

Classifying Unmarried Individuals in Japan: The Intersection of Economic Base, Intimacy Base, and Marriage Desirability

Miho Iwasawa,* Shohei Yoda*

* National Institute of Population and Security Research, Tokyo

Abstract

To reassess the circumstances of the never-married and how they have changed over time, this paper categorizes the never-married population aged 25-34 into four distinct types, based on their economic base (regular employment/self-employment), intimacy base (having a romantic partner), and intention to marry, which reflects their perception of marriage desirability. We use nationally representative surveys conducted between 1982 and 2021. The never-married individuals were categorized into four groups: “precursor,” “emancipation,” “deprivation,” and “withdrawal”, with notable educational differences observed. The increase in the number of never-married people since the 1980s began with an increase in “precursor,” which is characterized by the possession of two bases and the intention to marry (postponed marriage). Since the 1990s there has been an increase in “deprivation” due to a lack of economic base. Since 2010, the number of individuals classified as “withdrawal” -- those lacking both economic and intimacy bases, and with no intention to marry -- has risen sharply, contributing to the increase in the unmarried population around 2020. By educational background, the percentage of “withdrawal” was higher among those with a high school education or less, for both men and women.

Keywords: marriage decline, secure economic base, intimacy base, marriage intention

Introduction

Statistical evidence indicates a significant rise in the percentage of never-married individuals in Japan over the past several decades. However, there are mixed views on how to interpret this increase. To reassess the circumstances of the never-married and how they have changed over time, this paper categorizes the never-married population aged 25–34 into four distinct types, based on their economic base (regular employment or self-employment), intimacy base (having a romantic partner), and their intention to marry, which reflects their perception of marriage desirability.

Variables

Drawing on Dixon’s (1971) classic theory of change in marriage, the prevalence of marriage is influenced by three factors: feasibility of marriage, availability of a potential spouse, and desirability of

marriage. We apply this framework to individual behavior in the transition to marriage. Feasibility of marriage is conceptualized as having an economic base, availability of potential spouse is represented as an intimacy base and desirability of marriage is reinterpreted as the willingness to marry.

An economic base is defined by whether the unmarried persons' employment status is regular or self-employment. An intimacy base is defined by whether they have a romantic partner. The desirability of marriage is measured by whether they have intend to marry.

We classified never-married individuals into four groups. Those possessing an economic base, an intimacy base, and an intention to marry are labeled “precursors. Individuals with both an economic and intimacy base but lacking marriage intention are labeled as “emancipation. Those who have an intention to marry but lack any or both bases are designated as “deprivation,” and those without either base or marriage intention are designated as “withdrawal. We also examined changes in the composition of these groups over the past 40 years and explored how they vary by the educational attainment, distinguishing between “junior college graduates or higher” and “high school graduates or lower.”

Data

We utilize individual data from the Japanese National Fertility Surveys, conducted every five years by the Institute of Population and Social Security Research in Tokyo (IPSS), to capture changes in behaviors and attitudes regarding marriage and childbearing in Japan. The sixteenth survey was carried out in June 2021. The nationally representative sample includes 7,826 valid responses for unmarried men and women (response rate: 55.9%) and 6,834 valid responses for married women (response rate: 72.7%). Our analysis uses data from the 8th survey in 1982 through the 16th survey in 2021, focusing on never-married men and women aged 25-34.

Results

The increase in never-married individuals since the 1980s began with a rise in the "precursor" category, characterized by the possession of two bases and the intention to marry (postponed marriage). Since the 1990s, however, there has been a growing number of individuals classified as "deprivation", primarily due to a lack of economic base. Although the economic base constraint eased somewhat after 2010, there was a subsequent increase in “deprivation” due to a lack of intimacy base. During the same period, the number of "withdrawal" cases -- those lacking both bases and with no intention to marry-- rose sharply, contributing to the increase in unmarried individuals by around 2020. Throughout the observation period, the "emancipation" group remained rare. When examining the results by educational attainment, we found a significant rise in “deprivation” among both men and women in the “high school graduate or less” group.

Attitudes toward marriage and childbearing, as well as the barriers preventing marriage, differed across the type of never-married individuals. This suggests that employment measures, housing security, work-life balance policies, and caregiving support may help remove some obstacles to marriage.

However, certain types of never-married individuals are more difficult to address through direct socioeconomic intervention. Thus, it may be necessary to adapt social institutions to the likelihood that the marriage rate will continue to decline to some extent in the future.

Reference

Dixon, R. B. (1971) "Explaining Cross-Cultural Variations in Age at Marriage and Proportions Never Marrying," *Population Studies*, 25, pp.215-233.

Iwasawa, M. and Yoda, S. (2024) "Emancipation, Deprivation, or Withdrawal? Classification of Japanese Never Married Singles, 1982-2021, *Journal of Population Problems* (Jinko Mondai Kenkyu) Vol.80, No.2, pp.161-185. (in Japanese)

National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, (2022), *Sixteenth Japanese National Fertility Survey: Summary of Results*
(https://www.ipss.go.jp/ps-doukou/e/doukou16/Nfs16_gaiyoEng.html)

Table 1 Factors affecting the prevalence of marriage and the operationalization

		Factors affecting the prevalence of marriage		
		Economic base (Secure job)	Intimacy base (Intimate relationship)	Marriage desirability
Operationalization	Variables	Employment status	Relationships	Intention to marry
	Definition	Being in regular employment or self-employment (E/e)	Having a romantic partner (I/i)	Having an intention to marry (M/m)

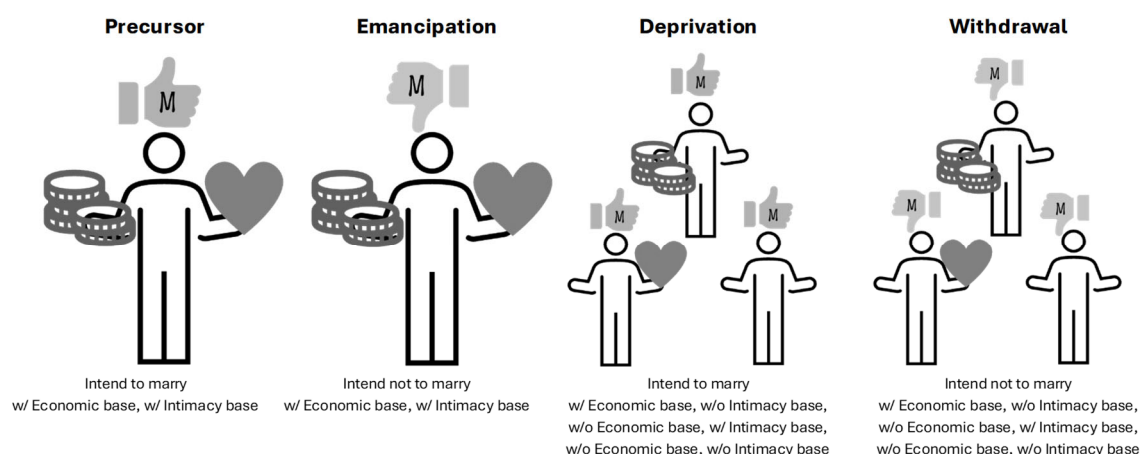


Figure 1 Four types of never-married individuals according to the possession of economic/intimacy base and intention to marry

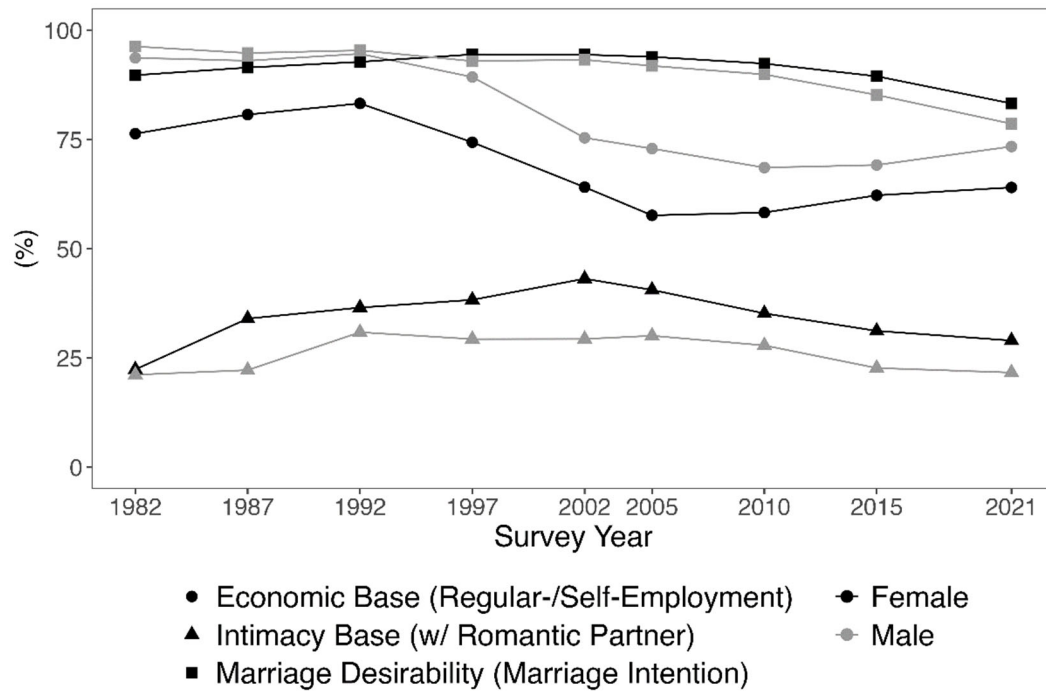


Figure 2 Trends in the possession of economic/intimacy base and intention to marry
Data: The National Fertility Surveys (National Institute of Population and Social Security, Tokyo)

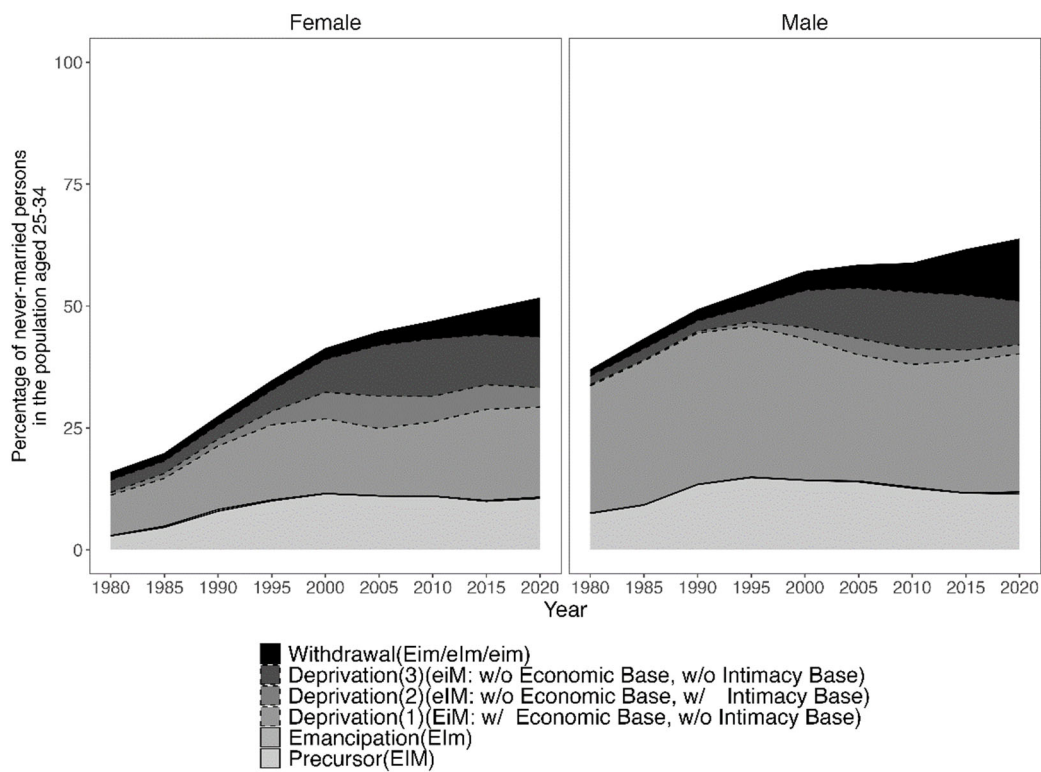


Figure 3 Proportion of never-married individuals in the population aged 25-34 based on census data and breakdown by the type of never-married
Data: The National Fertility Surveys (National Institute of Population and Social Security, Tokyo)