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Descriptive Finding

Trends and educational variation in the association between spouses' marital histories in South Korea, 1993–2017

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Trends and educational variation in the association between spouses' marital histories in South Korea, 1993–2017

Sangsoo Lee¹

Hyunjoon Park²

Abstract

BACKGROUND

Marriages between divorced and never-married individuals indicate a society's openness to divorce and have implications for children's well-being. Few studies have examined the association between spouses' marital histories, its educational variation, and the trends therein outside of the United States.

OBJECTIVE

Little is known about trends in assortative mating by marital history in more traditional societies, where stigma against divorce often remains. This study examined the changing patterns of assortative mating by marital history in South Korea across 25 single-year marriage cohorts, 1993–2017.

METHODS

Calculating the odds ratios from two-by-two marriage tables classifying spouses' marital histories and also applying individual-level logistic regression models to 7,451,399 marriages formed from 1993 to 2017, we investigated trends in the association between spouses' marital histories. We further explored heterogeneity in the strength of the association between spouses' marital histories and its trends over time by spouses' educational combinations.

RESULTS

The association between spouses' marital histories has declined over time across all educational groups. However, crossing boundaries of marital history is most difficult in marriages where the man and woman are both college-educated and is easiest in marriages where the man and woman are both non-college-educated.

CONTRIBUTIONS

We document the trends in marital history homogamy (which has not received much attention in the literature) in Korea, with distinctive contexts of divorce and remarriage.

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Presenting educational patterns in the association between spouses' marital histories is another contribution.

1. Introduction

Social demographers have long investigated the degree of assortative mating and its patterns with respect to socioeconomic and cultural factors such as education, age, religion, occupation, and race/ethnicity (Blossfeld 2009; Schwartz 2013; Smits and Park 2009). Marital history is a sociodemographic characteristic that has not received much attention in the assortative mating literature (Ono 2005, 2006). To what extent does a previous marriage (i.e., being divorced) affect an individual's chances of marrying someone who has never been married?

Examining marriages formed from 1970 to 1988 in the United States, Ono (2006) showed a decline over time in the tendency for divorced people to marry other divorced (rather than never-married) people. Other than this study in the United States, where divorce is widely accepted and practiced (Yodanis 2005), little research has addressed the issue. The barriers to marriage between divorced and never-married people may differ in societies where divorce is relatively common compared to more traditional societies, where the divorce rate has long been low or has only recently started to rise. Where the stigma and prejudice against divorced people remain strong, distance between divorced and never-married people can be an obstacle to marriage. Growth in marriage between the divorced and the never-married may serve as a useful indicator of a society's openness to divorce. Crossing boundaries of marital history is also relevant for children's well-being. Children living in families with one parent in a first marriage and the other in a remarriage may fare differently from children living with both remarried parents or with both first-married parents (Ono 2006).

The divorce rate in South Korea (hereafter Korea) used to be comparatively low but started to increase rapidly in the mid-1990s, reaching a peak of 3.5 divorces per 1,000 population in 2003, which is higher than the rates in several European countries (Park and Raymo 2013). Korea's divorce rate has since declined, leveling off at 2.1–2.3 per 1,000 in 2010s (Statistics Korea 2021). Koreans have shown relatively conservative attitudes toward divorce (Yang and Yen 2011), but along with the rising divorce rate, increasingly open attitudes have been observed (Statistics Korea 2020). Little known is about the likelihood of remarriage after divorce and whether the odds of marriage between divorced and never-married individuals have increased over time. According to our own calculation, using population counts by marital status in 2015 as denominators, there were 48 first marriages per 1,000 never-married women but only 10 remarriages

per 1,000 divorced or widowed women (18 and older) in Korea. A study in the United States reports 46 first marriages per 1,000 never-married women and 21 remarriages per 1,000 divorced or widowed women in 2017 (Schweizer 2019). Considering differences in calculation methods, we avoid direct comparisons of rates between the two countries. But the difference between remarriage and first marriage rates within each country suggests a relatively stronger barrier to remarriage in Korea than in the United States.

In addition to the overall trend, our study explored heterogeneity in the degree of marital history homogamy/intermarriage and its patterns over time by spouses' educational levels. Qian and Lichter (2018) and Ono (2006) assessed varying degrees of educational homogamy/heterogamy by marital history to test the status exchange theory. However, our study presents estimates of the strength of marital history homogamy and trends therein for different combinations of spouses' education, information that is hardly known in previous studies.

2. Data and method

We used marriage registration data provided by the Korean National Statistics Office. For all heterosexual marriages registered from 1993 to 2019, the administrative data contain information on the month and year of both actual occurrence and the official registration of the marriage. Data on the husband's and wife's ages, levels of educational attainment at the time of marriage, and marital histories (whether the registered marriage was a first marriage or a remarriage for each spouse) are also available. Some couples register their marriages after the actual year of marriage. To include these late-registered marriages, we assumed that all marriages in a given year would be registered within three years. For the 1993 marriage cohort, for instance, we combined marriages occurring in 1993 that were registered in 1993–1995. We could have included marriages registered in 1996–2019 for the 1993 cohort. However, to make the data coverage consistent across marriage cohorts, we counted only marriages registered within three years. For comparison, for the 2017 marriage cohort, data are available for only three years (2017, 2018, and 2019). Therefore we included couples who married in 2017 and registered their marriages in 2017–2019. In this way we created 25 marriage cohorts from 1993 to 2017. Note, however, that the vast majority of marriages were registered within three years of marriage; for example, only about 3% of marriages occurring in 1993 were registered in 1996 or later. Our results would be robust even if we had included only marriages registered without delay.

We included only husbands and wives whose age at marriage was 20–54 years to focus on remarriages that likely involve children and youths, given the theoretical implications of studying marital history homogamy for children's well-being.

Remarriages at older ages are more likely to be affected by different factors (Vespa 2012). The result is robust with the maximum age of 60; very few marriages occurred after age 54. We excluded marriages in which both the husband and the wife were foreign-born (or had foreign places of family origin); the results were largely unchanged even when only two native-born spouses were included. We also excluded marriages in which at least one spouse did not report their marital history (0.3%) or had remarried after widowhood (1.6%) to retain only those who were previously divorced or never married. Then, 0.7% of the remaining couples were excluded because of missing data on education. The final sample comprised 7,451,399 couples who had married between 1993 and 2017.

The key variables were men's and women's marital histories: whether each spouse was never married or divorced before the current marriage. In assessing the degree and trends in assortative mating by marital history, we controlled for compositional differences between never-married and divorced individuals. Because the marriage registration data are limited, we could include only education and age at marriage (as a continuous variable) for both spouses. To be consistent in the educational classification across all years, we simply categorized men and women as those with and those without a college degree (any tertiary degree), yielding four groups: (1) both spouses without a college degree, (2) husband without/wife with a college degree, (3) husband with/wife without a college degree, and (4) both spouses with a college degree.

The association between spouses' marital histories can be assessed using an odds ratio in a two (husband's marital history)-by-two (wife's marital history) marriage table for each marriage cohort. This odds ratio can be calculated as follows:

$$\frac{(\# \text{ of divorced women marrying divorced men} / \# \text{ of divorced women marrying never-married men})}{(\# \text{ of never-married women marrying divorced men} / \# \text{ of never-married women marrying never-married men})} \quad (1)$$

From the women's perspective, odds ratios greater than one indicate that the odds for divorced women to marry divorced men rather than never-married men are larger than the corresponding odds for never-married women. That is, divorced women's homogamy (marrying divorced men) is stronger than never-married women's heterogamy (marrying divorced men). Assuming the odds ratio in Equation (1) to be greater than one, larger odds ratios indicate stronger associations between spouses' marital histories. The odds ratio in Equation (1) can also be interpreted from the men's perspective (divorced men versus never-married men).

Odds ratios are the building blocks for log-linear models, which are typically used to assess trends in associations between spouses' characteristics, such as education, after controlling for temporal changes in the marginal distributions of characteristics of husbands and wives (Agresti 2002; Schwartz and Mare 2005). With two-by-two marriage

tables, the odds ratio also becomes a dependent variable (in logged form) in the logistic regression estimated with individual-level data. Using Equation (1) to calculate the odds ratio for each marriage cohort is equivalent to estimating the following logistic regression, which predicts the (log) odds for a divorced woman, relative to a never-married woman, to marry a divorced man rather than a never-married man:

$$\log\left(\frac{P_{\text{marrying a divorced man}}}{P_{\text{marrying a never-married man}}}\right) = a + b_1(\text{being a divorced woman}) \\ + b_2\text{Year 1994} \dots + b_{25}\text{Year 2017} \\ + b_{26}(\text{being a divorced woman} \times \text{Year 1994}) \\ \dots + b_{49}(\text{being a divorced woman} \times \text{Year 2017}), \quad (2)$$

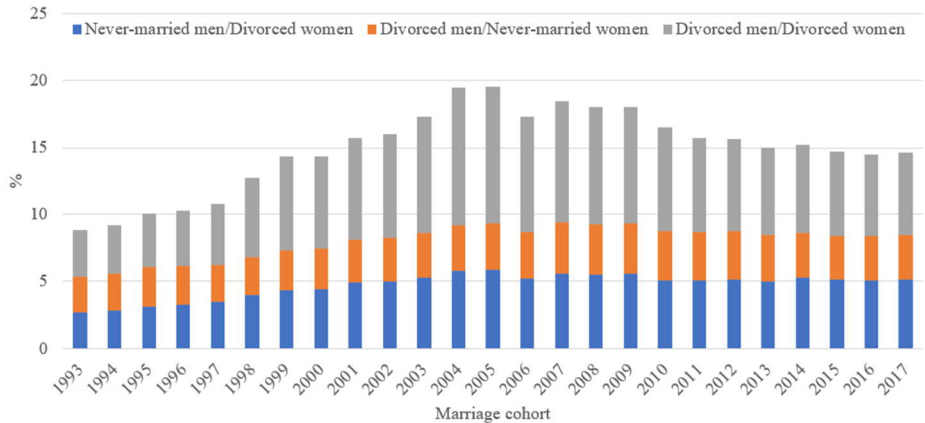
where a dummy variable for being a divorced woman indicates whether the woman was divorced or never married before the current marriage. Equation (2) includes 24 dummy variables for each year's marriage cohort from 1994 to 2017, which are compared with the 1993 marriage cohort. Another set of 24 variables pertains to the interaction terms between the wife's marital history and each marriage cohort. From Equation (2), we add coefficient b_1 and each of coefficients b_{26} through b_{49} and then exponentiate the value to produce the odds ratio expressed in Equation (1) for each marriage cohort. An advantage of the logistic regression model in Equation (2) is that we can easily estimate the association between spouses' marital histories net of their education levels and ages at marriage. Equation (2) can be separately estimated to predict the corresponding odds for men.

3. Results

3.1 Overall trends

Figure 1 presents the share of each marriage type by marital history across the marriage cohorts. In total, 2.7% of the marriages occurring in 1993 were between never-married men and divorced women, 2.7% were between divorced men and never-married women, and 3.4% were between two divorced individuals. The rest of the marriages (91.2%) were between two never-married individuals. The total share of marriages involving at least one previously divorced spouse (the sum of the blue, orange, and gray bars) increased from 8.8% in 1993 to 19.6% in 2005 before declining to 14.7% in 2017. Among the marriages involving at least one previously divorced spouse, the majority were between two divorced spouses.

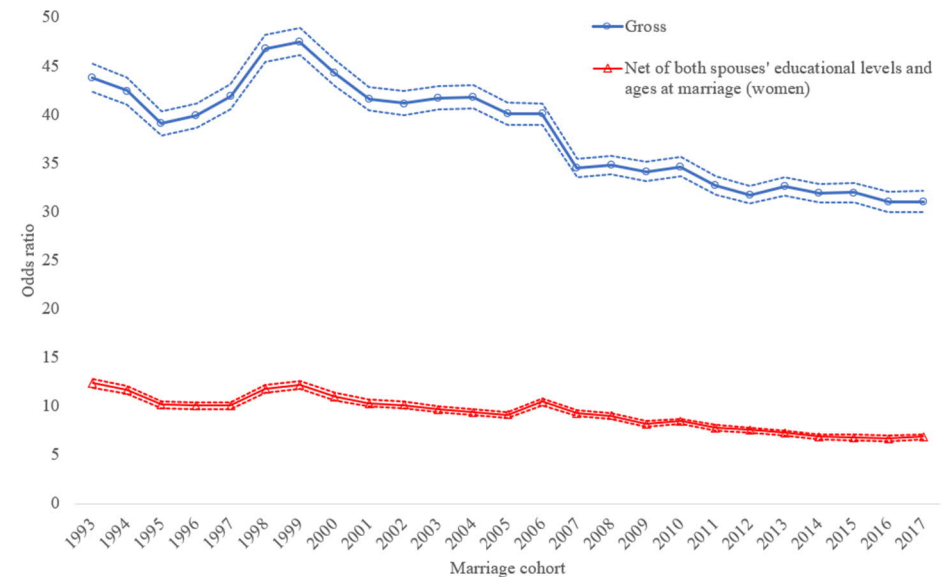
Figure 1: The share (%) of each marriage type by marital history in total marriages



Note: Adding the percentage of marriages between never-married men and never-married women to each bar would make the total 100 percent.

Regarding trends in the association between spouses' marital histories, the blue line in Figure 2 shows changes across marriage cohorts in the gross odds ratio (and 95% confidence interval) presented in Equation (1), comparing divorced women's odds of marrying divorced men rather than never-married men relative to the corresponding odds for never-married women (or divorced men's odds of marrying divorced women rather than never-married women relative to the corresponding odds for never-married men). The figure reveals a considerable association between spouses' marital histories after controlling for shifting marginal distributions of husbands and wives. In 1993, the odds of marrying divorced men rather than never-married men were 44 times higher for divorced women than for never-married women, revealing substantial barriers to marriage between divorced and never-married individuals. However, this association declined across marriage cohorts, especially after its peak at 1999. The odds ratio was only 31 for the 2017 cohort, 65% of the odds ratio of 47.5 for the 1999 cohort.

Figure 2: Trends in the association between spouses' marital histories (odds ratio)



We then used the logistic regression shown in Equation (2) to control for both spouses' education levels (three dummy variables) and ages at marriage (centered on the mean age for each gender) to obtain net odds ratios. Being symmetrical, gross odds ratios are identical for women and men. But net odds ratios are not identical, and the logistic regression results are presented separately for women and men in Table 1. In the method section, we described how to obtain the net odds ratio for each cohort from the result of logistic regression. We present the net trend for only women in Figure 2, as the trend for men is very similar, albeit weaker. As the difference between the blue and red lines illustrates, controlling for education and age at marriage reduces the odds ratios substantially. The association between spouses' marital histories is partially explained by differences in education and age at marriage between divorced and never-married individuals. However, the declining association is still observed even after adjusting for these variables. The net odds ratio declined by 45%, from 12.3 in 1993 to 6.8 in 2017.

Table 1: Logistic regression models: Log odds of marrying a divorced person rather than a never-married person

	<i>Women</i>			<i>Men</i>		
	Log odds to marry a divorced man vs. a never-married man			Log odds to marry a divorced woman vs. a never-married woman		
	b	(95% conf. interv.)		b	(95% conf. interv.)	
Being divorced (ref. never married)	2.511	2.473	2.550	2.336	2.296	2.377
Marriage cohort (24 dummy variables, ref: 1993)	<i>The coefficients are not presented here for the sake of space</i>					
Divorced X Marriage cohort						
X 1994	-0.056	-0.109	-0.002	-0.019	-0.076	0.038
X 1995	-0.197	-0.249	-0.145	-0.130	-0.185	-0.075
X 1996	-0.205	-0.258	-0.153	-0.091	-0.146	-0.035
X 1997	-0.204	-0.257	-0.152	-0.073	-0.129	-0.017
X 1998	-0.047	-0.098	0.004	0.108	0.053	0.162
X 1999	-0.016	-0.067	0.035	0.123	0.069	0.177
X 2000	-0.119	-0.171	-0.068	0.056	0.001	0.111
X 2001	-0.183	-0.234	-0.131	-0.019	-0.073	0.036
X 2002	-0.199	-0.251	-0.147	-0.012	-0.067	0.044
X 2003	-0.242	-0.293	-0.191	-0.038	-0.093	0.017
X 2004	-0.278	-0.329	-0.228	-0.034	-0.088	0.021
X 2005	-0.304	-0.354	-0.254	-0.101	-0.155	-0.047
X 2006	-0.168	-0.218	-0.118	-0.020	-0.073	0.034
X 2007	-0.285	-0.335	-0.235	-0.197	-0.250	-0.143
X 2008	-0.314	-0.364	-0.264	-0.195	-0.249	-0.141
X 2009	-0.413	-0.465	-0.362	-0.284	-0.339	-0.229
X 2010	-0.380	-0.431	-0.329	-0.253	-0.308	-0.199
X 2011	-0.463	-0.514	-0.412	-0.336	-0.391	-0.281
X 2012	-0.493	-0.544	-0.442	-0.305	-0.360	-0.250
X 2013	-0.532	-0.584	-0.480	-0.291	-0.347	-0.234
X 2014	-0.590	-0.642	-0.538	-0.354	-0.411	-0.297
X 2015	-0.599	-0.652	-0.546	-0.340	-0.398	-0.282
X 2016	-0.613	-0.667	-0.558	-0.329	-0.388	-0.269
X 2017	-0.590	-0.646	-0.534	-0.285	-0.346	-0.224
Education (ref: H-No Col, W-No Col)						
H-No Col, W-No Col	0.039	0.026	0.051	1.223	1.210	1.236
H-Col, W-No Col	0.007	-0.003	0.018	0.541	0.526	0.556
H-Col, W-Col	-0.441	-0.450	-0.432	-0.779	-0.792	-0.765
H: age at marriage (-31) ^a	0.234	0.233	0.234	0.008	0.007	0.009
W: age at marriage (-28) ^a	-0.012	-0.013	-0.011	0.250	0.249	0.251
Intercept	-3.102	-3.124	-3.081	-3.869	-3.894	-3.844
N	7,451,399			7,451,399		
Pseudo R ²	0.483			0.526		

Note: H – husband, W – wife, No Col – no college, Col – college.

^a Age at marriage is centered on the mean age for each gender (31 for husbands, 28 for wives).

3.2 Educational variation in the association between spouses' marital histories

Is the declining trend in the overall association between spouses' marital histories, shown in Figure 2, uniform across educational levels? We used the same logistic regression model (with both spouses' ages at marriage controlled) to predict the odds of marrying a divorced person rather than a never-married person for each combination of spouses' educational levels. We compared four different models within each educational combination to assess temporal trends as specified in Table 2. For both men and women, except for non-college-educated men with college-educated wives, the best-fitting model was M4, allowing temporal trends in assortative mating by marital history with ages at marriage controlled (the most negative Bayesian information criterion [BIC] value) (Raftery 1995). Based on M4 for women, Figure 3 presents the odds ratios, net of both spouses' ages at marriage, comparing the odds of marrying a divorced man instead of a never-married man for a divorced woman versus a never-married woman for each educational combination. The association between spouses' marital histories varied across educational levels. The barriers to marriage between never-married and divorced individuals were highest when both spouses were college-educated and were lowest when neither spouse was college-educated. The barriers were second highest in college-educated husband/non-college-educated wife pairs, although since the end of the 1990s, the barriers for this educational combination no longer differed from those for non-college-educated husband/college-educated wife pairs.

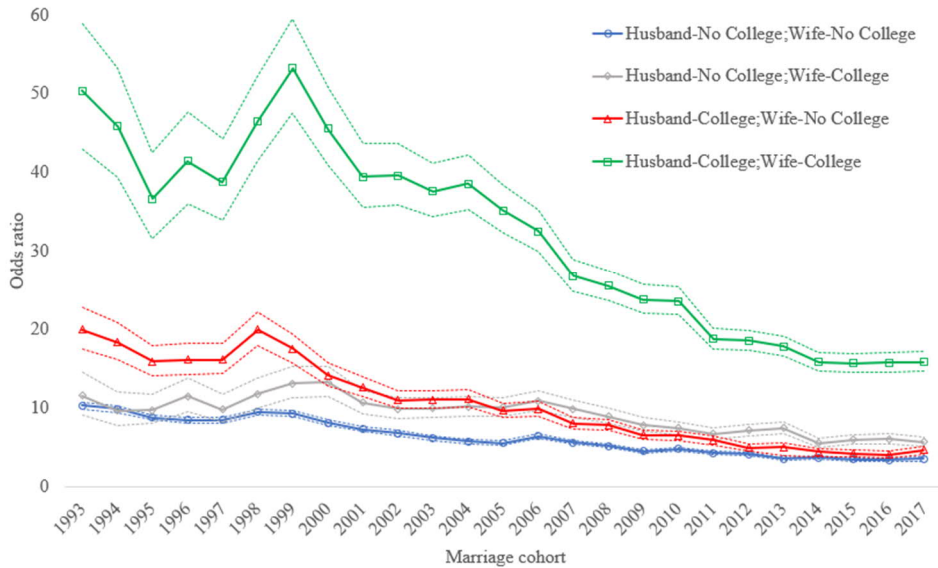
Despite differences in the strength of the association between spouses' marital histories across educational levels, the declining trend in the association was common. The odds ratio declined from 53 at the peak in 1999 to 16 in 2017 among spouses who were both college-educated. The corresponding decline among college-educated husband/non-college-educated wife marriages was from 20 in 1993 to 5 in 2017. Although the trends were weaker for the other two educational combinations, they also showed a declining association. The finding that M4, with temporal trends in assortative mating by marital history, was the best model for women in all four educational groups is consistent with the conclusion. We also found a similar, albeit weaker trend of declining association for men across all educational combinations except non-college-educated husband/college-educated wife pairs, for which there was no substantial trend. (Figures not shown, but see the model comparisons in Table 2.)

Table 2: Comparisons of logistic regression models

	df	Women		Men	
		G ²	BIC	G ²	BIC
<i>Husband No College, Wife No College (N = 2,509,521)</i>					
M1: Divorce indicator, Marriage cohort	25	751772	-751404	801715	-801346
M2: Divorce indicator, Marriage cohort, Trends (divorce X cohort)	49	759919	-759197	809862	-809140
M3: Divorce indicator, Marriage cohort, Ages at marriage	27	1058812	-1058414	1317649	-1317252
M4: Divorce indicator, Marriage cohort, Ages at marriage, Trends (divorce X cohort)	51	1064046	-1063294	1320124	-1319373
<i>Husband No College, Wife College (N = 615,250)</i>					
M1: Divorce indicator, Marriage cohort	25	77792	-77459	79408	-79074
M2: Divorce indicator, Marriage cohort, Trends (divorce X cohort)	49	78065	-77411	79680	-79027
M3: Divorce indicator, Marriage cohort, Ages at marriage	27	126722	-126362	140073	-139713
M4: Divorce indicator, Marriage cohort, Ages at marriage, Trends (divorce X cohort)	51	127141	-126461	140246	-139566
<i>Husband College, Wife No College (N = 942,815)</i>					
M1: Divorce indicator, Marriage cohort	25	200780	-200436	225387	-225043
M2: Divorce indicator, Marriage cohort, Trends (divorce X cohort)	49	204359	-203685	228967	-228292
M3: Divorce indicator, Marriage cohort, Ages at marriage	27	322970	-322599	319893	-319522
M4: Divorce indicator, Marriage cohort, Ages at marriage, Trends (divorce X cohort)	51	325233	-324531	321558	-320856
<i>Husband College, Wife College (N = 3,383,813)</i>					
M1: Divorce indicator, Marriage cohort	25	360859	-360483	367877	-367501
M2: Divorce indicator, Marriage cohort, Trends (divorce X cohort)	49	362663	-361926	369681	-368944
M3: Divorce indicator, Marriage cohort, Ages at marriage	27	561139	-560733	479822	-479416
M4: Divorce indicator, Marriage cohort, Ages at marriage, Trends (divorce X cohort)	51	563056	-562290	481318	-480551

Note: df – degrees of freedom (number of independent variables), G² – LRT (likelihood ratio test) statistic against the null model, BIC refers to BIC presented in Raftery (1995).

Figure 3: Trends in the association between spouses' marital histories (odds ratio) for each combination of spouses' educational levels (women)



4. Conclusion

Koreans have increasingly crossed the intermarriage boundary associated with marital history. The tendency for never-married individuals to marry other never-married people rather than divorced people has weakened over time. In Korea, where nontraditional family behavior such as divorce has long been subject to strong stigma, our evidence shows growing openness, with divorce presenting an increasingly lower barrier to intermarriage. This trend is consistent with the rising acceptance of divorce reported in social surveys (Statistics Korea 2020). The increase in the divorce rate has likely resulted in a larger share of divorced individuals in the marriage market, facilitating interactions between never-married and divorced individuals. Further, with Korea's rapidly declining fertility, in recent years divorced couples have been less likely to have minor children than in the past (Statistics Korea 2021), which may have contributed to the increased odds of divorced people marrying never-married individuals (Goldscheider and Sassler 2006; Qian and Lichter 2018). Unfortunately, our data do not include information on the presence of children. In interpreting the trends, we need to consider cohabitation of

couples that involve at least one divorced partner. Due to stigma against divorce, some couples with at least one divorced partner may opt out of formal marriage but remain cohabiting. There is little research investigating cohabitation among divorced individuals in Korea. However, prevalence of unmarried cohabitation in general remains low, which suggests the robustness of our results with formal marriages only (Raymo et al. 2015).

A distinctive contribution of our study is the separate examination of assortative mating by marital history and its trends for different educational groups. Crossing boundaries of marital history is most difficult in a marriage between a man and a woman who are both college-educated, whereas it is easiest in a marriage between a man and a woman who are both non-college-educated. This educational variation in marital history homogamy has hardly been assessed in existing studies of the status exchange theory, which focus on the degree of educational heterogamy in intermarriages between divorced and never-married persons due to trade between education and marital status (cf. Qian and Lichter 2018). The divorce rate in Korea is higher for those without a college degree than for their college-educated counterparts, and this educational gap has grown over time (Park and Raymo 2013). With divorce being increasingly common among those without a college degree, being divorced may no longer be a stigma preventing marriage to a never-married person. For those at the top of the educational hierarchy, however, divorce may still be stigmatized in the marriage market.

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