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Exploring the Diverse Family Structures in South Korea: Experiences and Perspectives of Nonmartial Cohabitants

Soo-Jung Byoun [1], Shinwoo Choi [2,*] and Hye-Young Kim [3]

[1] Korea Institute for Health and Social Affairs, Sejong 30147, Korea; byoun1@kihasa.re.kr
[2] School of Social Work, Texas State University, San Marcos, TX 78666, USA
[3] Department of Social Work, Graduate School of Policy, Sookmyung Women's University, Seoul 04310, Korea; khy8319@gmail.com
* Correspondence: shinwoochoi@txstate.edu

Abstract: Historically, South Korean society has been deeply influenced by Confucianism, which has an emphasis on the traditional family structure. If a given family does not belong in the "traditional" norm, which is composed of husband, wife, and children, they are often discriminated against and ostracized. Despite the increasing number of nonmarital cohabiters in South Korea, research is still insufficient to understand the phenomenon. This study explores the prevalence of nonmarital cohabitation in South Korea, which is still met with discrimination. Online surveys and in-depth interviews were conducted with cohabiters to gain an understanding of the phenomenon and to explore their marriage and family values. The findings of this study indicate that cohabiters who chose cohabitation as an alternative to marriage had more progressive values. Findings from the study provide implications for practice and policy.

Keywords: cohabitation; diverse families; family planning; policies; South Korea

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1. Introduction

In contemporary society, it is important that diverse family structures are accepted and treated without discrimination or prejudices. There are various types of family structures such as single parenthood, same-sex marriages, foster families, divorced families, or children having grandparents as their primary caregivers [1]. South Korea as a society has been deeply influenced by the values of Confucianism which was originated in China [2]. Confucianism emphasizes the social harmony between family members, teachers and students and submissiveness towards the ones with more authority [3]. Influenced by Confucianism, South Korean society values traditional family structure, composed of a married husband and wife and their children, as a default. Any family structure that is deviant from the norm is viewed with stereotypes and is discriminated against [4,5]. Due to various factors, South Korean society has in the past viewed nonmarital cohabitants with negativity.

However, since the late 1990s, there have been noticeable changes in South Korean family structures. Many scholars and experts agree that this is due to a weakened binding power of family—the perception that all men and women should get married and have children. Changes in traditional values related to marriage and childbirth have been taking place in South Korea in recent decades. Accordingly, there has been increasing acceptance of cohabitation. Despite increasing tolerance for affection-based cohabitation, it is still challenging to obtain accurate data on cohabiting couples in South Korea. Tradition in South Korea has not given social legitimacy to non-marital partnerships. Instead, traditional South Korean culture has viewed cohabiters as not respecting societal norms of marriage.

As a result, there is limited literature on cohabitation in South Korea. A few of the studies published on cohabitation since 2000 include: "Cohabitation Patterns Seen from Experiences of Women and Pursuit of Alternative Family Concepts" (Park, 2002), which

discussed cohabitation from the perspective of women under the Korean patriarchal family system; "Cohabitation, loneliness, and family function among university students" [6], in which Kim and Kim (2010) explored a correlation between cohabitation and family functions through experiences of college students in Jeonnam Province [6]; Kim (2009) and Jo (2012) studied psychological qualities of couples who chose to cohabit; and Lee (2008) identified features of cohabiting couples nationwide [7].

It is the purpose of the study to explore nonmarital cohabitation in South Korea, which is still seen with discrimination. Furthermore, it is also an aim of this study to capture the experiences, perceptions, and views of the individuals who have experienced nonmarital cohabitations.

1.1. Literature Review

1.1.1. Social Transition and Cohabitation in Other Cultures

Countries in Western Europe and North America during the 1960s, as well as countries in Central and Eastern Europe during the 1990s, underwent extreme societal and economic restructuring [8,9]. This social transition created a new environment for individuals, and as a result, affected the demographics [10]. For instance, cohabitation became widespread among young adults, non-marital births increased, and young people separated from their parents at an older age [10].

While cohabitation became widespread in North America and Europe, most other cultures did not recognize it as a family structure, indirectly indicating that cohabitation fluctuates depending on societal constructs. According to [11], cohabitation spreads within a society in the following four phases: (1) cohabitation as a deviant behavior created by single minors; (2) cohabitation as a prelude to marriage, during which most couples do not have children; (3) cohabitation gradually becomes an alternative to marriage; and (4) the distinction between cohabitation and marriage becomes indefinite. In response to phase 4, cohabitation may replace marriage or at least be recognized as another form of marriage [11]. Once a society arrives at a certain phase, cohabitation patterns that occurred in the previous phase co-exist with the new phase [11].

1.1.2. Changes in Cohabitation Types

Historically, cohabitation was an alternative living arrangement chosen by laborers or couples who could not financially afford a wedding or as an alternative to remarriage following a divorce [12–15]. Nowadays, cohabitation is no longer chosen merely for financial reasons but as a new lifestyle by highly educated people [16–18]. In modern society, cohabitation is more diverse and can be classified as a stage in the marriage process or as an alternative to marriage [19,20]. One study organized cohabitation into the following subgroups: a prelude to marriage (relatively shorter cohabitation periods and lower pregnancy rates), a stage in the marriage process (usually leads to childbirth and then to marriage), an alternative to being single (relatively shorter cohabitation periods that usually end in separation rather than marriage), an alternative to marriage (longer cohabitation periods and higher pregnancy rates), and a status indistinguishable from marriage [21]. Therefore, it is important to understand the complexities of cohabitation among populations in which it is becoming more prevalent.

1.1.3. Major Issues of Cohabiting Households

It is important to explore cohabitating in other nations where the arrangement is more accepted, such as England and the U.S. Observing the effects of cohabiting in other nations might help to better understand how cohabitating might influence demographical and social trends, as well as predict the impact on interpersonal relationships in South Korea. Reference [22] suggests that in the U.S. and England, cohabitation is increasing in response to delayed marriage. In the U.S., non-marital cohabitation is increasing for women across all education levels and races; however, women with low education are more likely to choose cohabitation. In England, cohabitation occurs irrespective of social and

economic circumstances, which is attributable to the sharp increase in their cohabitation rate. Therefore, when the percentage of cohabiting households is high and continuously growing, it can be viewed as another acceptable way of life rather than just as a prelude to marriage. In contrast, when the percentage of cohabiting households increases slowly and remains insignificant within a society, cohabiting couples may likely experience instability in their relationships due to implicit pressure placed on them by others, increasing the risk of separation. As a result, cohabiting relationships have not been found to be sustainable. Consequently, specifying criteria for defining "cohabiting households" is especially difficult in South Korea, where there are considerable requests for laws and institutions regarding the acceptance of diverse forms of family in relation to national issues including low birth rates and an aging society.

Presumably, cohabiting in South Korea is more multi-layered than cohabiting in the U.S. or England. Even though South Korean society has grown more receptive to cohabitation, stringent responsibility of parenting and the ever-rising increase in nurturing costs are becoming a motivation for not having children. Therefore, unless the culture of excessive dedication to raising children dissipates, there is a possibility that cohabitation may result in separation or be chosen by couples only pursuing partnerships. Thinking about what society expects from cohabiting households is a very important issue to explore, especially considering the urgent national challenge to overcome the 10-year trend of a decreasing birth rate. Therefore, more diverse and complex families in South Korea may have different social meanings and patterns compared to Western countries, which makes it necessary to continue long-term and specific research on this issue.

In addition, when there is no definite view on whether cohabiting relationships can be considered the same as traditional families or whether cohabitation can be an alternative to marriage, it seems necessary to concretely define cohabitation. One important criterion in defining cohabitation is the couple's will to marry. Depending on whether cohabitation is to prepare for marriage or is irrespective of marriage, the policy implications and meanings behind the couple's union will differ greatly. Even couples who plan to marry can be distinguished based on the stability and characteristics of their relationships such as the motivation behind choosing cohabitation. Inversely, it is more complicated for couples who do not choose cohabitation with any intention to marry, but instead for sexual satisfaction, economic reasons, or parenting as a result of an unplanned pregnancy. Those who refuse authoritative gender relationships and patriarchal family culture may also be included in this category, leading to another category of gender classification among partners: homosexual versus heterosexual cohabitation. There is limited mention or research regarding cohabitating among homosexual couples, indicating gaps in the existing literature.

In general, cohabitation ends in two ways: marriage or separation. In the U.S., about half of cohabiting couples get married and the probability of marriage decreases as the cohabitation period increases. Wealthier couples have a higher probability of getting married, thus implying that economic resources can influence the stability of cohabiting couples [22]. Therefore, it is highly likely that cohabitation among young or middle-aged people living in South Korea with a low socioeconomic status may end in separation.

Similarly, there are societal concerns in South Korea regarding the social development of children among cohabiting couples. It can be difficult for cohabiters to secure stable conditions for parenting due to social stigmas about cohabiting couples giving birth to children. As cohabitation gradually becomes more recognized, relationships between cohabiting couples, as well as cohabiters and their children, may show a different pattern compared to that of traditional families. Overall, the characteristics of cohabiting relationships and changes within these dynamics have room for more empirical exploration.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Recruitment and Sample

For the purpose of the current study, secondary data (online survey: "Online Survey Data on Nonmarital Cohabitation" and transcribed interviews) were used, which were originally collected by the Korea Institute of Health and Social Affairs in 2016. An online survey and in-depth interviews were conducted to acquire data about cohabitating individuals in South Korea. Inclusion criteria required participants to be between the ages of 18 and 49 and to currently be in a cohabiting relationship or have experienced cohabitation after the year 2000. Through purposive sampling, a total of 260 individuals responded to the survey, and 253 surveys were analyzed. Among the 253 respondents, 46.2% were currently in cohabiting relationships and 53.8% had experienced cohabitation. Among those who had experienced cohabitation, 36% were currently separated from their ex-partners and 17.8% registered marriage during cohabitation. Table 1 presents the characteristics of respondents of the online survey.

Table 1. Characteristics of online survey respondents [23].

Variables	All Sample (n = 253)	Variables	All Sample (n = 253)
Sex		Monthly household income during cohabitation (USD)	
Male	60.5%	<$1780	12.3%
Female	39.5%	$1780–2674	23.3%
Age (at the time of responding to the survey)		$2765–3565	17.0%
18–29	30.4%	$3566–4456	16.2%
30–39	44.3%	$4457–5349	13.8%
40–49	25.3%	$5350–6240	7.9%
Education		≥$6241	9.5%
Less than high school degree	10.3%	Employment status during cohabitation	
Some level of college	79.0%	Employed	19.4%
Graduate school	10.7%	Not-employed	80.6%
Age when start cohabitation		Financial contribution to the household during cohabitation	
17–29	55.0%	Both partners	82.6%
30–39	37.5%	Respondent alone	12.3%
40–49	7.5%	Partner alone	5.1%
Avg. age when start cohabitation	29.3 years (St. Dev: 6.10)	Number of children born during cohabitation	
Avg. years of cohabitation	2.4 years (St. Dev: 2.93)	0	93.3%
		1	4.3%
		2	2.4%

Source: Byoun et al. (2016). Childbirth and child-rearing in diverse families and policy implications: with focus on nonmarital cohabitation. Sejong: KIHASA.

For more detailed information regarding experiences of cohabiting in South Korea, 14 cohabitants were recruited by using convenience snowball sampling, and one-on-one in-depth interviews were conducted. Table 2 presents the demographic characteristics of the sample who participated in the interviews.

Table 2. Characteristics of sample for the semi-structured interview (n = 14) [23].

			Mean (Median)	Range
Gender				
Male	4			
Female	10			
Age (year)			28.5 (29)	19–35
Education				
Less than high school	1	7.1%		
High school diploma	2	14.3%		
Some level of college	3	21.4%		
Bachelor's degree or more	8	57.1%		
Cohabitation status				
Currently cohabiting	11	78.6%		
Cohabitation in the past	3	21.4%		
Avg. years of cohabitation (for those who ended cohabitation)			5 (6)	3–6

Source: Byoun et al. (2016). Childbirth and child-rearing in diverse families and policy implications: with focus on nonmarital cohabitation. Sejong: KIHASA.

Among the total respondents, namely 14 interviewees, 60% were men and 40% were women. The average age when the respondents began their cohabitation was 29.3. Of the 14 participants, 11 were currently cohabiting and 3 were no longer with their partners. Two of the latter three gave birth to children during cohabitation but broke up with their partners before registering marriage and were raising children as a single parent. The remaining respondent became pregnant during a long-term cohabitation period and registered marriage but later divorced.

2.2. Data Collection

The online survey was composed of four sections asking the respondents' demographic information; experiences of cohabitation—duration, reasons, and family planning; and their values regarding marriage. Semi-structured interview questions exploring cohabitants' perceptions and experiences of cohabitation were developed for the in-depth interviews.

2.3. Data Analysis

For the online survey, various descriptive statistical analyses were utilized to explore the patterns, experiences, and values of cohabitants in South Korea. A series of ANOVA analyses were conducted to examine if there were significant differences by respondents' sex and whether they view cohabitation as a stage in the marriage process or an alternative to marriage. For the in-depth interviews, content analyses were conducted through open-coding and deductive analysis. Afterward, data from the two sources were compared to increase rigor. For the online survey results, researchers hypothesized that there would be significant differences between the values and experiences of cohabitants by their sex and their view on cohabitation.

3. Results

3.1. Results from Online Survey and Qualitative Interview

3.1.1. Experiences of Cohabitation

Table 3 presents descriptive statistics of the cohabitation experiences of online survey respondents.

Table 3. Cohabitation experiences of online survey respondents (n = 253) [23].

Questions	
Cohabitation experiences	
Currently cohabiting without registering marriage	46.2%
Have cohabited before without registering marriage and is currently separated	35.6%
Registered marriage during cohabitation but is currently separated (legally divorced)	0.4%
Have cohabited before and is currently married with the same partner (legally married)	17.8%
Reasons for cohabitation	
Pregnancy	4.0%
Had an intention to get married but due to economic reasons including housing costs and wedding costs	24.1%
Had an intention to get married but due to opposition of family members, etc.	4.0%
To get confidence in partner living together before marriage	17.4%
To live freely without being bound to Korean marital system or norms	13.0%
Have no concrete plan for marriage but to rely on each other	19.0%
To save date expenses, rent, and living expenses while dating partner	18.6%
Plans to register marriage in the future	
No	25.6%
Yes	74.4%

Source: KIHASA (2016). Online Survey Data on Nonmarital Cohabitation.

The reasons individuals chose cohabitation were diverse. About 1/4 of the total respondents said they had an intention to get married but chose cohabitation due to economic reasons, including housing and wedding costs. Other reasons included relying on each other without any concrete plan for marriage, to save on living expenses, and to get to know their partner before marriage. About 13% chose cohabitation as an alternative to marriage. Other reasons were in response to pregnancy or opposition of family members.

When asked the extent to which participants disclosed their cohabiting relationships, about 27% said they disclosed it to no one, 6.3% said to everyone, and the rest disclosed it to some of their friends, colleagues, and family members. As for the respondents who said they disclosed cohabitation to some of their acquaintances, in-depth interviews revealed they felt more comfortable disclosing cohabitation to their close friends than to their family members, revealing that it is still difficult to disclose cohabitation to parents in South Korean culture. Excluding the 16 respondents who answered that they disclosed cohabitation to all people, we asked the other 237 respondents their reason(s) for not disclosing cohabitation. Almost half of them answered, "because other people may think ill of them or have a prejudice over them". Others said, "because I don't like others preaching to me".

It was also asked whether the respondents ever felt discriminated against while cohabiting, including negative bias or criticism. Fifty-one percent (129 participants) said they experienced discrimination. Negative views accounted for 70% of the responses, including feeling that others thought of them as sexually promiscuous, immoral, being engaged in an affair, or as an irresponsible person. Fifteen percent identified that society's view towards cohabiting led to overall feelings of prejudice. Negative views, which accounted for the largest portion of experienced discrimination, mostly included female respondents feeling that others viewed them as sexually promiscuous. According to a female who is currently cohabiting:

> *"I felt somehow that other people were labeling me, and people tend to say that what I am doing now does not differ much from being married except for the fact that I did not register marriage. Some people also said that once I break up with my partner and try to get married to another person, then my cohabitation experience will serve me negatively".*

Others included being discriminated against by public agencies—experiencing subtle criticism by others, not being recognized as a spouse, and receiving negative views from neighbors. About 45% of the respondents replied that they experienced discrimination from government support or services. Specifically, 45.1% (114 respondents) answered that they 'could not receive support available from the government', that 'there were limitations

in accessing social services', and that they "were excluded from services available because they were not registered as husbands and wives". Others included "limitations in playing a role as a spouse like being unable to play a role as a guardian in hospital".

When asked what their responses would be if their child(ren) chose to cohabitate, 41.9% answered they would agree and 58.1% said they would disagree. This might be a result of their negative experiences or concerns about negative social recognition of cohabitation. Regarding participants' attitudes toward their children cohabiting, there was a significant difference by gender of children, and more women extremely opposed cohabitation than men, indicating that cohabitation is more negatively applied to women. Specifically, attitudes of women may be were applied more strictly to daughters than to sons. Therefore, if women have had negative experiences while cohabiting, they may apply a double standard. According to a single mother who cohabited in the past:

> *"I will oppose as much as I can if my daughter wants to choose cohabitation in the future. [The reason is because] I am afraid that she would live a life like mine. If my son wants to choose cohabitation, I will let him do just as he wants".*

A higher percentage of those who considered cohabitation as a stage in the marriage process (48%) slightly disagreed with cohabitation of children compared to those who considered cohabitation as an alternative to marriage (41.4%); a higher percentage of those who considered cohabitation as a stage in the marriage process (37.6%) slightly agreed to the cohabitation of children compared to those who considered cohabitation as an alternative to marriage (33.6%); a higher percentage of those who considered cohabitation as an alternative to marriage (14.1%) strongly disagreed about cohabitation of children compared to those who considered cohabitation as a stage in the marriage process (12.8%); and a higher percentage of those who considered cohabitation as an alternative to marriage (10.9%) strongly agreed to the cohabitation of children compared to those who considered cohabitation as a stage in the marriage process (1.6%). A higher percentage of those who were cohabiting as an alternative to marriage or irrespective of marriage answered that they would strongly agree if their children chose cohabitation, which appears to reflect the tendency of the respondents not wanting to join the traditional marital system.

3.1.2. Views on Marriage and Family

As characteristics of the respondents indicate, 207 out of 253 respondents did not register marriage, including 117 respondents who were currently cohabiting and 90 respondents who once cohabited but were currently separated without getting married. Among the respondents with cohabitation experiences, 46 of them registered marriage. As for whether they felt the need for marriage registration while cohabiting, 44.4% (92 respondents) of the 207 respondents who did not register marriage said they felt the need, which is slightly lower than 55.6% (115 respondents) who answered not feeling the need. When asked whether they have plans to register marriage in the future, more than 70% (87 respondents) of the 117 respondents who were currently cohabiting answered that they did. Whether respondents had marriage registration plans or not differed according to their reasons for cohabitation. A higher percentage of those who were cohabiting as an alternative to marriage answered that they did not have plans for marriage registration.

Table 4 presents respondents' thoughts and values on South Korea's family cuture; 43.9% said that it should be maintained although it is somewhat inconvenient, and 72.4% thought it was inconvenient. A higher percentage of men than women thought it was inconvenient but should be maintained, while a much higher percentage of women than men thought that "it is inconvenient and should be changed". For reasons for cohabitation, those who were cohabiting as a stage in the marriage process and thus had the intention to get married said that "South Korea's family culture is necessary" or that "it should be maintained although it is inconvenient"; those who were cohabiting as an alternative to marriage also thought that "it should be maintained although it is inconvenient" but also said that "it should be changed", which indicates that those who chose cohabitation as an alternative to marriage tend to require changes in traditional family culture.

Table 4. ANOVA on cohabitants' values by sex and by their view on cohabitation as a stage to marriage or an alternative to marriage (n = 253).

Questions				
Thoughts on South Korea's family culture	Total (n = 253)	Male (n = 153)	Female (n = 100)	x^2 = 20.2 ***
Should be maintained	27.7%	30.1%	24.0%	
Is inconvenient but should be maintained	43.9%	51.6%	32.0%	
Is inconvenient and should be changed	28.5%	18.3%	44.0%	

*** $p < 0.001$. Source:KIHASA (2016). Online Survey Data on Nonmarital Cohabitation.

3.1.3. Need for Cohabitation-Related System

Table 5 presents respondents' views on how a contract is necessary for cohabitors to pretect cohabiting relationships; 46.6% of the respondents said they are slightly necessary, 28.5% slightly not necessary, 11.9% very necessary, and 13% not necessary at all. Notably, a significantly higher percentage of women thought that a contract or a pact was necessary. A moderately higher percentage of those who considered cohabitation as a stage in the marriage process (50.4%) answered that a contract is slightly necessary compared to those who considered cohabitation as an alternative to marriage (43%). However, a lower percentage of those who considered cohabitation as a stage in the marriage process (26.4%) answered that a contract is slightly unnecessary compared to those who considered cohabitation as an alternative to marriage (30.5%). Although most of the respondents answered that they felt the need for a contract, only 30% of them wrote a contract, which implies that despite the necessity, it is not being practiced. The necessity of a contract or a pact was also discussed in the in-depth interviews, and according to a female who got married after cohabitation but is currently divorced:

> *"Yes, it is necessary if it is a minimum institutional strategy . . . Many people, especially single moms, are disadvantaged . . . As for me, I am divorced and think that I am in a relatively happier situation because I receive childcare expenses. (If you want to cohabit) I would recommend writing a contract before beginning cohabitation".*

Table 5. ANOVA on cohabitants' need for a contract by sex (n = 253).

Questions				
Whether a contract or pact should be written between cohabiting partners	Total (n = 253)	Male (n = 153)	Female (n = 100)	x^2 = 18.6 ***
Not necessarily at all	13.0%	17.6%	6.0%	
Slightly not necessary	28.5%	33.3%	21.0%	
Slightly necessary	46.6%	41.8%	54.0%	
Very necessary	11.9%	7.2%	19.0%	

*** $p < 0.001$. Source: KIHASA (2016). Online Survey Data on Nonmarital Cohabitation.

When asked how respondents feel about the introduction of a registration system in which cohabiting couples can register and be recognized by law through contracts other than marriage registration, 72% responded they agree to an institutional strategy that gives them a similar level of protection to married couples. Overall, female respondents agreed more than males to the introduction of a registration system. There was no significant difference in answers for reasons for cohabitation and the need for marriage registration, indicating that official recognition of cohabiting relationships was desired by all groups. Respondents did identify doubts about whether South Korea will be able to recognize the need for providing minimum protection of registering cohabiting relationships, as well as the acceptance of cohabiting by society. According to a woman who is currently cohabiting:

> *"Recognition of cohabiting households by our country or society . . . Well, I don't care whether they recognize our relationship or not anymore, but they need to design a system that can be incorporated into the existing system to make welfare benefits accessible for*

cohabiting couples . . . Well, first, I doubt whether they can really do it because I lost trust. And second, even if they came up with one, will other people living in normal family ideology leave it as it is? This means that if they don't, then we might have to fight against them, but we are already too tired to fight . . . ".

3.1.4. Childbirth Trends

Although some couples choose cohabitation as an alternative to marriage, they tend to become legally married before giving birth to a child, indicating that cohabiting is not necessarily an alternative to marriage when parenting. Table 6 presents the respondents' experiences and plans for pregnancy and childbirth. More than 70% (188 respondents) answered that they did not get pregnant during cohabitation, 19% (48 respondents) have experienced an abortion, and only 6.7% (17 respondents) gave birth to a child. Among the 17 respondents with childbirth experience, 11 gave birth to one child and six to two children during cohabitation. For reasons for cohabitation, a higher percentage of those who considered cohabitation as an alternative to marriage (80.5%) answered that "they have not gotten pregnant during cohabitation" compared to those who considered cohabitation as a stage in the marriage process (68%). A higher percentage of those who considered cohabitation as a stage in the marriage process (21.6%) answered that "they only experienced abortion during cohabitation" compared to those who considered cohabitation as an alternative to marriage (16.4%). A higher percentage of those who considered cohabitation as a stage in the marriage process (10.4%) answered that "they gave birth to a child during cohabitation" compared to those who considered cohabitation as an alternative to marriage (3.1%).

Table 6. ANOVA on cohabitants' experiences by their view on cohabitation as a stage to marriage or an alternative to marriage (n = 253).

Questions				
Experiences of pregnancy, abortion, or childbirth during cohabitation	Total (n = 253)	Stage (n = 125)	Alternative (n = 128)	x^2 = 7.2 *
No experiences of pregnancy	74.3%	68.0%	80.5%	
Abortion only	19.0%	21.6%	16.4%	
Child birth	6.7%	10.4%	3.1%	
Plans for pregnancy during cohabitation	Total (n = 253)	Stage (n = 125)	Alternative (n = 128)	x^2 = 23.0 ***
Plans for pregnancy during cohabitation	4.7%	4.0%	5.5%	
Plans for pregnancy after registering marriage	54.5%	69.6%	26.4%	
No plan	40.7%	39.8%	54.7%	

* $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.001$.Source: KIHASA (2016). Online Survey Data on Nonmarital Cohabitation.

Regarding plans for pregnancy during cohabitation, 54.5% of 253 respondents answered they did not have plans for pregnancy during cohabitation, 40.7% had no plan for pregnancy, and only 4.7% had plans for pregnancy during cohabitation. There were differences between groups classified according to reasons for cohabitation. About 70% of the group that considered cohabitation as a stage in the marriage process had plans for pregnancy during cohabitation, whereas 54.7% of the group that considered cohabitation as an alternative to marriage answered that they had no plan for pregnancy.

Those results showed that cohabitation as an alternative to marriage or cohabitation irrespective of marriage had a lower correlation with pregnancy and childbirth compared to cohabitation as a stage in the marriage process. In the current social structure, under which it is common for parents to register marriage before birth registration, it seems that choosing cohabitation is related to not having a child. It may also be possible that couples who plan not to have a child do not feel the need to join the marriage system and instead choose to maintain cohabiting relationships. According to a currently cohabiting female:

"I think that one's viewpoint on the matter of childbirth and parenting will have a huge impact on cohabitation. People like me who are very negative toward childbirth and feel

no need to have a child may also feel it less necessary to get married. For example, those who really want to have a child seem to think that getting married is a very natural thing. They seem to be thinking that getting married is a must to have a child. But as for me, it is quite the reverse".

4. Discussion

4.1. Discussion on the Findings from the Current Study

The current study made a meaningful contribution to the current body of knowledge. The percentage of total cohabiting households in South Korea cannot be accurately determined with currently available literature. However, there is an existing population of cohabiting couples, which will more than likely continue to exist. Therefore, cohabiting should be considered a family structure. Based on the literature and current research, the various cohabitation patterns in South Korea can be classified into two categories of cohabiting that are often used in Western society: cohabitation as a stage in the marriage process, and cohabitation as an alternative to marriage or irrespective of marriage. As for those who choose cohabitation as an alternative to marriage, there seems to be the formula that selection of cohabitation equals childlessness. While some cohabitants do not want children, the cases in which they do, but give up having a child due to societal structures, must be considered. Currently, childbirth rarely occurs in cohabiting relationships, which implies that eradicating bias and discrimination toward different forms of family might enable all forms of family to have the opportunity to create a proper, nurturing environment for children. Therefore, it would be desirable to prohibit discrimination toward children born to non-traditionally accepted household structures in South Korea. According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), all children have the right not to be discriminated against regardless of their gender, race, nationality, social class or act of their family, opinion, values, etc. Specifically, regardless of the marital status of one's parents, all children should be guaranteed the same rights and safety. Consequently, discussions about the enactment of the "anti-discrimination act" should continue.

Furthermore, it was identified in the current research that South Korean society is beginning to consider cohabiting as a test period before marriage and/or as an alternative to marriage. By classifying reasons for cohabitation and analyzing pregnancy plans and childbirth experience among those who had experiences with cohabitation, we can understand that Korea society is currently placed somewhere between 2 and 3 stages among four phases by [11]. Moreover, [11] predicted that once cohabitation comes to the surface within a society and the reasons for and types of cohabiting develop, the society hardly returns to the previous phase of cohabiting. Based on this hypothesis, as cohabitation proliferates among young people in South Korea, it seems that social measures supporting cohabiting couples to form a family and lead a more stable life are required. The future direction of policies that can be presented through this study may be very limited. Regardless, the current study would like to promote stability and measures to enhance the quality of life for cohabiting households. Therefore, careful discussions regarding proposed measures are necessary, and long-term considerations will be presented rather than immediate policy changes.

4.2. Implications

The survey results suggest that some cohabiting couples disclosed cohabitation to others, while most of the respondents did not; this confirms that negative views and social bias towards cohabiting couples persist within South Korean society, causing most cohabitants to feel uncomfortable disclosing their relationships. Respondents suggest that it is a rational choice or modern form of marriage—a new way of forming a family—rather than a behavior resulting from irresponsibility. Therefore, efforts should be made to increase cohabitating households as one form of family existing in South Korea. Awareness and acceptance will help lead to policies that promote a more stable life for all types of

families by diversifying and broadening the standards related to the recognition of what a family is.

4.2.1. Cohabiting Registration

Currently, cohabiting relationships can get legal protection by proving de facto marriage (Park et al., 2019), but there is no separate procedure that certifies cohabiting relationships through registration as in the case of marriage. Cohabitation registration should be an option for those who choose cohabitation as an alternative to marriage as a means of obtaining institutional benefits without the bounds of marriage. While this might pose concerns for declining marriage rates, it can be justified by the expansion of family definitions and a pathway to increase the social acceptance of cohabitating relationships.

4.2.2. Create a System for Cohabitants

Similarly, the respondents called for the introduction of a basic system that at a minimum certifies their cohabiting relationships regardless of reasons for cohabitation. Therefore, it seems necessary to consider introducing a system befitting the level of public understanding of cohabitation, as well as the cultural background of South Korean society from a long-term perspective. While the extent of protection should undergo careful and long-term discussions to reach a cultural and social consensus, it seems necessary to actively consider some form of an institutional system for registering cohabiting relationships. Once cohabiting relationships are recognized as a family, raising a child within that boundary will become more accepted. Therefore, those who choose cohabitation as a prelude to marriage can finally join the conventional marriage system and receive protection to plan for pregnancy and childbirth. Those who choose the cohabitation–childlessness formulation as an alternative to marriage may also be given the opportunity to consider more liberal choices regarding pregnancy.

4.2.3. Support for Cohabiting Childbirth

Raising children is considered a difficult task for all forms/types of family, especially cohabiting couples. Consequently, childbirth is rare in cohabiting relationships. Nonmarital cohabitation and childlessness are chosen not only due to social bias but the inability to secure housing or stable finances to raise children. Since giving birth to children and raising them are burdensome for cohabiting couples under the current social structure, most cohabitants choose to live without children and accordingly feel no need to get married. South Korean society has historically required women to devote themselves to parenting (Park and Kim, 2003), which is an issue cohabiting women identified throughout the in-depth interviews. Therefore, if the state shares more of the burden of nurturing children from birth until adulthood, regardless of the marital status of their parents or the form of their family, there may be less difference in the fertility rate caused by family dynamics. In this environment, any form of family would be more likely to consider childbirth without worrying about discrimination or difficulties. South Korea would then be able to expect the creation of a social environment where various forms of families, including cohabiting households, feel accepted when making non-traditional choices regarding childbirth.

4.2.4. Social Service Implications

Understanding the definition and prevalence of cohabitating households can help social work implications in practice and research. It is important for social workers to know the stigma that still exists with unmarried cohabitation in South Korea. Social workers must adopt an unbiased view when conducting home visits with child protective services. Children living in a cohabitating home should not be treated differently from children residing in married households (Byoun et al., 2017). Social workers must also be competent and unbiased when clients are seeking counseling while cohabitating. “Marriage counseling” is slowly becoming an outdated term and is being replaced with “relationship counseling”.

4.2.5. Census Expansion

Finally, cohabiting households should not be excluded in cthe ensus or in other surveys. There should not be cases of deleting options related to cohabitation in questionnaires due to only a few respondents selecting such options. Ample and accurate statistical data will provide basic but significant information for research, the development of a new system, and/or laws related to cohabitation. Therefore, efforts for preparing improved statistical data should be prioritized to support the accurate identification of cohabiting patterns in South Korea.

5. Conclusions

The current study explores characteristics of cohabitation, which has not been much revealed officially so far in Korea. Because little is known of cohabitation, the study seeks to understand fundamentals related to cohabitation, such as reasons for cohabitation and plans for pregnancy. There are diverse reasons for cohabitation, and we could classify the reasons into two groups; those who considered cohabitation as a stage in the marriage and those who considered cohabitation as an alternative to marriage. The two groups showed very different views on cohabitation and experiences.

The study results explain much of the group differences. In particular, pregnancy plans during cohabitation were different. Because relationships between legal marriage and childbirth are still extremely strong in Korean society, it is not easy to decide to have pregnancy plans for cohabiting couples without legal marriage. Two adults who choose the cohabitation lifestyle are prepared for negative experiences due to the non-traditional family type, but they usually do not want their children to have the same experiences. Related to those cultural contexts in Korea, we found differences between cohabitation as a stage to marriage and as an alternative to marriage.

There is still a negative view of cohabitation in Korean society. However, once cohabitation emerges in society, cohabitation trends tend to move on to the next phase. Thus, Korean society will also move 3 or 4 phases, in which cohabitation may be considered equal to marriage and need to think about ways to prevent cases in which choosing cohabitation causes disadvantages.

This study has limitations. One of the limitations of this study is that it was not a longitudinal study. The data from this study were retrieved cross-sectionally. It is important to note that the phenomenon of cohabitation is changing every day. It is also important to note that this study captured the cohabiters' family values and their experiences of cohabitation and did not capture additional vulnerabilities. Furthermore, since the study relied on purposive sampling, it is likely that there was a selection bias in recruiting the representative sample of nonmarital cohabitants in South Korea. There was no effort to sample individuals from certain geographical locations (i.e., urban vs. rural) or occupations (i.e., professionals vs. working class). Therefore, future studies may overcome these shortcomings by utilizing more representative sampling strategies and engaging in longitudinal data collection. Another limitation that should be taken note of may be limited social services as a couple. It is recommended that readers consider these factors when reading the data. This study draws attention to the stigma behind cohabitation in South Korea. This symbolizes the value of marriage and family dynamic in South Korea.

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