

# **Change in Opportunities for Meeting a Partner and the Marriage Decline in Japan**

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**Abstract**

We focus on how the trend in meeting places for married couples is related to the marriage decline in Japan. Using data from the Japanese National Fertility Surveys, we show the extent to which changes in the incidence of each type of meeting have contributed to the decline in the first marriage rate since the 1970s. The results indicate that the decrease can be attributed to the drop in the number of arranged marriages (including those introduced by relatives and superiors) which accounts for over 50 percent of the decrease, and to the drop in the number of marriages at work or through colleagues which accounts for nearly 40 percent of the decrease. These findings reveal that the supply side of shrinking opportunities for partner choice are the significant factors behind the rising proportion of never-married, and the work-life balance policy would be required for promoting personal networking.

## **Introduction**

Since the 1970s there has been a striking progression in the percentage of never-married in Japan. This is the main cause of the decline in fertility<sup>1</sup> and is significantly transforming the way that individuals live their lives, making it an issue of great interest.

In the last national census (2000) the percentage of never-married females in their early 30s was 26.6 percent, in comparison to 7.2 percent in 1970. The results were similar among males, with the 11.6 percent level in the 1970s rising to 42.9 percent. The same trend is observed even among the age groups in their late 30s and 40s. This is not simply delayed marriage in the sense of postponement, but reveals a steady increase in those remaining unmarried, meaning a growing number of people who never marry during their life. The most recent population projections assume that females born in 1985 will have a rate of 16.8 percent, and that the high estimate for the lifelong never-married rate will be 22.6 percent, while females born in 1950 have a lifelong never-married rate of just 5 percent (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research 2002).

Most companies that have been organized on the assumption that full-time employees are married males are now suddenly confronted with large numbers of unmarried males and females. The “ship” of family-friendly systems that is finally ready to set sail has very few interested passengers. There is a lot of discussion about the differences in family policy in various Northern European countries and Japan, but there is one fundamental social difference. In various northern European countries 90 percent of females in their late 20s have co-habited with an intimate partner, while in Japan the number is only about 50 percent (Iwasawa 2004a).

To date, a variety of approaches have been tried to explain the decline in marriage. This paper tries a new approach with a focus on the opportunities for “meeting” a marriage partner in an effort to identify a cause for the drop in first marriage rates. It is natural that attention is focused on marriage trends due to the connection with the declining number of births and population decline. However, the appearance of changes in marriage trends also signals a transformation of the day-to-day lives of individuals. This study considers today’s never-married trends from the perspective of opportunities to meet a prospective spouse, and points out the changes in the personal relationships in the work place and local areas and the role of public policy.

## **Background**

The classical framework for marriage analysis presented by Dixon states that marriage patterns are determined by three factors, “availability”, “feasibility”, and “desirability” (Dixon 1971).

“Desirability” is related to the perceived advantages of marriage, and is affected by the potential for other lifestyle choices that compete with marriage. There is already hypothesis testing being

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<sup>1</sup> About 30 percent of the decline in fertility rate since 1975 can be explained by changes in couple’s reproductive behavior. The remaining 70 percent can be explained by changes in marital behavior, in that is, the increasing never-married.

conducted regarding this perspective, primarily in economics. It has been proposed that a sudden increase in the cost of marriage, including the opportunity costs, and a drop in the benefits is a major cause of the marriage decline (Higuchi and Abe 1999, Takayama *et al.* 2000). It has been pointed out that these costs are especially high for females, who are currently expected to single-handedly deal with running the household and raising the children, and may be a significant factor in the rising proportion of never-married (Ogawa 1994, Tsuya 2000).

In light of the recent increased desire for self-actualization and tolerance of more diverse lifestyles, it is expected that the “desirability” of marriage will continue to decline. Nevertheless, with regard to lifelong marriage intent, even today nearly 90 percent of never-married people have responded that “I am going to marry someday” (Kaneko 2004a), so it does not mean that there is a loss of interest in marriage. Furthermore, there are vacillations among the younger age groups regarding the desirability of marriage, such as another increase in negative opinions about staying single throughout life

The “feasibility” of marriage includes the necessary economic requirements for men and women to engage in marriage life. For example, as it is more difficult for young people to become independent in society, there is a tendency for marriage to be later. With regard to the “feasibility” of marriage in Japan, among the ranks of temporary workers and part-time jobbers, which have increased in recent years, there is a clear tendency to refrain from marriage and childbearing, raising possibility of an increase in passive never-marrying (Nagase 2002, Sakai and Higuchi 2005).

“Availability” is regulated by the balance of the marriageable male / female populations in a given region, and the opportunities for selecting a mate in that society (for example, whether there is a culture of arranged meetings and marriage). In other words, regardless of a person’s marriage intent and needs, the incidence of marriage is greatly controlled by the number of available marriage partners. Demographer pointed out that inequalities in marriageable-age male and female populations create a marriage squeeze for one of the sexes (Glick *et al.* 1963). In fact, there are comparatively fewer younger females since the baby-boom onward, creating a marriage squeeze for males. The “availability” problem is not only about numbers. Mismatches in the requirements of the marriage partners is another important factor leading to a marriage squeeze (Oppenheimer 1988, Lichter *et al.* 1992, Schoen 2003). In Japan, females have a strong preference for “marrying up”<sup>2</sup>; so, as females continue to obtain higher education this leads to a shortage in the supply of partners demanded by the highly-educated females (Yamada 2000, Raymo and Iwasawa 2003).

In addition, the opportunities for meeting potential mates can also be a significant issue. Logically, it is possible to consider the “marriage market” to be a limitless space. People in modern society can change geographical locations quickly and easily, and it would seem that the range of

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<sup>2</sup> Females chose male partners with a higher status than their own (for example more education, social status, age, etc.)

intermarriage is much larger than in the past<sup>3</sup>. However, since there are time and economic costs that restrict an individual's ability to find a partner, it is very likely that the search for a partner will actually be limited to an extremely narrow range (local marriage market works(Lichter et al. 1991)). Furthermore, it has been pointed out that the partner search behavior is still poorly developed in Japan (Atoh 1998).

How do never-married people in Japan feel about being single? Figure 1(not shown) shows the results from the Japanese National Fertility Surveys that are conducted every five years by the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research. Never-married males and females between the ages of 25 and 34 were asked to select the reasons they are single, and the data from the past three surveys is compared. There is a tendency for more people to chose reasons that indicate an avoidance of marriage, such as "Don't feel any necessity" and "Don't want to lose freedom and carefree life" in the more recent surveys. Next there are the reasons indicating a desire to pursue a lifestyle other than marriage, such as "I want to enjoy my own interests and hobbies" and "I want to focus on my career". On the other hand, for the reasons that were not chosen often, including "Don't have enough money to get married" and "I have no prospects for owning a home", indicating a desire to marry but being unable to do so, there has been a slight increase in recent years, providing a glimpse of the difficult circumstances surrounding single people.

However, the reason chosen most often is "Have not met a suitable partner". Nearly half of the responding males and females cited this as the reason they are single. This study will focus on the circumstances of "have not met a suitable partner". Although there is certainly an impact from a smaller absolute number of desirable marriage partners due to structural changes, this is not the only factor. Here the focus will be on another aspect that affects "availability", the opportunities for meeting marriage partners, which has not received much attention thus far in the discussions on the never-married trends. Specifically, married couples are surveyed to determine how they met, the generational changes are considered, and changes in the marriage market faced by unmarried males and females are noted, in an effort to clarify the relationship to the decline in first marriage rates. The data used is information on the first marriage process for couples, accumulated from the Japan National Fertility Surveys covering many years. In particular, considering the recent trends in employment for both men and women, the focus is placed on the connection between the opportunities for meeting at the work place or through work and the incidence of marriage.

## **Data and Method**

The Japanese National Fertility Surveys providing the data used for this analysis are surveys with a national representative sample that are conducted about every five years by the National Institute of

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<sup>3</sup> Suzuki (1990a, 1990b) showed the range of intermarriage in Japan from both the geographical and social perspective.

Population and Social Security Research (National Institute of Population and Social Security Research 2004). The responses from couples used for this analysis are those from married couples in which the wife is under the age of 50. The respondent is the wife and the valid response rate was over 80 percent. There were about 8000 samples in each survey. Since the 7<sup>th</sup> Survey in 1977 and through the most recent 13<sup>th</sup> Survey (conducted in 2005) respondents have been asked to select from a list of descriptions of how the couple met. From these results it is possible to see changes in how husbands and wives meet from the 1930s up to the present time.

There are 10 choices on the list of descriptions of how a couple met, including “arranged meeting (including introductions through relatives or superiors)”, “through a marriage consultant”, “childhood acquaintance / neighbor”, “through friends or siblings”, “at school”, “through work”, “at a part-time job(sideline)”, “while in town or traveling”, “through club or group activities other than at school”, and “other”. For this report, the “arranged meeting” and “through a marriage consultant” are combined and taken to be “arranged marriages”, while the other options are defined to be “love marriages”. For the love marriage categories, the references to “known since childhood / neighbor”, “through friends or siblings”, “at school”, and “through work” will use the terms “proximity-linked marriage”, “friend-linked marriage”, “school-linked marriage” and “employment-linked marriage”, respectively.

We will show first an overview of how the meeting opportunities for first marriage couples have changed through each era, as well as an outline of the differences in the process of marrying depending on the meeting place. Next, the change in meeting opportunities and the actual first marriage rate decline trends will be aligned in an effort to quantitatively demonstrate the impact due to the changes in the meeting place of couples, particularly on the rate of incidence of employment-linked marriage. Then, a polynomial logistic model is performed with the meeting method as a dependent variable, in order to identify the social and economic characteristics that facilitate employment-linked marriage. Finally, there is a look back to the corporate society of the 1960s ~70s and a discussion of the rise and fall of employment-linked marriage.

## **Results and Summary**

We focused on the meeting places of couples as one of relevant factors for the marriage decline in Japan. As a result, it has been shown that about 50 percent of the decline in the first marriage rate since the 1970s can be explained by the reduction in arranged marriages, and nearly 40 percent can be explained by the reduction in employment-linked marriages. For the other kind of meeting, such as the school-linked marriage, friend-linked marriage, and marriages that are interest-related or through chance meetings (e.g., at parties or on vacation), the marriage incidence rates have changed very little over the past 40 years. The trend of a shift from arranged marriages to love marriages has given rise to an image of individuals freely choosing partners in an open marriage market. However,

in fact, as the match-maker function of corporate society has waned since it's heyday in the early 1970s, that alone can explain the decrease in marriage. Although it is said that love marriages are the main trend, the meeting of a partner is not completely free and unrestricted. The "meeting opportunities" are provided by the social system. When the system ceases to function, it is a very difficult practical problem for individuals to immediately compensate by finding alternative ways<sup>4</sup>. Regardless of the marriage intentions<sup>5</sup>, never-married people in their late 20s and older most often give "have not found a suitable partner" as the reason for being single<sup>6</sup>. Under these circumstances, the effects of structural changes in society as a whole that go beyond individual consciousness and sense of values are likely to have a large effect. Considered in conjunction with the analysis results of logistic model, so far there has been a relative abundance of opportunities for arranged marriage and employment-linked marriage among men and women working at government or public offices, or doing office work at large companies. However, to say the opposite way, since there are few opportunities for other methods of meeting for these people, there is expected to be a further advancement of the never-married trend due to shrinking opportunities to meet partners in this group.

The role of match-maker filled by companies in the 1970s has probably become impossible to revive. The special characteristics of the population structure and the economic situation at that time no longer exist, and both men and women now commonly have more individualistic attitudes about work and the work place. Instead the role that individuals expect of companies has probably shifted from a pre-marriage role to a post-marriage role. Companies once did promote match-ups, and promised a financially stable life, but the long work hours of the husband and the allocation of personnel with a higher priority on the company operation than the needs of the families led to a separation in the daily sphere of the husbands from that of the wife and children. This reality, in effect, conveyed a negative message about marriage to the succeeding generation. Companies today are expected to support a fulfilling family life for the employees. Accordingly, rather than support through match-making, if there are couples in the company who become joined through an employment-linked marriage, there should be mechanisms developed that consider elimination of obstacles to the couples engaging in both work and family life.

Today, as this kind of match-maker function and the sense of belonging to an associated group become weaker, what kind of spouse selection opportunities can be anticipated? One very interesting

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<sup>4</sup> Atoh (1998) has used survey analysis to show that never-married females in Japan are extremely passive about searching for a partner.

<sup>5</sup> Among never-married people, 86.3 percent of males and 87.7 percent of females in their late 20s responded that they intend to marry at some point. For men and women in their early 30s the percentages were 83.8 percent and 85.1 percent, respectively, and for those in their late 30s the numbers are 81.1 percent and 76.8 percent (Kaneko 2004a).

<sup>6</sup> Although there is a decreasing trend over the last three surveys in the selection percentage, in 2002 for the 25~34 year old age group 44 percent of never-married males and 49 percent of never-married females cited this as the reason (Kaneko 2004b).

point is that in the 1990s as arranged marriages decreased, the meetings through peers included in “through friends or siblings” had an increasing trend, particularly among those in their 30s. Whether or not this kind of personal networking based on lateral connections is replacing employment-linked meetings is a question that will be kept in mind as future trends are observed. At the present time there are no numbers available, but, it is possible that there may be a sudden expansion of the venues for meetings, beyond the sphere of daily activities, through increases in the use of marriage information services and meetings through the Internet. For this kind of new meeting place one of the keys will be building a relationship of mutual trust between the service providers and users as well as between the users among themselves.

The trend of self-help and self-reliance is not only found in career development; individuals are also applying it to spouse selection. For people who want to be married or to obtain a partner, it is important to develop a practical vision at a relatively early stage of the kind of family they want to build and when, in the same way as formulating a career plan. A reconsideration of the work-life-balance by individuals and companies is likely to also affect increase in never-married. The issue for those of us today is how to support this vision and nurture the seeds that will grow into avenues of interaction between people in ways that are separate from the corporate culture.

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