

Evaluating the East Asian Model of Low Fertility Hypothesis Evidence from Japan

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Research questions and hypotheses

In East Asia, the tight link between marriage and childbearing has been a well-documented explanation for low fertility (e.g., Raymo et al. 2015). Based on the robust evidence that very few married couples are childless in these countries (Raymo et al. 2015; Yu and Xie 2021), studies have posited that childbearing is one of the strongest normative expectations of forming a marital union in these societies, as demographers view marriage in East Asia as a “package” of family expectations and obligations (Bumpass et al. 2009). If this expectation is correct, we can expect that marriage behaviors are partly driven by fertility intentions, although previous studies have not evaluated this empirically. Drawing on nationally representative longitudinal data in Japan, we examine two hypotheses. First, net of marital intentions, those who have a fertility intention are more likely to marry than those without fertility intentions. Second, the positive association between marital intention and transition to marriage is stronger for those with fertility intention (or reduced by childless intentions).

Data and measures

In this study, we use the Japanese Life-course Panel Survey, 2007–2021, which has been conducted by the Institute of Social Science at the University of Tokyo collecting data from men and women aged 20–40 in 2007 (born in 1966–86). The analytical sample comprised person-year observations of never-married men and women born in 1970–1998. Our dependent variable is respondents’ transition to marriage from year t to $t+1$. Our independent variable is fertility intention, categorized as “want,” “do not know,” and “do not want.” We also consider marital intention, which is measured in three categories, “absolutely want to marry,” “want to marry if possible,” and “don’t care, want, or think about marriage.”

Preliminary results and next steps

Figure 1 presents the associations of fertility and marriage intentions with the transition to marriage obtained from the discrete-time logit models. As shown in Model 1, stronger fertility intention is positively associated with the transition to marriage. For women, after controlling for marriage intention, stronger fertility intention was significantly associated with the transition to marriage (see Model 2). For men, this association was insignificant. Finally, we introduced the interaction terms between fertility and marriage intention and found no significant influence (results not shown).

The results suggest that stronger fertility intention is associated with net of other demographic and socioeconomic attributes and marriage intention particularly for women. In future analysis, we use several other fertility intentions, including desired family size or age at first birth. We also plan to use the Japanese Panel Study of Consumers, another longitudinal dataset, which has asked fertility intentions to non-married women.

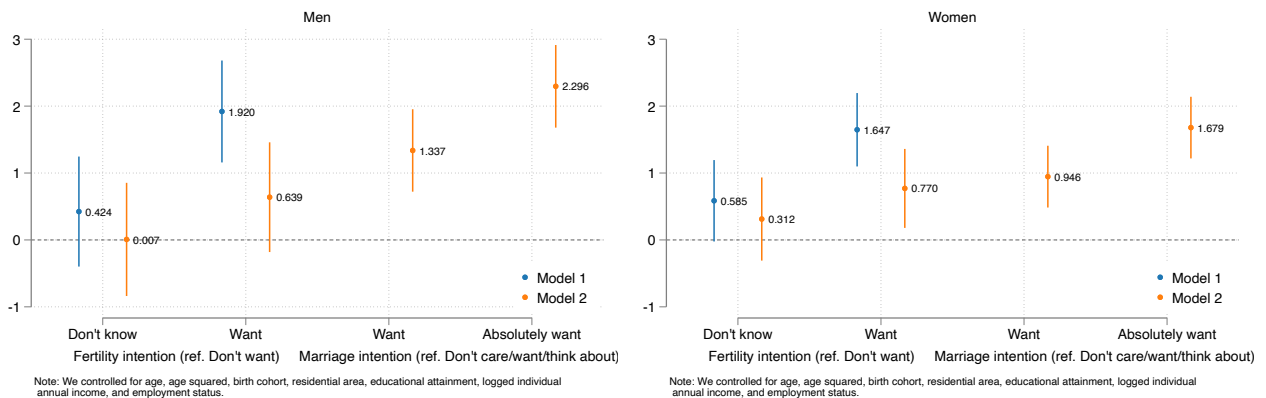


Figure 1. Estimates of fertility and marriage intention in discrete-time logit models predicting transition to marriage.

Key words: Fertility, Marriage, East Asia