Unbending Gender, Marital Breakdown: How Gendered-Role Expectations Break Down Marriages in Korea

Yean-Ju Lee, University of Hawaii

Introduction

While numerous quantitative studies explored various “risk factors” of divorce across the societies, the sociological perspectives explaining the process of marital dissolution have come from a much smaller number of qualitative studies or even critical essays or from other disciplines, notably economics (e.g., Becker 1991; Cherlin 2009; Hackstaff 1999; Whitehead 1997). With the paucity of in-depth insights based on qualitative research, tons of findings from quantitative research have not been translated into any coherent theoretical models of marital dissolution. There exist few convincing theories to comprehend the ever-growing quantitative findings in a consistent manner. For example, a still dominating sociological perspective in the field, summarized in such terms as, “divorce culture” and “expressive divorce,” emphasizing the values of self-fulfillment and weak commitment to marriage, falls short of predicting the patterns of marital dissolution observed in recent decades. The perspective describes the historical development of cultural ideology taken place several decades ago, over the transition period from the first to the second half of the twentieth century; further, it was developed from philosophical conjectures rather than from rigorous social science research. Also, a framework developed by economists (Becker 1991), which is often converted into the exchange model in sociology, lacks key contextual components needed to go beyond a simple dichotomy of the families where “specialization and trading (specialization of roles by gender and trading their products between the spouses)” hold and the families violating the arrangement by the wife’s employment. Like the concept of “expressive divorce,” the economic model is more relevant to the social changes taken place decades ago. In urgent need are some new theoretical framework(s) that can accommodate family practices in recent decades, including the widening divorce (and marriage) divide by class.

Based on qualitative data from Korea, this study proposes a new comprehensive model explaining marital dissolution. The original purpose of the research was to explore how women were doing in contemporary Korean families, which witnessed a rapid rise in divorce incidence from one of the lowest levels among the OECD countries in the early 1990s to the world’s highest level by the mid 2000s despite the lingering cultural tradition of Confucianism. Based on the existing theoretical perspectives, the research was to explore the processes in which women (and men, for that matter) negotiate the relationships with their spouses and decide to leave the marriage in the given social context of Korea. An implicit assumption based on the broadly defined modernization theory, (including the concept of “expressive divorce,”) which emphasizes rising individualism accompanied with material affluence, was that the rising incidence of divorce is an outcome of improving women’s autonomy liberated from patriarchal oppression, in terms of both individualistic values and economic independence.

As the qualitative data cumulated and their analysis and interpretation proceeded, however, the paradigm of research shifted completely (to be elaborated below). Accordingly, the research goal was modified, from applying the existing perspectives to the believably unique context of Korea to devising a theoretical model reflecting the qualitative findings, which might be widely applicable across the societies. The remainder of this extended abstract discusses: data
sources and the ground theory method adopted for the research; main propositions of the theoretical model developed from the findings; a brief summary of the findings; and implications and applicability of the theory.

Data Sources and the Ground Theory Method

Divorcee cases used in this study are from three sources: (1) in-depth interviews by the author, (2) in-depth interviews by other researchers, reported in two published volumes (with the permit of the authors), and (3) court rulings publicly posted at the homepages of the Supreme Court Library and the five Family Courts located in populous cities across the regions, Seoul, Busan, Daegu, Daejun, and Kwangju. The total number of cases used for the analysis is 136, including 30, 15, and 91, from the three sources, respectively. The study adopted three criteria in selecting the cases: (1) couples divorced in their 40s or younger, i.e., childrearing ages, (2) divorces occurring roughly over the two decades between the early 1990s and the early 2010s, and (3) divorces of first marriages. The sample is restricted to childbearing ages for their greater consequences for the children’s wellbeing and hence for the society.

Although the sampling was, in principle, purposive, to secure the validity of the findings, the sampling pursued randomness: (1) by relying on the author’s personal networks, including friends, relatives, and colleagues, to find interviewees individually, instead of relying on any organizations of divorcees in case the members may have developed certain biases, (2) by interviewing all the persons introduced within the three criteria above, and (3) by including all the secondary interview cases and court rulings that meet the criteria. The author’s interviews were conducted over the years between 2006 and 2013; the secondary interviews were conducted during the few years before the volumes were both published in 2005; and selection from the Supreme Court Library (containing cases from all the courts in the country) and the Seoul Family Court was restricted to cases ruled between the mid 1990s to 2012, but the cases from the other Family Courts were ruled in 2008 or later, as those four Family Courts became independent from the corresponding District Courts in 2008. All interviews and rulings were in Korean and the author translated them into English.

Data from in-depth interviews and court rulings have different advantages and drawbacks. Only one spouse was interviewed in in-depth interviews; thus interview data lack the balanced views but contain rich information. Court rulings describe the detailed circumstances of the families and often contain narratives from both spouses, as they are needed for adjudication. Korea has two tracks of divorce procedure, mutual consent and court adjudication. In the former track, spouses are to submit a registration form (in recent years, with a few additional documents specifying post-divorce arrangements for childrearing and property division, with one to three months of waiting period) and a judge will confirm the truth of their consent in person at a court. A vast majority of divorces are based on this simple process of mutual consent. The remaining 15 to 20 percent of divorces go through the court process, where one spouse files for divorce against the defendant who does not agree to either divorce per se or to the terms of divorce. In the principle of protecting the “innocent” spouse, the court will grant a divorce only if the plaintiff is no more responsible than is defendant for marital breakup. This principle requires the courts to collect all the relevant information (often with the help of court investigators), and most court rulings provide relatively thick descriptions of marital trajectories. Thus, the court rulings contain many cases involving some obvious “faults” of one spouse, such as infidelity or abuse, but the analysis of this paper finds that the underlying marital dynamics leading to marital breakdown are virtually the same in court rulings and in interviewed cases.
This paper adopted the constructivist ground theory method while utilizing several typical interpretation strategies (Bryant and Charmaz 2011; Jaccard and Jacoby 2010; Ong 2012; Trent and Cho 2014). With no idea yet about the theoretical model to be developed, the author started in-depth interviews based on a semi-structured questionnaire, inquiring about the life experiences of the couples during the process of marital dissolution and gathering some additional information about personal and family backgrounds. Early interviews conducted by the author provided the groundwork for what later referred as the model of gendered-role expectations (GRE model); they depicted those husbands whose economic “failures” as breadwinners were rather obvious. The cases are grouped by the nature of the husband’s economic failures, from underemployment to financial mishandling to failing small-businesses. Those cases shed an important insight, suggesting that what initially triggers marital conflicts may be the husbands’ “hypermasculine” behaviors, conducted apparently in an attempt to restore the threatened self-identity, rather than constraints in material conditions per se. Interviewees did not use such words as “self-identity,” whether threatened or not. The author interpreted the interviewees’ narratives and linked them to the identity control theory from the symbolic interactionist literature (Burke and Stets 2009; Stets and Burke 2005; Stryker 1980).

The author’s interpretation of the narrations of the remaining cases from all three sources may be characterized as “analytic induction” and “constant comparison,” repeatedly verifying and modifying/expanding the GRE model to incorporate the wives’ identity controlling and to identify further variations in the husbands’ role perceptions. While the husbands’ identity is pretty much defined by the breadwinner role, interestingly, the wives’ role perceptions are more flexible and personal, defining either housewifery or full-time working as their “identity standard.” Some working wives seem to perceive they are overachievers not gaining what they deserve in their marriages whereas some housewives feel they are lagging behind the contemporary trend.

The behavioral responses to the perceived threats to self-identity often involve glitches of the implicit marital contract, which are countered by similar breaches by the spouse. Such long or short reciprocations of negativities result in relationship breakdown. In all, this paper identifies a dozen types of marital dynamics leading to marital breakdown (described in a later section). In this way, in addition to inductive and deductive reasoning, also used was “abductive reasoning,” a skill of the grounded theory method, where an explanatory hypothesis is repeatedly applied to the case after case to confirm its validity (Bryant and Charmaz 2011; Jaccard and Jacoby 2010; Ong 2012; Stinchcombe 1968).

Theoretical Model of Gendered-Role Expectations

The GRE model explaining the process of marital dissolution consists of two levels of arguments. At the higher level, the key argument concerns a conceptual distinction between the process of marital breakdown and the decision/act of leaving the marriage. The remaining propositions of the GRE model deal with the former, whereas the existing literature heavily focuses on the latter while not making such a conceptual distinction. Although distinguishing the two processes with quantitative data may be challenging, such conceptual clarification is crucial for the reasons that some covariates of marital dissolution may have conflicting effects on the two processes (thus, if not making the distinction, the overall effects may be underestimated) and, more importantly, that researchers may attribute the observed effects of a covariate to the wrong process. Research routinely discusses the act (or propensity) of leaving as the key pathway to divorce, as shown in the term, “expressive divorce.” With such a premise, one may
attribute the divorce divide by class, observed in recent years, to a greater propensity to leave the marriage among people of lower socioeconomic status. The danger of making a misleading conclusion is high if the norms against divorce have become sufficiently weak across the board regardless of the socioeconomic status (thus, propensity of leaving is no longer predictive of divorce) while growing economic inequality in the society breaks down marriages of lower economic strata. The narratives from the interviewees in Korea were all about how their relationships had broken down, and for most of those divorcees the divorce came rather naturally and remaining in marriage was not a viable option.

Three interrelated lower-level propositions explain the process of relationship breakdown. First, any spouse who perceives a gap between the normative spousal roles expected for the gender and the actual roles performed by the self will feel threats to his/her self-identity and will engage in some behaviors in an attempt to restore his/her self-identity, which often glitches the implicit marital contract. This proposition is an application of the identity control theory (Burke and Stets 2009; Stets and Burke 2005), where it postulates that normative gender roles comprise one’s identity standard. Second, the normative spousal roles are gendered (this is why the model refers to “gendered-role” expectations) in that the husbands are expected to be the breadwinners under any circumstances whereas the prescription for the wives’ roles is flexible, from housewifery to fulltime work. This conceptualization is contrary to the usual approach to gender roles based on the division of labor by gender. As such, wives’ choice of the identity standard is personalized, which also means that their role perceptions can be paradoxical: for example, working wives may perceive themselves as overachievers (in reference to housewifery) while housewives may perceive themselves as lagging behind the social trend (in reference to women with careers). Despite the possibility of such paradoxical role perception, role flexibility implies that wives are generally less likely to feel threat to their self-identity, thus less likely to initiate glitches with the marital contract. The third proposition describes marital trajectories after any spouse feels threats to the self-identity. The behaviors intended to restore the self-identity that violate the marital contract can be grouped into two types: self-indulgence (such as, infidelity, gaming/gambling, alcohol consumption, shopping spree, etc.) or controlling of the spouse (such as, physical or verbal abuse, various demands beyond the spousal capacity/willingness, etc.). These initial misbehaviors cause counter-behaviors and the reciprocations of those deeds break down the relationships.

To view the three propositions differently, these marital dynamics represent the actors’ “doing gender” within the parameter of marriage (West and Zimmerman 1987). Those identity perceptions and accompanied behavioral responses are all part of routine daily interactional activities. In the GRE model, there is ample room for personal variations in the pathways that the marriages may take, but the central argument here is that marital relationships break down in daily interactions while spouses “do gender.”

Findings: Ten Types of Marital Dynamics Leading to Marital Breakdown

Based on the theoretical framework, this paper identity a dozen types of marital dynamics leading to marital breakdown, classified by whose, either the husband’s or the wife’s, role perception triggered marital conflicts and the circumstances of those role perceptions, including the occupational or employment status of the perceiver. Briefly introduced below are six types where the husband’s role perception was the issue and four types where the wife’s role perception triggered marital breakdown.
**Underemployment:** In these cases, interviewees were the wives of relatively young husbands who experienced difficulties in staying employed. The men were high school graduates and had worked at the time of marriage at various manual jobs that required hard physical labor yet paid only modest wages. These young husbands worked for only a few years before voluntarily quitting their jobs, according to their wives, for no good reasons, but apparently due to their hopeless working conditions. Most of them engaged in similar types of jobs repeatedly, but the work did not last. The stories that these wives recounted are surprisingly similar to one another. With their unemployment, the husbands had a plenty of spare time and spent it mostly in front of the computer, playing computer games, chatting with women, or doing on-line, or doing off-line gambling and/or drinking. In most cases, the wife left the marriage, but a couple husbands started new relationships.

*Aspirations without Means (Trap of Easy Loans):* Another group of husbands pursued financial aspirations that were doomed to fail. The interviewees were again the wives. Their college-educated white-collar husbands were short of the fund to provide the aspired middle-class lifestyle. They obtained loans, either to cover living expenses, investments, or personal expenditures, and the debts got out of control over time. These middle-class men aspired to live the lifestyle that their realities did not allow and they took the shortcut, hoping for a good luck instead of enduring the compromised self-identities with humble lifestyles. By the time these wives found out, it was too late. The wives said if only they knew about the loans earlier, they could have done something to save the husbands and the marriage.

**Untimely Retirement:** One college-educated husband had worked for many years in a large construction company when he was sent to a European country to supervise a branch office. When the economy slowed down globally after a few years, the company asked him to return but the family decided to stay there and he quit the job. Since then, it was a downward spiral. For a man who had been in a managerial position for many years, starting from scratch (opening a retail store and dealing with customers in a lowly position in a foreign country) was a fat dream. He relied on his wife for every little chore. He began staying home while his wife was working, often drinking or computer gaming, etc. When she came home, he often yelled at and assaulted her, increasingly severely over time. His behaviors were no different from those young less-educated underemployed men. The wife said the divorce was necessary to support the two adolescent children, not bothered any longer by the husband who was a ruined man by then.

*Provider Angst, Small Business Men:* Beside irregular work schedules, small business has additional features endangering marriages. These husbands have hard times to keep the small businesses afloat given the context in the country where 80 percent of newly established small businesses close within five years. What links this business insecurity directly to poor marital relationships is the unclear boundary between the business and the family finances, which makes the husband alert about consumptions on the family side, i.e., living expenses, which are often managed by the wife. At the same time, there is an ample room for the wife to get involved in the mom-and-pop type small business, raising the issue of “control” between the spouses. For example, one husband raised an issue regarding the use of a credit card that he issued to his wife for living expenses years ago. As the business slowed down, he interrogated her for her every little expenditure and eventually accused her of secretly setting aside the money. Another doctor husband who opened his own clinic had a similar issue. Their arguments over her interference with the management of the clinic and her household expenditures (excessive to the husband’s eyes) resulted in a divorce in about five years.
Provider Angst, Lower Middle-Class Men: A dozen cases of judicial divorces collectively form a type, with the husbands of lower middle-class positions with relatively stable jobs who exerted strong controls over their wives regarding their household managements. To the views of these husbands, their wives’ mismanagement of the households made their lives so much harder, or did not help at all, which gave some husbands rationales to assault their wives verbally or physically. For example, one husband asked the wife to bring the children to the public library every day during the winter and summer breaks, so that they could save the expenses for heating or air conditioning. Another husband complained to his wife, for her not caring for him and not being considerate of his difficulty with his work life.

Masculinity Defense: The husband’s defense of their masculinity can be a lot subtler than the hyper-masculine behaviors. In these cases, college-educated husbands initiated the divorce criticizing various personal traits of the wife, roughly put, for not being feminine or proper enough (i.e., not sexy, untidy, non-amiable, having explosive anger spells, and/or unable to perform housekeeping, if not outright contemptuous of their husbands). These husbands depended on their wives supposedly temporarily at certain points of their career paths, during the training period or in the process of switching jobs. Apparently the frustration felt by the husbands and their spouses somehow pushed their imperfect marriages to fall. Several court rulings show similar patterns: well-educated husbands were not successful in acquiring social prestige or earning to the level they expected, and the husbands either filed for divorce or totally withdrew from their marriages causing divorce.

Resourceful Women’s Paradoxical Role Perceptions: The society allows a whole spectrum of choices for what wives may do. Considering the housewifery as the role standard, some stably employed wives or wealthy none-working wives perceive that they are overachievers (as compared to housewifery) and do not gain from the marriage what they deserve. They feel they earned a right to transgress the marital contract. What makes such perceptions differ from the notion of pursuing personal fulfillment (as the term “expressive divorce” suggests) is the fact that these wives violate the marital contract seemingly without any plan to leave their marriages and also that such paradoxical perception originates from the ideology of traditional gender division of labor. More than a dozen divorces in the sample are caused by those resourceful women with, presumably, such paradoxical role perceptions, engaging in shopping sprees (for her or for her children) for luxury goods perhaps believing her earnings are her own; extramarital affairs; making extreme demands to the husband; interfering with the husband’s workplace matters. Some of these cases were confounded with in-law conflicts or other existing marital problems, but for others apparently without any such issues. Similar paradoxical role perceptions were observed among wives who were not working but wealthy with inheritances from their parents or even with the properties transferred from their husbands.

Housewife Depression: While working wives’ paradoxical perception of gender roles anchors on the ideology of gender division of labor, some fulltime housewives show mixed role identities. Some young housewife interviewees had doubts about their worth as a person, in contemporary Korea where noticeable progresses have taken place in women’s occupational status. They easily gave up upon their marriages, not showing much will power or confidence to navigate their marital issues, for example, raised by the husband’s small-business troubles and related minor breaches of the marital contract. They said they just did not want to “try any more” to maintain the marriage even though their husbands were willing to try to restore the marriage.
Women’s Search for Matriarchal Marriage: A few cases were exceptional in that wives defined their gender roles radically differently from the social norms. One case shows the wife’s unusually strong solidarity with the members of her family of origin. She demanded her husband to merge their family with her family of origin, her mother and her two grown-up younger siblings. The proposal of her and her siblings was something like, his buying a small building with the fund from his parents, living together in one part of the building, and her siblings opening a cram school and a beauty salon in other parts of the building, etc. He outright refused, and she left home. The other is about a woman who entered the marriage with a promise not to bear a child for her personal preference. Her husband asked for her childbearing, and she left the marriage. These cases stood out for the wives’ attempt to define the terms of marriage on their own.

The Wife’s Expectation of Hypergamy: Hypergamy refers to a marriage in which the husband’s socioeconomic status is higher than the wife’s status and has long been a norm in Korea. In these cases, the relatively competent wives left their not-so-competent husbands, for no obvious reasons from the perspectives of the husbands. Given their marital trajectories, it seems most logical to assume that the marital breakdown is related to the wife’s unmet expectation of hypergamy. For example, in a couple owning a printing shop, the wife, who was a skillful computer technician and had been aggressive in business management, left the husband who took a more cautious approach, when the economic recession pushed their business to the brink. Another wife left the marriage when the husband took over the responsibility to support his parents and two younger siblings, who knows for how long, after his father’s business collapsed.

One may ask whether these wives believed that a divorce was for an enhanced future prospect or simply thought the marriage was not up to their standard. In fact, this question is applicable to virtually all divorced couples reported in the book, leading me to a theoretical model postulating simply “doing gender” in everyday lives while pursuing to maintain the self-identity, departing from the widely accepted modernization perspective emphasizing individualism or the exchange perspective assuming rational choices among alternative paths based on their cost and benefits.

Implications and Applicability of the GRE Model

The theoretical model of gendered role expectations has important implications for the study of gender roles as well as for the study of marital dissolution. First, the term, gender-role, often conceptualized as gender division of labor, may mask the differential developments in expectations about male and female roles. Norms about female roles became flexible enough, approving any roles from fulltime housewife to fulltime workers. In contrast, men have always been expected to be the primary breadwinners, if not sole breadwinners. As such, performances as the provider define the husband’s self-identity. Wives evaluate their role performances in the ways they choose, and hence rarely feel threatened with regard to their self-identities, except that some housewives feel lagging behind the social progress in women’s status or those wives with successful careers.

More importantly, the theory implies that flexibility in gender role expectations may be the key to marital stability. Inflexible gendered-role expectations, in other words, more conservative values, not individualistic attitudes, cause marital breakdown. Of course, the norms about the act of leaving the marriage may explain the variations in divorce incidence across the different societies or across the time periods. However, in contemporary societies with sufficiently weak regulations against divorce, the concept of individualism has lost the
explanatory power. The specific content of gendered-role expectations may differ across the societies, but the model postulating “doing gender” as the primary mechanism of marital breakdown may be valid in any society. Further, depending on the social context, various personal circumstances other than gendered role expectations may cause marital breakdown, and the GRE model leaves much room to incorporate those variations.

In all, it is critical to make a conceptual distinction between the process of marital breakdown (defined as unsustainable marriage) and the act/decision of leaving the marriage (filing for divorce or pursuing spousal consent to divorce). It is time to highlight the former process, granting that the propensity to leave the marriage given the status of marital breakdown does not vary much among population subgroups in a given society at a given time. It appears that the identity control theory provides a valuable tool to understand how the macro social environment would affect individual families, i.e., how the growing inequality in the era of neoliberal globalizing economies would disturbs men’s and women’s self-identity and disrupts their marriages.

References


Burke, Peter J. and Stets, Jan E. 2009. Identity Theory, Oxford University Press


