

Self-Differentiation, Family Functioning, Life Satisfaction and Attitudes towards Marriage among South Korean University Students

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Abstract

This study attempted to investigate the relationships between self-differentiation, family functioning, life satisfaction, and attitudes toward marriage, and identify factors contributing to the development of these attitudes among university students in South Korea. Participants were 759 students attending five universities located in Daegu and Gyeongsangbuk-do, South Korea. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered between June 10 and July 12, 2013. The analysis revealed that attitudes toward marriage significantly differed by gender, age, school year, and religion, and were positively correlated with self-differentiation, family functioning, and life satisfaction. Self-differentiation was positively correlated with family functioning and life satisfaction. Family functioning was positively correlated with life satisfaction. Factors that significantly influenced attitudes toward marriage were life satisfaction, gender, age, self-differentiation, and family functioning that together explained approximately 16.1% of the total variance. These results suggest that positive attitudes toward marriage among Korean university students can be fostered by providing marriage education programs that increase life satisfaction and improve self-differentiation and the quality of family relationships.

Keywords: Attitudes Toward Marriage, Differentiation, Family Functioning, Life Satisfaction

1. Introduction

Major changes in attitudes toward marriage have occurred in South Korea over recent decades. Over the 35-year period from 1970 to 2005, Singulate Mean Age At Marriage (SMAM) for Korean women has increased by 5.5 years¹. Delayed marriage and/or remaining unmarried are linked to very low fertility rates. Longstanding attitudes toward marriage may affect one's post-marriage behavioral patterns. To reduce low fertility rates, it is necessary to implement policies aimed at improving younger generations' attitudes toward marriage and childbirth². In general, male students' attitudes toward marriage tend to be nontraditional and more progressive than female students' attitudes. However, more female than male stu-

dents have nontraditional attitudes toward childbirth and recognize the seriousness of childrearing^{3,4}.

Attitudes toward marriage are affected by demographic characteristics and familial factors⁵. Attitudes that are more conservative are held by women rather than men, older rather than younger individuals, students with science and technology majors compared to art or physics majors, and those who are the youngest rather than the eldest or middle child in the family. Family atmosphere can directly and indirectly affect children's impression formation about marriage or family values⁶. The experiences within the original family influences the development of gender roles and affects children's attitudes toward marriage⁷. Additionally, healthy relationships between family members is related to a greater degree of happiness among

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couples and in parent-child relationships, thus increasing the likelihood of positive attitudes about marriage to be transferred to the next generation⁸.

Self-differentiation is described as two separate, but related aspects of the self⁹. The first part occurs intrapsychically (within the individual), and can be considered a type of emotional maturity. This is the ability to balance intellectual thinking and emotional (feeling) processes in situations where there is an increased likelihood for emotionality to override thinking. The second aspect occurs interpersonally and represents relational maturity. This is the ability to experience and balance intimacy and autonomy in social relationships. Thus, self-differentiation can be regarded as comprising both emotional and relational maturity⁹. Individuals with a high level of differentiation, cope better with life tensions, are more adaptable and flexible, function independently of emotionality around them, and are less affected by it¹⁰. A high level of self-differentiation is related to marital satisfaction, stable relationships with the opposite sex, and effective parent-child communication. It is also related to intellectual and emotional functioning and helps maintain individual identity and positive interpersonal relationships^{11,12}. Those with high levels of life satisfaction also demonstrate more stable emotional levels and positive attitudes toward marriage⁵.

Changes in attitudes toward marriage and childbirth can affect marriage rates and SMAM. Women who are still single at 35–39 years are nearing the point at which their reproductive capacity is considerably diminished. Marriage rates are particularly low for women with a higher level of education. In 2013, adults aged 65 and older comprised approximately 12.2% of the Korean population; this proportion is expected to rise to 24.3% by 2030¹³. Therefore, examining Korean university students' attitudes toward marriage can help promote the development of positive attitudes toward marriage and childbirth. The present study focused on demographic, familial, and psychological factors that have been found to affect attitudes toward marriage in previous studies.

Research on attitudes toward marriage in South Korea has largely focused on the following areas: the value of marriage and childbirth among high school students¹⁴, psychological adjustment, marital satisfaction as perceived by men and women¹⁵, and the influence of parents' beliefs about marriage¹⁶. Although previous studies have examined unmarried individuals' attitudes toward mar-

riage^{5,7,12,17}, they are limited by narrow demographics and a lack of familial and psychological variables. Our research targets university students in South Korea. There are several advantages to studying this group: (a) they have more dating experience than younger students and are at a developmental stage that is more likely to involve selecting a life partner and building a devoted relationship; (b) marital partner selection has occurred only occasionally; and (c) marriage is not imminent, allowing free discussion.

This study aimed at investigating self-differentiation, family functioning, life satisfaction, and attitudes toward marriage, and identifying factors contributing to these attitudes among university students in South Korea. Specific objectives included: (a) identifying demographic differences in attitudes toward marriage; and (b) determining the relationship between demographic characteristics, self-differentiation, family functioning, life satisfaction, and attitudes toward marriage among university students in South Korea.

2. Methods

2.1 Design

A descriptive research design was used to measure self-differentiation, family functioning, life satisfaction, attitudes toward marriage, and contributing factors among university students in South Korea.

2.2 Sampling and Procedure

Participants comprised 759 university students attending five universities located in Daegu and Gyeongsangbuk-do, South Korea. Inclusion criteria were university attendance, being unmarried, and consent to participate in this study. Using the G*Power 3.1.7 software for power analysis, the required power was .95 for multiple regression analysis, with a medium effect size of .15, 10 independent variables, and a significance level of .05. The sample size—759 participants—was satisfactory¹⁸. Data were collected using self-administered questionnaires from June 10 to July 12, 2013. The researcher explained the purpose and significance of the study to department directors, who then agreed to assist in recruiting Korean university students.

A pilot study was conducted to revise the study tools. A convenience sample of 30 students attending D univer-

sity was used. The meaning of each questionnaire item was reviewed and vague or duplicated questions were revised. After completing the final version, the researcher trained four assistants on the study procedure to minimize inter-scoring errors and ensure reliability. Of the 800 distributed questionnaires, 759 (94.8%) were returned for final data analyses.

2.3 Measurements

2.3.1 Self-differentiation

Self-differentiation was assessed using the scale developed by Jun (1994)¹⁹ to measure the individual's level of self-differentiation in the context of an intimate relationship, based on Bowen's family systems theory (1978)¹⁰. It consists of 44 items and 4 subscales: intrapsychic differentiation (14 items), interpersonal differentiation (10 items), triangles (4 items), and emotional cutoff (16 items). Responses to the items were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale (ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree"). A higher score on intrapsychic and interpersonal differentiation and a lower score on the triangles and emotional cutoff indicate a higher self-differentiation level. In this study, scores on triangles and emotional cutoff were reverse calculated. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient was .91 in Jun's study (1994)¹⁹ and was .88 in this study.

2.3.2 Family Functioning

This was assessed using the Family Functioning Scale (FFS), developed by Noller, Seth-Smith, Bourna, & Schweitzer²⁰ and modified by Lee⁷ to measure family functioning among adolescents. It consists of 23 items and 3 subscales: family cohesion (10 items), family adaptability (7 items), and family communication (6 items), each using a 5-point Likert scale (ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree"). A higher score implies more efficient family functioning. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient was .91 in Lee's study⁷ and .92 in the present study.

2.3.3 Life Satisfaction

This was assessed using the Happy Life Scale (HLS), developed by Kim, Kim, Cha, Lim, & Han²¹. The original scale consisted of 48 items and 16 subscales. However, in this study, HLS was modified to include 20 items with six subscales: economic capacity (3 items), health (4 items), family interpersonal relations (4 items), self-accomplish-

ment (6 items), and leisure (3 items). Each item used a 5-point Likert scale (ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree") with a higher score implying a higher level of life satisfaction. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient was .78 in Kim et al.'s study²¹ and was .86 in this study.

2.3.4 Attitudes Toward Marriage

Attitudes toward marriage were assessed using the scale developed by Jung, Kim, Bae, & Kim²² to measure attitudes toward marriage of Korean adults, and modified by Kim²³. It consists of 20 items with a 5-point Likert scale (ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree"); a higher score means a greater number of positive attitudes toward marriage. Cronbach's alpha was .88 in Kim's study²³ and was .75 in this study.

2.4 Data Analysis

Analyses were performed using SPSS for Windows (version 20.0, IBM Corp., Armonk, NY, USA). Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the general demographics. *t*-tests and analysis of variance (including Scheffé's test for post hoc analysis) were used to compare the differences in attitudes toward marriage by demographic characteristics. Pearson's correlation coefficient was used to determine the relationships between variables.

Stepwise multiple regression analysis was performed to explore which factors predicted attitudes toward marriage in participants after testing multicollinearity. A $p < .05$ was considered statistically significant. Multicollinearity, residuals, and outlying values were examined to test the regression analysis hypotheses regarding variable independence. First, correlation coefficients between variables ranged from .079 to .642. Thus, no explanatory variable with a correlation coefficient higher than .80 was found. Predictors were confirmed to be independent from one another. There was no autocorrelation problem as the Durbin-Watson statistic was 1.782. In addition, the variance inflation factor ranged from 1.000 to 1.411 (≤ 10), implying no issues with multicollinearity. Testing the hypotheses on the residuals satisfied the hypotheses of linearity, residual normality, and homoscedasticity. Cook's distance for examining outlying values did not exceed 1.0. Accordingly, all hypotheses of the regression equation were satisfied. The results of the regression analysis were considered reliable.

2.5 Ethical Considerations

The study's ethical protocols and procedures were approved by the ethics committee of the Institutional Review Board of Daegu Haany University (No. DHUMC-D-13004-ETC-01).

3. Results

3.1 Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

Demographics are shown in Table 1. Male students comprised 39.7% and female students comprised 60.3%. The participants' ages were as follows: 37.5% were 21–22 years, 26.0% were under 20 years, 24.0% were 23–24 years, and 12.5% were over 25 years (12.5%). Freshman students comprised 28.3%, sophomores, 30.6%, juniors, 20.4%, and seniors 20.7%. Regarding religion, nearly half (46.8%) reported no religious affiliation, followed by Protestants (24.9%), and Buddhists (20.4%). With regard to number of family members, 55.3% had four, 33.6% had five or more, and 14.1% had three or fewer. Of the participants' parents, 83.0% were married; and 17.0% were separated, divorced, or bereaved. Monthly household income was 3,000 to 3,999 thousand won at 28.6%; 2,000 to 3,999 thousand won at 27.9%; over 4,000 thousand won at 24.8%; and less than 1,999 thousand won at 18.7%.

Mean scores for self-differentiation and family functioning were 3.47 ($SD = 0.40$) and 3.43 ($SD = 0.57$), respectively. Mean scores for life satisfaction and attitudes toward marriage were 3.27 ($SD = 0.48$) and 3.43 ($SD = 0.39$), respectively.

3.2 Differences in Attitudes toward Marriage by Demographic Characteristics

Attitudinal differences according to demographics are shown in Table 1. Attitudes toward marriage significantly differed by gender ($t = 6.235, p < .001$), age ($F = 9.244, p < .001$), school year ($F = 4.078, p = .007$), and religion ($F = 3.950, p = .004$). Scheffé's test showed that male students and students in the age categories 23–24 years and 25 years and over, had significantly higher scores than female students and those in age categories 21–22 years and under 20 years. Seniors had significantly higher scores than

freshmen, and Buddhists obtained significantly higher scores than those with other religious beliefs.

3.3 Correlations between Self-Differentiation, Family Functioning, Life Satisfaction and Attitudes towards Marriage

These correlations are depicted in Table 2. Attitudes toward marriage were positively correlated with self-differentiation ($r = .079, p = .030$), family functioning ($r = .200, p < .001$), and life satisfaction ($r = .341, p < .001$). Thus, higher scores on attitudes toward marriage imply higher self-differentiation levels, more efficient family functioning, and greater life satisfaction. Since self-differentiation was positively correlated with family functioning ($r = .642, p < .001$) and life satisfaction ($r = .445, p < .001$), higher self-differentiation levels implies more efficient family functioning and greater life satisfaction.

3.4 Factors Influencing Attitudes towards Marriage

Stepwise multiple regression analysis was performed to identify factors affecting attitudes toward marriage among university students in Korea. Demographic variables included gender, age, school year, religion, number of family members, parents' marital status, and monthly household income. Variables also included self-differentiation, family functioning, and life satisfaction. Among demographic characteristics, gender (male = 0), school year (freshman = 0), religion (none = 0), and parents' marital status (married = 0) were entered as dummy variables.

The prediction model containing five of the ten predictors was reached in five steps without removing variables. The model was statistically significant ($F(5, 753) = 30.004, p < .001$), and accounted for approximately 16.1% of the variance of depression ($R^2 = .166$, Adjusted $R^2 = .161$).

Coefficients obtained for the five variables were as follows: life satisfaction $\beta = .310, p < .001$; gender $\beta = -.144, p < .001$; age $\beta = .106, p = .002$; self-differentiation $\beta = -.153, p < .001$; and family functioning $\beta = .110, p = .010$ (Table 3).

Table 1. Differences in Attitudes toward marriage by demographic characteristics among the participants
(N = 759)

Characteristics	Categories	n (%)		Attitude toward Marriage			
				Mean (SD)	t or F	Scheffé	
Gender	Male	301	(39.7)	3.54 (.41)	6.235		
	Female	458	(60.3)	3.36 (.36)			(<.001)
Age (year)	≤ 20 ^a	197	(26.0)	3.35 (.37)	9.244	a, b < c, d	
	21 - 22 ^b	285	(37.5)	3.40 (.36)			(<.001)
	23 - 24 ^c	182	(24.0)	3.50 (.38)			
	≥ 25 ^d	95	(12.5)	3.56 (.44)			
School year	Freshman ^a	215	(28.3)	3.36 (.38)	4.078	a < d	
	Sophomore ^b	232	(30.6)	3.46 (.41)			(.007)
	Junior ^c	155	(20.4)	3.42 (.40)			
	Senior ^d	157	(20.7)	3.49 (.34)			
Religion	Protestant ^a	189	(24.9)	3.44 (.36)	3.950	c > e	
	Catholic ^b	48	(6.3)	3.43 (.50)			(.004)
	Buddhist ^c	155	(20.4)	3.50 (.38)			
	None ^d	355	(46.8)	3.40 (.38)			
	Other ^e	12	(1.6)	3.18 (.35)			
Number of family members	≤ 3	107	(14.1)	3.46 (.39)	.448		
	4	420	(55.3)	3.42 (.40)			(.639)
	≥ 5	232	(30.6)	3.43 (.36)			
Parents' marital status	Married	630	(83.0)	3.43 (.38)	.200		
	Other (separated, divorce, bereavement)	129	(17.0)	3.42 (.40)			(.842)
Monthly household income (thousand won)	≤1,999	142	(18.7)	3.42 (.43)	.430		
	2,000~2,999	212	(27.9)	3.41 (.36)			(.732)
	3,000~3,999	217	(28.6)	3.44 (.38)			
	≥ 4,000	188	(24.8)	3.44 (.40)			

Table 2. Correlations among self-differentiation, family functioning, life satisfaction and attitudes toward marriage (N = 759)

	Attitudes toward marriage <i>r</i> (<i>p</i>)	Self-differentiation <i>r</i> (<i>p</i>)	Family function <i>r</i> (<i>p</i>)
Self-differentiation	.079 (.030)		
Family functioning	.200 (<.001)	.642 (<.001)	
Life satisfaction	.341 (<.001)	.445 (<.001)	.540 (<.001)

Table 3. Factors influencing attitudes toward marriage of South Korean university students (N = 759)

	B	β	R ²	Adj R ²	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
(Constant)	2.836				22.229	<.001
Life satisfaction	.251	.310	.116	.115	7.637	<.001
Gender	-.116	-.144	.142	.139	-4.144	<.001
Age	.040	.106	.152	.149	3.077	.002
Self-differentiation	-.147	-.153	.160	.156	-3.486	.001
Family functioning	.075	.110	.166	.161	2.345	.019

F (5, 753)=30.004, *p* < .001

4. Discussion

This study investigated self-differentiation, family functioning, life satisfaction, and attitudes toward marriage among Korean university students. There were significant differences in attitudes toward marriage by gender, age, school year, and religion. This finding is similar to previous studies wherein male participants and those reporting religious affiliations has more open-minded and positive attitudes toward marriage than the female participants and those without religious affiliations did^{5,24}. Among male students, 53% answered that they would definitely seek marriage in the future. However, only 18.8% of female students regarded marriage as essential²⁵. Additionally, there were gender differences, women felt that marriage was burdensome; housework, childbirth, and childcare were major reasons for choosing to remain unmarried. This reflects a trend wherein marriage is increasingly regarded as a choice rather than as

an essential life event as women become more educated and become a growing presence in the work force. In the present study, no significant differences were found in attitudes toward marriage in relation to monthly household income, although those earning over 3,000 thousand won had the highest scores. This was inconsistent with previous research that found that higher economic levels were associated with positive attitudes toward marriage²⁴. Research is needed to further understand the relationship between economic level and attitudes toward marriage among Korean university students.

In the present study, higher scores in attitudes toward marriage corresponded with higher scores in self-differentiation, family function, and life satisfaction. This is consistent with previous studies, where self-differentiation was related to more positive attitudes toward marriage¹²; higher perceived family functioning indicated more positive impressions of marriage²⁶, and those reporting greater life satisfaction had higher levels of emotional

stability⁵. Self-differentiation is an important concept in understanding interpersonal relationships. Those with high self-differentiation levels tend to have more flexible and independent thought. They also display better coping skills in stressful events and act autonomously²⁷. Typically, the most important factor in deciding to marry has been individual choice, even though environmental factors play a role. Intrinsic values can also affect the choice to marry. Individuals with higher self-differentiation levels are regarded as being more mature and introspective. Thus, higher self-differentiation is related to greater marriage satisfaction, more affirmative communication, and better problem solving skills among family members and couples¹².

Because values and attitudes toward marriage are formed through exposure within the family, a healthy atmosphere in the family of origin is essential to successful marriage education²⁶. Family members, particularly children, can be affected by the parents' marital life, including the family's culture and parental relationships. However, some studies suggest that thoughts and values about marriage, held prior to marriage, are unrelated to the actual experience of marriage because the extent and nature of family cohesion and adaptability differ in these two situations²³. It is therefore necessary to conduct longitudinal studies to examine how the relationship between attitudes toward marriage and family functioning changes before and after marriage.

Happiness reflects a mental or emotional state of well-being, characterized by positive or pleasant emotions. Therefore, life satisfaction is determined by cognitive evaluation—consciousness of the value of one's life²⁸. Life satisfaction refers to the way an individual perceives their past, and feels about the future. It contributes significantly to mental health and is related to positive emotions experienced in daily life²⁹. Higher levels of life satisfaction are also related to more stable emotional states. Individuals who experience greater satisfaction with daily life show positive attitudes toward marriage⁵. Thus, it is necessary to provide university students with self-growth programs to facilitate the development of a positive self-image and improve their subjective experience of satisfaction in order to improve attitudes toward marriage.

This study found that life satisfaction, gender, age, self-differentiation, and family functioning influenced attitudes toward marriage among Korean university students, explaining 16.8% of the total variance. The results

supported prior findings, indicating that positive attitudes toward marriage were related to higher levels of life satisfaction and self-differentiation^{5,28}, more efficient family functioning, and male gender roles. Further, lower socio-economic level may be related to delayed marriages²⁶. However, the present study's findings differed from previous studies wherein educational level was found to influence attitudes toward marriage. Thus, considering that parents' economic status could influence the timing of their children's marriages³⁰, future research clarifying these factors is necessary.

This study found that life satisfaction was the most significant factor influencing attitudes toward marriage. Greater life satisfaction leads to subjective happiness and psychological stability, potentially influencing self-actualization and positive value formation. Moreover, self-differentiation occurs through continuous long-term family interaction and parents' gender roles affect its development. Thus, family education is necessary to improve the quality of parent-child relationships. As with implicit understanding about family education through socialization, marriage education deals with emotionally charged issues that are not satisfactorily addressed at home, and should not be ignored by family-centered professionals only because it is emotionally charged, or otherwise difficult to change³¹. However, most studies on marriage education conducted with couples use marital contentment or separation rates as outcome variables³². The results suggest that marriage education should be conducted with adolescents as well as young adults in community centers and schools.

This study had several limitations. First, the convenience sample from Daegu and Gyeongsangbuk-do may not have been an adequate representation of the target population. A survey of Korean university students across other provinces would allow us to generalize the results. This study does not include relevant variables such as personality traits or perceived parent-child relationships. Nonetheless, by examining the relationship between self-differentiation, family functioning, life satisfaction, and attitudes toward marriage among Korean university students, this study has provided basic data that may be used to better understand and facilitate the development of positive attitudes toward marriage among Korean university students. The provision of couple- and family education programs would aid positive attitude formation toward marriage and improve family functioning among Korean university students.

5. Conclusion

This study attempted to investigate Korean university students' attitudes toward marriage and related factors. Life satisfaction, gender, age, and family functioning were found to predict attitudes toward marriage. In order to improve positive attitudes toward marriage among Korean university students, it is necessary to provide them with marriage education programs that increase life satisfaction and improve self-differentiation and the quality of family relationships. These programs must be tailored to the participants' attitudinal stance toward marriage and to their level of self-differentiation.

This study focused solely on university students studying in the Daegu and Gyeongsangbuk-do regions in South Korea. Therefore, future research needs to investigate attitudes toward marriage with a wider population, including adolescents, couples preparing for marriage, and married couples.

6. References

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