leaving vary across these regions (Aassve, Arpino, and Billari 2013; Luetzelberger 2014; Spéder, Murinkó, and Settersten Jr. 2014). The relationship between living arrangements and psychological wellbeing depend on cultural expectations and societal situations. For example, in Portugal, where a relatively high proportion of emerging adults live with their parents, leaving the nest late is not related to poor intergenerational relationships (Mendonça and Fontaine 2013).

2.3 Attitudes towards marriage

Satisfaction with current living arrangement 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 satisfaction or psychological wellbeing may result. If the current situation deviates from what one thinks of as normal or ideal, such individuals may view themselves less favorably (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 that perceive marriage as a positive norm to follow, current marital and living arrangements may not be satisfactory. The same living arrangement, however, may be linked to improved psychological wellbeing among individuals that do not perceive marriage as a desired norm.

Attitudes toward marriage in Korea are important in understanding the association between living arrangements and psychological wellbeing. Korea is a family-oriented society based on Confucianism (Eun and Lee 2006; Kim 2013). Family serves as a key social institution and marriage is the only culturally legitimate condition in which couples may live together or raise children (Park 2013). The late 20s and 30s is the prime marital age according to the age norms of adulthood transition. At this life stage, most people have finished their education and have entered the labor market. Marriage is the next step toward full adulthood. Unmarried solo residents deviate from both marital and family coresidency norms. Additionally, how people perceive marriage may

serve as an important indicator from which to gauge the general perspective held toward traditional family norms. For example, Kim and colleagues (2007) demonstrated that unmarried solo residents who are more open to non-traditional families, such as stepfamilies and single parenthood, are likely to perceive their current solo living situation more favorably.

In general, Koreans have favorable attitudes toward marriage and this remains an important social norm. About 69.0% of men and 56.6% of women aged 15 and older held a positive attitude towards marriage in 2012, saying that "people must marry," or "it is good to marry" (Korea National Statistical Office 2014b). The responsibility of supporting aging parents and younger siblings, however, is also cited as one of the main reasons among young adults for delaying marriage (Kim 2013). With positive marital norms and worsening economic conditions in which to secure stable economic status and start a family (Nahm and Namgoong 2012), current unmarried young adults often describe themselves as a generation involuntarily giving up three things (*sahm-pho-sae-dae*): intimate relationships, marriage, and children.

Attitudes toward marriage may vary across living arrangements. Solo residents in Korea tend to have a less traditional marital value system. Compared to their married counterparts that live with their family, solo residents are less likely to have a positive attitude toward marriage and are more open to divorce (Ho 2014). At the same time, unmarried young adults with a positive attitude toward marriage are more likely to have marital intentions at a younger age (Chin and Chung 2012) and are more likely to marry (Sassler and Schoen 1999). Caution is needed, however, in understanding living alone as an expression of a preference for individualism and a denial of family care responsibilities (Ryu and Wang 2010). Studies on solo residents and the unmarried suggest that marriage and family continue to be a central foci of their lives (Byun et al. 2008; Kim et al. 2007).

3. Data and methods

3.1 Data

We used data from the two most recent waves of the 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 year since 1977 and covers contemporary social issues. The subsets of the KSS related to family issues and wellbeing used in this study have been included biannually. The analytic sample consisted of survey respondents aged between 25 and 39, who were not in school, and met any of the following living conditions at the time of data collection: 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). We chose this age group as the late 20s to 30s is considered to be the prime age range for marriage and family formation. This is the period when most individuals have completed their education and are entering the labor market. The mean age of first marriage in Korea was 32.2 years for men and 29.6 years for women in 2013 (Korea National Statistical Office 2014c). This period extends to the late 30s, as the proportion of the never married among people aged 35 to 39 is 26.7% for men and 12.6% for women (Korea National Statistical Office 2014a). We excluded students from the analytic sample because the relative meaning of living alone and expectations of marriage are different among those that have completed their education. The age and order norms of adulthood transition indicate that marriage usually occurs after education has been completed (Nahm and Namgoong 2012); thus, students are generally expected to be unlikely to wed. Further, living alone away from parents for the purposes of education is generally considered to be a temporary arrangement and may have different implications for psychological wellbeing.

A total of 17,279 respondents who were aged 25–39 and were not in school at the time of the survey completed either wave of the KSS. Among married people, living separately from the family is not common, and experiences of divorce or widowhood are quite rare among young adults. These conditions result in sample sizes that are too small to warrant meaningful findings and may introduce confounding factors of subjective wellbeing. Thus, we excluded 132 respondents who were married and lived alone and 454 respondents who were either divorced or widowed. We also excluded 127 cases of individuals living in a non-family household setting, such as dormitories. After further excluding 79 cases of missing or incorrect information pertaining to the variables used in the analyses, the final study sample consisted of 16,487 respondents.

3.2 Variables

Living arrangements. Living arrangements were a key independent variable in the analyses. As stated earlier, participants were grouped into three categories: unmarried solo residents (n = 1,299), unmarried family coresidents (n = 4,299), and married family coresidents (n = 10,889). 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, an indicator of whether respondents perceived marriage as a positive family norm. This variable was measured via 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 or 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 "it is better not to marry" or "one must not marry"). As inclusion of this subgroup may have resulted in a sample size too small to ensure reliable statistical analysis, the expressed negative attitudes were grouped together with ambivalent attitudes into the category of "non-positive attitudes." Sensitivity tests with different categorizations of responses yielded similar results. Detailed descriptions and variable distributions by living arrangements included in the analysis are presented in Table 1.

Psychological wellbeing. Both positive and negative aspects of psychological wellbeing were measured through life satisfaction and suicidal ideation. Life satisfaction was assessed through responses to the following question: "Considering things such as your financial situation, employment, and overall health status, how satisfied are you with your life? (1 = very dissatisfied, 5 = very satisfied)." Suicidal ideation was a binary variable, where 1 indicated that the individual had thought about 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. Korea had the highest suicidal rates among all OECD countries at all ages in 2013 (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development 2013), and suicide is the leading cause of death among young adults aged 20–39 (Korea National Statistical Office 2013).

Table 1:   Variable descriptions and distributions

		Unmarried solo residents	Unmarried family coresidents	Married family coresidents	χ^2 or F-value
Total (N = 16,487)		7.9 (1,299)	26.1 (4,299)	64.3 (10,889)	
Female (0 = male)		36.1	44.1	58.7	427.2***
Surveyed in 2012 (0 = 2010)		52.5	47.1	45.9	20.6***
Age (year)		31.5 (4.2)	29.8(3.8)	34.2(3.6)	2293.2***
Education	Lower than high school	3.1	2.1	2.2	215.9***
	High school	35.7	28.0	39.6	
	College-level graduates	22.7	27.2	25.4	
	University-level graduates or higher	38.5	42.7	32.8	
Subjective health status		3.6 (0.7)	3.6 (0.7)	3.6 (0.7)	16.7***
Regular physical exercise (0 = none)		30.6	28.9	24.2	51.5***
Smoking (0 = non-smoking)		46.7	32.1	23.6	368.7***
Metropolitan city (0 = non-metropolitan)		55.0	58.7	46.3	204.1***
Home ownership type	Owned (by respondents or by family)	14.1	73.9	51.4	1680.1***
	Leased w/ lump-sum deposit payment	58.8	20.0	39.1	
	Leased w/ monthly payment	27.1	6.2	9.5	
Occupation type	Not working (e.g., unemployed, or homemakers)	17.7	26.5	35.9	330.6***
	Managerial, professional, and administrative occupations	23.2	22.3	17.0	
	Office and administrative support occupations	17.2	20.9	15.7	
	Service or sales occupations	17.6	12.5	13.6	
	Machine operators, skilled agricultural workers, or unskilled occupations	24.3	17.8	17.8	
Positive attitudes toward marriage (0 = non-positive)		51.3	53.3	55.4	11.90*
Life satisfaction (1 = very dissatisfied, 5 = very satisfied)		3.1 (0.9)	3.0 (0.9)	3.3 (0.9)	116.0***
Suicidal ideation over the past twelve months		9.8	7.7	8.1	5.9

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

Control variables. Based on previous studies of living arrangements and psychological wellbeing, the following variables were included in the analyses: gender, age, survey year, educational attainment, subjective health status, health-related behaviors, city residency, occupation type, and home ownership type. Family norms and the degree of pressure to abide by them differ by gender and age (Chang and Song 2010; Kim 2013). In general, women are expected to abide by norms governing marriage and coresidency more strongly than are men (Jamieson and Simpson 2013). Educational attainment and health are positively related to better psychological wellbeing (Bhullar, Schutte, and Malouff 2013; Ek et al. 2014). Educational attainment

was divided into four categories: less than high school, high school, 2-year college, and 4-year university-level education or higher. Subjective heath status was measured on a five-point Likert scale based on the following question: "In general, how is your health?" Health-related behaviors were measured by the two binary variables of regular exercise participation and current smoking status. City residency was included in the analysis, as individuals living in urban areas tend to have less traditional attitudes towards family and marriage. This was measured using a binary variable where 1 indicated residency in one of the eight metropolitan cities of Korea. One limitation of the KSS is its lack of detailed information related to economic status, such as individual income and household wealth. Therefore, we used types of occupation and home-ownership to gauge economic status. Type of occupation 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 both homemakers and the unemployed. Type 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. Leased homes with monthly payments often indicate lower residential stability and a poor economic situation in Korea (Choi and Nam 2008; Kim 2010). The KSS did not include any information with which to identify the actual homeowner, thus the home could belong to either the young respondents or their family members, usually the parents. In the case of unmarried family coresidents, it may be reasonable to assume that the home would belong to the parents of the respondents, since most of them were young and living with their birth 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 suicidal ideation, 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 indicated that the associations between living arrangements and psychological wellbeing vary by attitudes toward marriage.

4. Results

4.1 Life satisfaction

Table 2 presents ORs from the ordered logistic regression analysis of life satisfaction. Model 1 estimated baseline associations between living arrangements and life satisfaction. The reference category of living arrangements was unmarried solo residents. The results suggest that living arrangement is significantly related to wellbeing in young adulthood. In line with previous studies on the positive association between marriage and psychological wellbeing (Liu and Umberson 2008; Sassler and Schoen 1999), unmarried solo residents had lower levels of life satisfaction than did married family coresidents. Unmarried solo residents however, tended to have greater life satisfaction than unmarried family coresidents. This is in contrast to the prevalent social discourse in Korea in which solo residents are supposed to demonstrate poor psychological wellbeing compared to their unmarried counterparts that live with family (Ryu and Wang 2010). Attitudes toward marriage were significantly related to life satisfaction so that those with positive attitudes toward marriage demonstrated higher odds of having higher life satisfaction than their non-positive counterparts.

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. This indicates that the association between living arrangements and life satisfaction differed regarding attitudes towards marriage for both unmarried solo residents and married family coresidents. The ORs from Model 2 are presented graphically in Figure 1 in order to better illustrate this relationship. First, the respondents were categorized into two groups according to their attitudes toward marriage and then 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 individuals with a positive attitude toward marriage, the relationship between living arrangements and life satisfaction was similar to that found in Model 1. Unmarried solo residents were likely to experience more life satisfaction than were unmarried family coresidents, but less life satisfaction than were married 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 relationship between marriage and wellbeing

(Liu and Umberson 2008; Sassler and Schoen 1999). Young adults living alone, however, were likely to enjoy more life satisfaction than were their unmarried counterparts living with family members, as is the case in Western societies (Galambos and Krahn 2008; Kins and Beyers 2010).

Table 2: Odds ratios from the ordered logistic regression analysis of life satisfaction

	Model 1		Model 2	
Surveyed in 2012 (0 = 2010)	1.23	(0.030)***	1.22	(0.030)***
Female (0 = male)	1.31	(0.040)***	1.31	(0.040)***
Age	1.00	(0.004)	0.99	(0.004)
Education (0 = high school graduates)				
Less than high school	0.80	(0.101)*	0.80	(0.101)*
College-level graduates	1.22	(0.039)***	1.22	(0.039)***
University-level graduates or higher	1.79	(0.039)***	1.79	(0.039)***
Subjective health status	3.12	(0.022)***	3.12	(0.022)***
Regular physical exercise (0 = none)	1.38	(0.035)***	1.39	(0.035)***
Smoking (0 = non-smoking)	0.80	(0.042)***	0.80	(0.042)***
Metropolitan city (0 = non-metropolitan)	0.92	(0.030)**	0.92	(0.030)**
Home ownership type (0 = owned)				
Leased w/ lump-sum deposit payment	0.76	(0.033)***	0.76	(0.033)***
Leased w/ monthly payment	0.64	(0.053)***	0.64	(0.053)***
Occupation (0 = managerial/professional)				
Not working	0.69	(0.045)***	0.69	(0.045)***
Office and administrative support occupation	0.92	(0.049)	0.92	(0.049)
Service or sales occupations	0.80	(0.055)***	0.80	(0.055)***
Machine operators, skilled agricultural, or unskilled workers	0.79	(0.054)***	0.80	(0.054)***
Positive attitudes toward marriage (0 = non-positive)	1.42	(0.031)***	1.02	(0.105)
Marital and living arrangements (0 = unmarried solo residents)				
Unmarried family coresidents	0.64	(0.064)***	0.60	(0.089)***
Married family coresidents	1.39	(0.059)***	1.10	(0.082)
Interaction terms				
Positive attitudes toward marriage **×** Unmarried family coresidents			1.13	(0.120)
Positive attitudes toward marriage **×** Married family coresidents			1.57	(0.111)***
-2 Log Likelihood (*df*)	39017.04 (*19*)		38983.99 (*21*)	
LR test Model 1 vs. Model 2 (*df*)		34.06 (*2*) ***		

Note: N = 16,487. Standard errors are given in parentheses. P-values: *** <.001, ** <.01, and * <.05.

Figure 1: **Odds ratios from the ordered logistic regression analysis of life satisfaction**
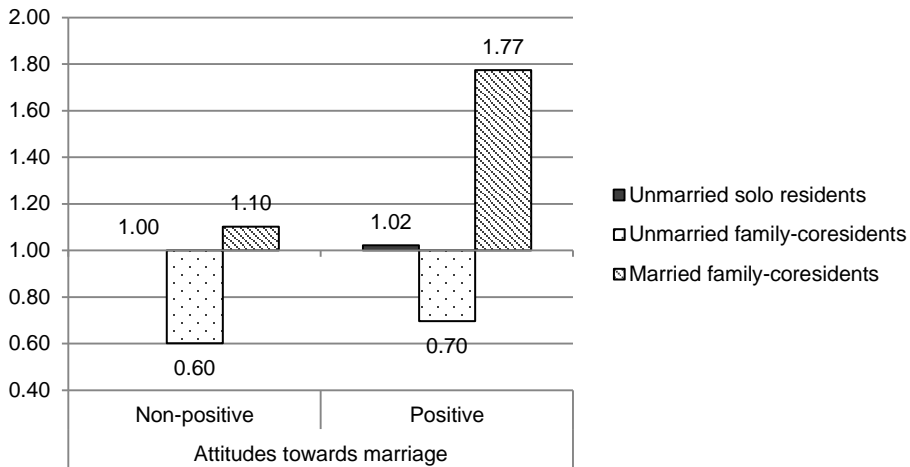
Note: This figure is a graphical presentation of the odds ratios for the key variables of Model 2 shown in Table 2. The first three bars from the left show the odds ratios for each group of living arrangements for individuals with non-positive attitudes towards marriage, in the following order: unmarried solo residents (the reference category), unmarried family coresidents, and married family coresidents respectively. The next three bars show the odds ratios for those with positive attitudes towards marriage in the same order of living arrangements.

Somewhat different patterns emerged for respondents with non-positive attitudes toward marriage. Unmarried solo residents with a non-positive attitude continued to demonstrate greater life satisfaction than unmarried family coresidents. Unlike for individuals with a positive attitude toward marriage, however, there was no statistically significant difference in life satisfaction between unmarried solo residents and married family coresidents. The difference in the relationship between living arrangements and life satisfaction by attitude toward marriage was statistically significant. Additionally, results of the likelihood ratio test between Models 1 and 2 (presented in the last row of Table 2) indicated that Model 2 fit the data significantly better. This is because married family coresidents, as well as unmarried family coresidents, with non-positive marriage attitudes tended to have less life satisfaction than those with positive attitudes, while unmarried solo residents had similar levels of life satisfaction irrespective of their attitudes toward marriage. Thus, the level of life satisfaction demonstrated by married family coresidents with non-positive attitudes was similar to that of unmarried solo residents. This suggests that attitudes toward marriage play an important role in understanding life satisfaction among both unmarried and married family coresidents

whose living arrangements conform to traditional family norms of marriage and family coresidency. The life satisfaction of unmarried solo residents, however, did not differ by attitudes to marriage, suggesting that traditional marital norms may not be an important factor related to life satisfaction. This is in line with public and academic discussions that suggest that unmarried solo residents in Korea have less traditional family norms (Ho 2014; Ryu and Wang 2010).

The covariates, in general, were related to life satisfaction as would be expected. Both women and individuals with higher educational attainment were likely to report greater life satisfaction than either men or individuals with lower educational attainment. Respondents who had good health and who adopted health-promoting lifestyles, such as regular physical exercise, and did not smoke, were likely to report better life satisfaction. Those living in metropolitan areas tended to report lower life satisfaction. Individuals living in their own houses were likely to report higher life satisfaction than those living in leased homes. Those in managerial or professional occupations were also better off regarding life satisfaction compared to those in other occupational groups and those not in work. This suggests that residential stability and economic status are important factors for life satisfaction.

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 coresidency are more strongly enforced for women than they are for men. Residential independence is more favorably accepted for individuals in their late 30s compared to those in their 20s. Therefore, we conducted additional analysis in order to examine whether, and to what extent, the association between living arrangements and life satisfaction differ by 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 by gender or age group.

4.2 Suicidal ideation

We conducted binary logistic regression analysis on suicidal ideation during the last twelve months and present the results in Table 3. As was the case for the life satisfaction analyses, we first examined baseline associations between living arrangements, attitudes toward marriage, and suicidal ideation in Model 1. Unlike life satisfaction, living arrangements were not significantly related to suicidal thoughts over the past twelve months. Although unmarried solo residents tended to have the highest proportion of suicidal ideation according to the simple cross tabulation presented in Table 1, living arrangements were not significantly related to suicidal ideation after controlling for covariates included in the analysis. This result is not consistent with

previous literature on older Korean adults that have shown that solo living is associated with suicidal thoughts (Lee and Oh 2008). Attitudes toward marriage were significantly related to a lower likelihood of suicidal ideation such that respondents with positive attitudes were less likely to experience such thoughts than to those with a non-positive attitude. This finding is in line with the results of previous studies on the relationship between a positive outlook on life and an optimistic anticipation of marriage possibilities (Li et al. 2011).

In Model 2, we introduced interaction terms between living arrangements and attitudes toward marriage in order to examine whether the association between living arrangements and suicidal ideation differed by attitudes toward marriage. We found no statistically significant interaction term, suggesting that the relationship between living arrangements and suicidal thoughts are similar across attitudes toward marriage. Our finding that living arrangements are not significantly related to suicidal ideation is in contrast to previous research pertaining to the older population, in which living alone has been found to be related to decreased wellbeing and increased suicidal ideation (Fukuchi et al. 2013; Han, Kang, and Jeong 2012; Masocco et al. 2008). Additionally, our findings do not support the current social discourse on the negative psychological implications of living alone in young adulthood (Nho 2014). This suggests that the relationship between living arrangements and psychological wellbeing may vary by life stage. As discussed earlier, individuals in different stages of life have different needs and resources and the same living arrangement may have a different impact on psychological wellbeing on different individuals.

Several covariates were, as would be predicted, significantly related to suicidal ideation. Both women and individuals with lower educational attainment tended to have higher odds of ever having had suicidal thoughts as compared to men and individuals with higher educational attainment. Considering that women reported higher life satisfaction than men in the previous analysis, this finding suggests that gender differences in psychological wellbeing may vary across measures or aspects of wellbeing (Roothman, Kirsten, and Wissing 2003). Those with better subjective health and non-smokers were less likely to have suicidal thoughts. As in the case of life satisfaction, respondents living in their own homes were less likely to experience suicidal thoughts than those living in a leased home with monthly payments. Considering that this type of living situation often indicates residential instability and lower economic status (Choi and Nam 2008; Kim 2010), this finding suggests that lower economic status may be related to poor psychological wellbeing.

Table 3:   **Odds ratios from the binary logistic regression analysis pertaining to suicidal ideation**

	Model 1		Model 2	
Surveyed in 2012 (0 = 2010)	1.14	(0.059)*	1.14	(0.059)*
Female (0 = male)	1.84	(0.087)***	1.84	(0.087)***
Age	0.98	(0.008)**	0.98	(0.008)**
Education (0 = high school graduates)				
Less than high school	1.56	(0.151)**	1.56	(0.151)**
College-level graduates	0.83	(0.078)*	0.83	(0.078)*
University-level graduates or higher	0.81	(0.079)**	0.81	(0.079)**
Subjective health status	0.47	(0.041)***	0.47	(0.041)***
Regular exercise (0 = none)	0.93	(0.075)	0.93	(0.075)
Smoking (0 = non-smoking)	1.35	(0.092)**	1.34	(0.092)**
Metropolitan city (0 = non-metropolitan)	1.05	(0.060)	1.05	(0.060)
Home ownership type (0 = owned)				
Leased w/ lump-sum deposit payment	1.09	(0.067)	1.09	(0.067)
Leased w/ monthly payment	1.41	(0.094)***	1.42	(0.094)***
Occupation (0 = managerial/professional)				
Not working	1.18	(0.091)	1.18	(0.091)
Office and administrative support occupation	0.84	(0.110)	0.84	(0.110)
Service or sales occupations	1.05	(0.112)	1.04	(0.112)
Machine operators, skilled agricultural, or unskilled workers	0.86	(0.118)	0.86	(0.118)
Positive attitudes toward marriage (0 = non-positive)	0.57	(0.062)***	0.59	(0.201)**
Marital and living arrangements (0 = unmarried solo residents)				
Unmarried family coresidents	0.83	(0.121)	0.78	(0.151)
Married family coresidents	0.84	(0.111)	0.87	(0.136)
Interaction terms				
Positive attitudes toward marriage × Unmarried family coresidents			1.18	(0.233)
Positive attitudes toward marriage × Married family coresidents			0.89	(0.214)
-2 Log Likelihood (*df*)	8496.71 (*19*)		8500.71 (*21*)	
LR test Model 1 vs. Model 2 (*df*)	*4.00 (2)*			

Note: N = 16,487. Standard errors are given in parentheses. P-values: *** <.001, ** <.01, and * <.05.

5. Discussion

Unmarried solo living is on the rise in Korea, and this challenges the traditional family norms of mandatory marriage and family coresidency during singlehood. This study aimed to examine the psychological wellbeing of unmarried solo residents, relying on data from the most recent waves of KSS data (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 association between living arrangements and psychological wellbeing varies by attitude towards marriage.

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, and this association did not vary across attitudes toward marriage. This finding is contrary to what has been discussed in previous academic literature and the prevalent public discourse on the negative association between living alone and quality of life (Nho 2014; Ryu and Wang 2010; Yi and Park 2003). As discussed earlier, a large body of literature on living arrangements in Korea has focused on older adulthood, in which the family is the main provider of the resources that contribute to individuals' wellbeing. Young adults have needs and resources different from those of older adults, and 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 is not necessarily associated with poor economic status, loneliness, or social isolation. At the same time, with higher unemployment rates and delayed marriage and childbearing becoming more common, the traditional transitional period to adulthood has become longer and more blurred (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 and thus be related with better psychological wellbeing. The relatively low life satisfaction among unmarried family coresidents suggests that the traditional norms of family coresidency may not be adequately addressing the changing needs and preferences of the unmarried young. The number of young adults living alone is likely to continue to increase, since this lifestyle is related with better psychological wellbeing than the traditional arrangement of living with parents, as well as the aforementioned socioeconomic changes.

How do unmarried solo residents fare in terms of psychological wellbeing compared to married family coresidents? The relationship between living arrangements and psychological wellbeing is contingent on an individual's attitude toward marriage. Among those with a positive attitude toward marriage, unmarried solo residents tend to have less life satisfaction compared to married family coresidents. Among those with a

non-positive attitude toward marriage, however, unmarried solo residents have similar levels of life satisfaction to married family coresidents. This is presumably because married people with non-positive attitudes tend to have lower life satisfaction than their married counterparts with positive attitudes. This lower level of life satisfaction is similar to that of unmarried solo residents. Unlike their married and unmarried counterparts living with family, unmarried solo residents have similar levels of life satisfaction across attitudes toward marriage. One of the reasons of this non-responsiveness of life satisfaction by attitudes toward marriage among unmarried solo residents is that they are likely to have a less traditional orientation of family values (Ho 2014) and hence marital norms may not be a critical factor in the formation of life satisfaction for unmarried solo residents. Married family coresidents, however, are likely to value more traditional and positive marital norms and, hence, life satisfaction is significantly related to attitude toward marriage. It is also possible that, among married family coresidents, individuals with better marital satisfaction tend to have more positive attitudes toward marriage and to experience greater life satisfaction. Explanatory analysis of married family coresidents, however, suggested that attitude toward marriage is significantly related to life satisfaction after controlling for marital satisfaction (results not shown). This means that the degree to which married people perceive marriage to be the norm is related to life satisfaction, independent of their current satisfaction with marital life. Research on living arrangements and family values is limited both in Korea and in Asian societies in general, and it has not yet been extensively investigated why and to what extent the experience of solo living is related to different family value orientations in comparison to other living situations (Ho 2014; Park 2013). More research is needed on the relationship between living arrangements and family value orientations.

Our finding that the association between life satisfaction and living alone varies by attitudes toward marriage calls for attention to be paid to an individual's life stage and perception of marital norms when discussing the benefits of family coresidency and marriage. At the same time, we found no significant difference of suicidal ideation by living arrangement. As suggested by previous literature (Marks 1996), marriage and living arrangements may not relate to all aspects of psychological wellbeing. Although suicide is the leading cause of death among young Korean adults (Korea National Statistics Office 2014d), suicidal ideation may measure more serious aspects of a negative condition that are not contingent on living arrangements. Our findings are in line with previous studies on marriage and wellbeing in different cultural settings. For example, no positive association was found between marriage and health status among middle-aged Korean women who experience heavy family and work overloads due to gender inequality within their families and other social settings (Lee 2013). Furthermore, the relationship between the presence of children and/or a spouse and

feeling of happiness varies across societies according to the perceived societal importance of marriage and children (Vanassche, Swicegood, and Matthijs 2013).

We would like to note several limitations of this paper and, based on these, propose areas for future research. First, 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 following transitions 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 in comparison to individuals engaged in unmarried family coresidence, or if individuals with better psychological wellbeing deliberately choose solo living over living with their families. Longitudinal data are needed in order for future studies to observe changes in psychological wellbeing and living arrangements within individuals so as to identify causal relationships. Second, the economic resources of both young adults and their families are important correlates, both 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 affordable rent, the opportunity to live alone relies heavily on the economic capacities of young adults and their families (Jung and Lee 2011). Familial economic resources are also an important covariate of psychological wellbeing. Due to a lack of information on financial specifics, such as individual earnings or household wealth, economic factors were not extensively examined in this study. Finally, it would be important to assess the relationship between the voluntariness of living alone and psychological wellbeing. If current living arrangements are voluntary, then this is likely to be associated with greater psychological wellbeing. Related to the previous discussion on the positive associations 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 associations between marital status, living arrangements, and the psychological wellbeing of young adults that differ from those of individuals in other phases of life. For the young, living alone does not necessarily relate to reduced wellbeing, as has been assumed in academic research and public discourse in Korea. Living alone may even be beneficial to the psychological wellbeing of young adults through the enhancement of feelings of independence. At the same time, the benefits of marriage and family coresidency on psychological wellbeing are contingent on how individuals perceive marriage. As social norms of mandatory marriage and family coresidency weaken in Korea, and the time taken for successful transition towards independent adulthood increases, the need for residential independence will grow and rates of unmarried solo living will continue to rise. Our findings suggest that the current cultural discourse on solo living does not adequately

address changes in living arrangements, both on the individual and social levels, and therefore more extensive research into this growing group of young adults is needed.

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