

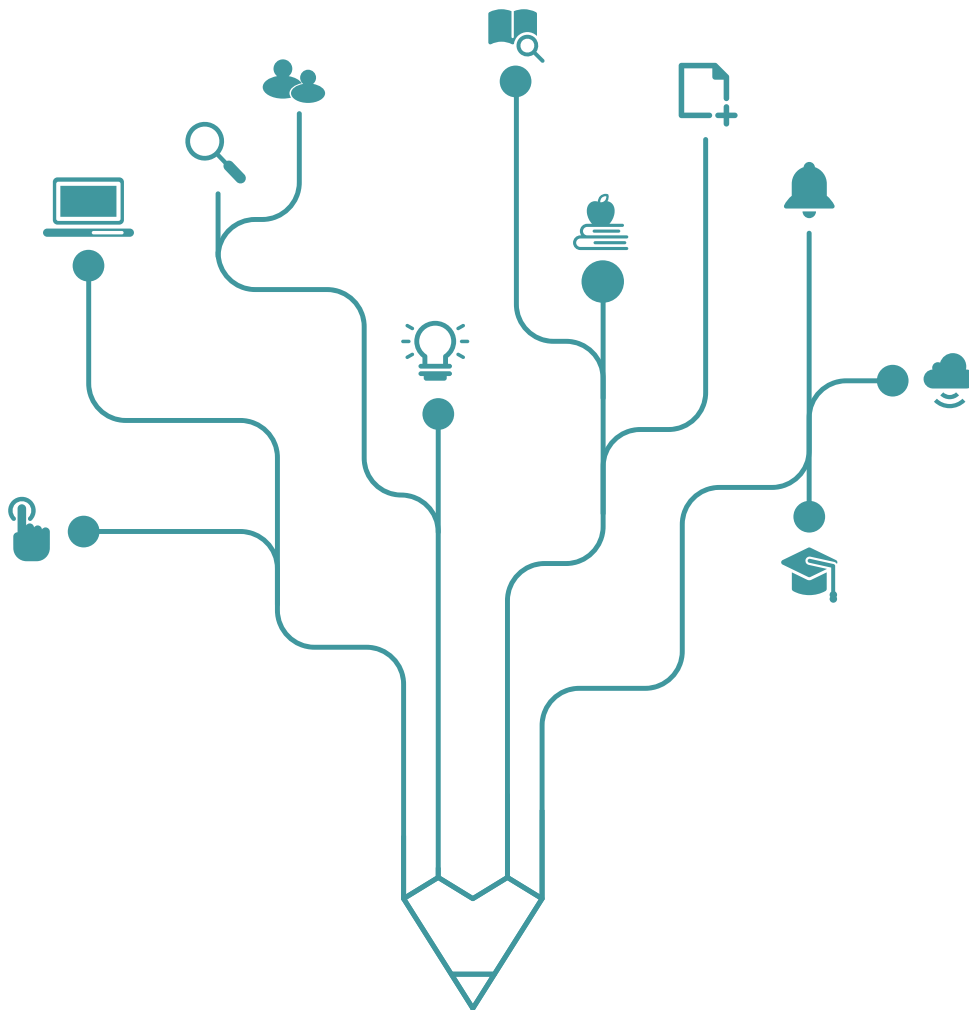
Spousal Relationship, Gender and COVID -19 Outbreak in South Korea

Seulki Choi (KDI School of Public Policy and Management)

Eunhee Joung (Korea Institute for Health and Social Affairs)

Saeun Choi (Korea National University of Education)

Kwangman Ko (East Tennessee State Univeresity)



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Abstract

Drawing upon the Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) model, this study examines how people in South Korea perceived their spousal relationships under COVID-19 outbreak. Analyzing 720 married respondents with a young child from the Survey on Koreans' set of values regarding marriage and family in the COVID-19 era conducted on February 2021, we found that the majority of the respondents did not experience any change, and this was more pronounced in men. Infection concern and income decrease were universal factors causing negative influence on spousal relationships. Meanwhile, results of this study show sharing housework was important to women's perceived relationship quality, which may reflect the gendered division of housework in South Korea. It implies that the threats from outside like COVID-19 fail to hurt spousal relationship in South Korea. On the contrary, it makes the relationship stronger.

Keywords: COVID-19, Gender, Spousal Relationship, PPCT

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic and follow-up measures, such as lockdown, are expected to influence family lives including spousal relationship changes. Interestingly, the changes have been in the opposite direction from country to country. In South Korea, the divorce rate has decreased during the COVID-19 pandemic. On the contrary, in the cases of the United States and UK, the divorce rates have increased during this period. Several countries have reported that the pandemic has had a significant impact on marital relationships through the result of divorce, but relatively a few studies have been conducted empirically to explore the changes in marital relationship satisfaction. Drawing upon the Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) model (Bronfenbrenner, 2005), this study examines how people in South Korea perceived their spousal relationships under COVID-19 outbreak, with the ecological systems theory's perspective, while South Korea is known for its successful quarantine management based on Testing-Tracing-Treatment strategy (Park et al., 2020).

Theoretical framework and Literature Review

This study is based on the Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) model by Bronfenbrenner by modifying his own ecological systems theory. P refers to proximal process as the primary and direct interaction between person and immediate environment. Proximal process occurs on the daily basis over a long period of time. For example, what couples do together, take care of their children and interact with them is the proximal process.

Person refers to a personal characteristic that an individual has in each social situation. the personal characteristics that individuals bring with them into any social situation. Tudge et al. (2009) explains Person with three categories. Demand characteristics such as age, gender, and race are an 'immediate stimulus to another person'. Resource characteristics are not an immediate but social, emotional or material resources, such as skills, educational experiences, home ownership, SES, and so on. Lastly, force characteristics refers to variations in terms of temperament, motivation, persistence. Context refers to four interrelated systems which are based on Bronfenbrenner's original ecological systems: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. Time refers to the aspect of time inherent in each system. During the COVID-19, for example, the increase in shared time in family or the decrease in family income pandemic reflects the time of the PPCT theory.

The COVID-19 pandemic is heavily affecting overall psychological well-being and relationship quality worldwide. Many preliminary studies have explored the effects of the how the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown on changes in family lives and individuals' well-being similarly or differently across social and cultural contexts. Panzeri et al. (2020) collected data from 124 Italian who were living with a partner during the lockdown to explore a couple's sexual life. The majority of participants are females (73%) and ranged from age 23 to 60. Findings show that most couples did not perceive any differences in their sexual desire, arousal, organism, and sexual activity frequency. Also, the negative effects of the COVID-19 on couple relationships pandemic as an external stressor are more likely to be exacerbated when the couple is vulnerable context in terms of social class, minority status, and etc. (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021). Using two points data (right after the national lockdown; after the lockdown ended) from Romanian couples, Turliuc, M. N., &

Candel(2021) also found that that couples with lower SES are more prone to greater stress and lower levels of marital satisfaction.

The COVID-19 pandemic did not necessarily negatively affect family relations. When there is a threat from outside, it may raise a sense of bond among people inside. Using the European Social Survey, Kim and Kim (2017) show that the terrorism of Charlie Hebdo shooting made French residents develop more favorable attitudes towards trust for people. Kye and Hwang (2020) also show that social trust in South Korea has improved during COVID-19 using the Korean Academic Multimode Open Survey conducted between March 24 and April 25 in 2020.

Interestingly, spousal relationship overall satisfaction increased in S. Korea. According to the National Survey on Families in Korea, 57% of the respondents said they were satisfied with marital relationships in 2020 and 50.2% in 2015, up 5.8%p. Absolute time to spend in household labor, child care, and family leisure has increased in Korea during the COVID-19 outbreak. The pandemic led to a change in the lifestyle of Korea, which was notorious for its long working hours. According to Chin et al. (2020) drawn from the data of 627 married Korean, household work and childcare time increased significantly before and during COVID-19, whereas no significant changes in sleep, work, and personal leisure time. In addition, the perceived burden of household work and child care increased significantly during COVID-19. 33% and 47% of Respondents responded that housework and childcare have become harder than before COVID-19. Authors conclude that “COVID-19 changed the meaning of home from a space to sleep to a space for all daily activities including work, education, and leisure in S. Korea” (Lee, Chin, & Sung, 2020). As such, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic as external stressor has a great influence on couple relationships, which can be different from culture to culture, because each country has different quarantine rules and norms in couple relationships, and so on.

The COVID-19 pandemic, as a powerful external stressor, has affected intimate relationships, and it seems that this effect differs according to gender. There are several possible reasons for the gender difference. Panzeri et al. (2020) suggest that some female participants who perceive a decrease in sexual desire, arousal, and orgasm may be caused by anxiety, lack of privacy, and distress that women experienced during the lockdown. In other words, the negative impact of the pandemic on couple relationships are greater for women due to the tendency of women to react more sensitively to external stress. On the other hand, there have been studies that the gender difference in couple satisfaction comes from fairness in the couple's division of labor (Coltrane & Shih, 2010). In this regard, changes in the amount and pattern of housework due to the COVID-19 outbreak and lockdown would require couples to adapt anew and consequently affect couple relationships such as marital satisfaction. This process of finding a new equilibrium in relation to the division of housework can eventually act as a secondary stressor for couples.

In East Asian cultures, these gender differences may be particularly pronounced. Using data from the 2006 Family Module of the East Asian Social Survey, Qian and Sayer (2016) examines the associations among divisions of housework, gender ideology, and of marital satisfaction in East Asia. This study shows the variations within East Asia. Among four countries, China, Japan, Taiwan, and Korea, relative share of housework was negatively associated with marital satisfaction for both men and women in couples only in Korea. On the other hand, the division of housework was only significantly associated with marital satisfaction of Japanese husbands and Taiwanese wives. In the Study of married Korean, Chin et al. (2020) found that 43% of women and 24% of men reported the increases in housework and 64% of women and 36% of men reported the increased in childcare related work. Compared to men, women had a higher rate of experiencing an increase in the amount of housework and childcare related labor.

In sum, the pattern of the COVID-19 pandemic affecting intimate relationships varies across cultures. In case of S. Korea, the pandemic has increased the time that people spend at home, such as housework, childcare, and family leisure. However, what remains a gap in previous research is about the effects of the prolonged COVID-19 pandemic on couple relationships in Korea. It is also not known whether there is a gender gap in this effect in the Korean situation. Accordingly, the research questions of this study are as follows.

Research Questions

1. What factors make the married couple in South Korea perceive their marital relationship has changed during the COVID-19 outbreak?
2. How do the factors affecting changes in a marital relationship differ by gender?

Data and Methods

We will analyze the data from the Survey on Koreans' set of values regarding marriage and family in the COVID-19 era (hereafter 'the Korea Value Survey'). It has a nationally representative sample of 2,000 Korean individuals, aged between 25 and 49, stratified by age, sex, and region. Samples are selected randomly from the Embrain internet panel, which is one of the big internet panels in Korea, consisting of approximately 1,580,000 as of June 2022. 'The Korea Value Survey' was conducted in February 5-10, 2021 through online. To study spousal relationship with the child care responsibility, the study sample are limited to married respondents who have spouses with at least one child under age 18. The final analytical sample size becomes 710.

Dependent variable is a change in spousal relationship during the COVID-19 pandemic, Respondents are asked to answer the question, “ Has your relationship with your spouse changed after the COVID-19 pandemic?” by 1) Worsened considerably 2) Worsened slightly 3) Not changed / more or less the same 4) Improved slightly 5) Improved considerably.

The independent variables can be grouped by 4 categories based on PPCT theory. Process consists of 5 variables – shared housework, shared child care, age, marriage years and education level. Shared housework is measured by a composite of several household tasks – preparing a meal, washing dishes, cleaning the house, garbage disposal/recycling, and laundry. Shared child care is measured by a dummy whether the responsibility is shared with spouse. If there is more than one child, the respondent are asked to mark based on the case of the youngest. Education level is also a dummy variable (1=4 year college diploma or higher, 0=2or3 year college diploma or less). Person consists of 5 variables – subjective SES, income adequacy, homeownership, youngest child age, and dual-income family. Subjective SES is measured by the question, “If we were to say that the lowest level of socioeconomic status was 1 and the highest level was 9, where do you think you belong?”. Income adequacy is measured by the question, “How well do you manage on your household income? I mean the money your household has every month net – that is after the deduction of social contributions and taxes in total.” Context consists of 3 categories – residential area, infection concern, and income decrease. Residential area is a dummy variable (1=lived in urban area, DONG, 0= lived in rural area, EUP or MYEON). Infection concern is asked by the question, “How much do you worry about whether you and your family members get infected with COVID-19?”. Income decrease is also asked by the question, “Has your gross monthly household income changed after the COVID-19 pandemic?”. Time is measured by one variable – time at home increase which is asked by the question, “I now spend more time at home after the COVID-19 outbreak”.

Results

The descriptive results of the change or continuity in the couple relationship during the COVID-19 pandemic are shown in Table 1. Results show that more than 70% experienced no change in their spousal relationships during the COVID-19 outbreak. A total of 15.1% of them reported relationship improvement, while 12.6% reported relationship deterioration. Descriptive statistics show that men were a bit more likely to report positive change, but women were prone to report negative change. A 16.2% of male respondents reported relationship improvement, while 13.9% reported relationship improvement. As for relationship deterioration, 10.9% of male respondents said the relationship had deteriorated, and 14.8% of female respondents did.

[Table 1] *Change of the Spousal Relationship during the COVID-19 pandemic*

	Women (n = 325)	Men (n = 395)	Total (N = 720)
Worsened Considerably	4.3%	1.8%	2.9%
Worsened slightly	10.5%	9.1%	9.7%
Not changed / more or less the same	71.4%	72.9%	72.2%
Improved slightly	10.8%	13.9%	12.5%
Improved considerably	3.1%	2.3%	2.6%

Source: 'the Korea Value Survey'

Results of the hierarchical regression analysis for both female and male groups are presented in Table 2 and Table 3, respectively. In Model 1, the *Process* variables (shared housework and share childcare) were included, and the effect of shared work was statistically significant ($b=.06$, $p<.001$). The more shared housework between couples, the better the marital relationship was reported by female respondents. In Model 2, the *Person* variables

were in. The higher the level of education, the worse the marital relationship was reported for women during this period, whereas the better the SES, the better the economic level of income or homeownership, the better the marital relationship for women respondents. In Model 3, the *Context* variables were included, and the greater the concern about COVID-19, the worse the marital satisfaction. In Model 4, the *Time* variables were included, and the more experienced an income decrease, the worse the marital relationship was for female respondents.

[Table 2] *Results of relationship change with spouse/ partner: Female respondents (n=395)*

variables		Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
		B (SE)	B (SE)	B (SE)	B (SE)
Process	Shared housework	.06** (.00)	.06** (.01)	.06* (.01)	.05* (.01)
	Shared child care	-.05 (.33)	-.05 (.23)	-.04 (.35)	-.04 (.38)
	Age		-.01 (.44)	-.01 (.46)	-.01 (.61)
	Marriage years		-.00 (.94)	-.00 (.92)	.00 (.85)
	Education level		-.17* (.04)	-.17* (.04)	-.16* (.04)
Person	Subjective SES		.08* (.02)	.08* (.02)	.05 (.14)
	Income adequacy		.16* (.02)	.13 (.07)	.09 (.19)
	Homeownership		.16 (.09)	.17 (.07)	.15 (.09)
	Youngest child age			.00 (.97)	-.01 (.84)
	Dual-income family			.11 (.17)	.10 (.23)
Context	Residential area			-.20 (.09)	-.18 (.12)
	Infection concern			-.14* (.01)	-.15** (.01)
	Income decrease				-.21*** (.00)
Time	Time at home increase				.01 (.73)
		3.15*** (.00)	3.49*** (.00)	2.89*** (.00)	2.14*** (.00)
cons		0.03	0.10	0.14	0.18

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Results of the hierarchical regression analysis for male respondents are shown in Table 3. In Model 1, where the *Process* variables were used, no significant effect was found. The more shared housework between couples, the better the marital relationship was reported by female respondents. In Model 2 where the *Person* variables were included, only the level of subjective SES was statistically significant. Male respondents who showed better SES were more likely to report the improvement of marital relationship. In Model 3, the *Context* variables were included, and the greater the concern about COVID-19, the worse the marital satisfaction. In Model 4 where the *Time* variables were included, male respondents who experienced a more decrease in income were less likely to report the improvement of the marital relationship.

[Table 3] *Results of relationship change with spouse/ partner: Male respondents (n=325)*

<i>variables</i>		Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
		B (SE)	B (SE)	B (SE)	B (SE)
<i>Process</i>	Shared housework	.00 (.77)	-.00 (.97)	-.01 (.58)	-.01 (.50)
	Shared child care	.00 (.94)	-.01 (.74)	.01 (.82)	.00 (.98)
	Age		-.01 (.05)	-.02 (.10)	-.01 (.05)
	Marriage years		.00 (.70)	.00 (.69)	.00 (.71)
	Education level		-.02 (.80)	-.03 (.69)	-.05 (.50)
<i>Person</i>	Subjective SES		.07** (.01)	.06* (.02)	.04 (.10)
	Income adequacy		.04 (.47)	.03 (.64)	.01 (.87)
	Homeownership		-.10 (.19)	-.09 (.23)	-.09 (.23)
	Youngest child age			.04 (.37)	.05 (.29)
	Dual-income family			.06 (.38)	.08 (.24)
<i>Context</i>	Residential area			-.01 (.96)	.01 (.91)
	Infection concern			-.15*** (.00)	-.13** (.00)

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