

Variations in preferred living arrangements among Korean elderly parents

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Abstract. Guided by the assumption that the preferences for a particular type of living arrangement are influenced by values of privacy and the level of needs/resources among the elderly, this study investigates how the socioeconomic and demographic characteristics of the Korean elderly are associated with their preferences for independent living over coresidence with their children. A logit model analysis is conducted based on data from the 1994 Survey on the Living Status of Korean Elderly. The major findings are: (1) contrary to common belief, the rural elderly are *more likely* to prefer independent living than the urban elderly, (2) provided that elderly parents have financial resources, those in poor health are more likely than those in fair health to prefer separate residence from their children, and (3) the absence of a son increases the likelihood of preferring independent living over coresidence. The implications of these findings for current Korean policy promoting coresidence and for studies of living arrangements of the elderly are discussed.

Key words: Elderly, Korea, Living arrangement, Preference

Introduction

Over the last decades in Korea, Taiwan, and Japan, the proportion of elderly living apart from their children has been on the rise. In the face of accelerated population aging and the continuation of the family as the main support system for the elderly, this trend has become the focus of recent studies. Most of these studies have relied primarily on the rational choice model to investigate the determinants of living arrangements.¹ According to this model, the choices of a particular living arrangement of the elderly are viewed as a function of preferences actualized under a specific set of demographic and socioeconomic resources and constraints. As one component in this model, the relationship between preferences and actual living arrangements is both complex and indirect. Nonetheless, it is important to begin with a knowledge of preferences and their possible changes to understand the shift in residence patterns among the elderly. However, preferences of the elderly have not been well addressed in previous studies.² This research focuses on variations in

preferences to provide greater insight into the increasing trend of separate living arrangements among the elderly.

Korea presents a valuable setting to examine this issue. Historically, the normative and practical residence pattern in old age has been the coresidence of aged parents with married children, particularly the eldest son and his family. Along with the dramatic and sweeping social changes³ over the past decades, the actual residence patterns of the elderly in Korea has shifted from coresidence with the children to separate residence. National statistics demonstrate a drop from 32.2% in 1966 to 15.7% in 1990 in the proportions of stem family households (composed of two married couples of different generations or a single parent and married child) headed by persons aged 60 and over. During the same period, the proportion of one-person households headed by persons aged 60 and over increased from 6.7% to 17.2% (Population and Housing Census Reports, 1966 and 1990). In terms of preferred living arrangements, the proportion of elderly desiring coresidence with children decreased from higher than 70% during the early 1980s to 47% in 1994⁴ (Korean Gallup Survey 1981; Survey on the Aged Population in Korea 1984; Survey on the Living Conditions of the Korean Elderly 1994).

Based on data from the 1994 Survey of the Living Conditions of the Korean Elderly, we will investigate how the socioeconomic and demographic attributes of the Korean elderly are associated with their preferences for independent living over coresidence with the children. In this paper,⁵ we theorize that these characteristics operate via values of privacy and the level of needs vis-à-vis resources. This paper has two objectives. One is to investigate the effects of a specific set of individual attributes, such as age, sex, education, religion, place where the respondent had grown up, and place of residence on preferences. These attributes of the elderly, despite acknowledged multiple meanings, have been widely used as measures of inclination to privacy (i.e., proxy variables for preferences for independent living) in most studies of living arrangements. The second objective is to explore the importance of needs and resources (economic condition, health status and availability of kin) as complementary factors which influence preferences.

Factors of the preferences

The preferences of the elderly are influenced by (1) the emphasis on privacy versus values on coresidence with family members and (2) the need for financial, physical, and emotional support from children and availability of spouse and children. After controlling for needs and resources, the impact of privacy is hypothesized to differ by place of residence, place of birth, age,

sex, religion, and education. Needs and resources are determined by economic status, health status and kin availability.

1. Emphasis on privacy versus values of coresidence

Preference is embedded in the context of societal norms and cultural values concerning parent-child coresidence, inheritance rules, arrangements for the care of dependent aged and young children, gender roles, and the social organization of domestic activities (Casterline et al. 1991; Kojima 1989). The extent to which coresidence is desired varies by cultural family system: greater value on family cohesiveness may encourage coresidence, while strong emphasis on privacy may yield independent living arrangements (Goldscheider & Goldscheider 1989a). In Korea, the ideal living arrangement has been coresidence of multi-generation under the same roof (Kwon 1992). However, with the social transformation of Korean society and the import of Western culture, the prevalence of multigenerational coresidence as an ideal living arrangement has declined. This weakened emphasis on living together and presumably heightened value of privacy varies greatly, given an elderly person's exposure and adaptation to Western culture.

The emphasis on living together would thus differ by the characteristics which influence exposure and adaptation to Western culture. For example, gender circumscribes both the public and private spheres of women and men. Women are more likely to value family cohesiveness, since their lives and identities are more closely bound by family roles as daughter, wife, and mother than are men's (Goldscheider & Goldscheider 1989b). This pattern appears to be true among Koreans. Korean family systems emphasize norms of sex segregated roles and subordination of women throughout the life course (Choi 1975). Women are socialized to devote themselves to domestic chores and rearing children, while men are encouraged to achieve family or individual goals outside of the home. Thus, women would be more likely than men to put greater emphasis on living together.

The other characteristics which influence values of privacy are religious affiliation, age, formal education, place of current residence, and place of birth. For instance, religious Korean elderly⁶ are assumed to have a more favorable attitude toward coresidence and are found to be more likely to live with children (Martin 1989). However, the affiliation of religion is noted to be linked with family roles and patterns (Castleton & Goldscheider 1989). Traditional religions put greater value on family-oriented behavior, while Protestant Christianity increases values of individual privacy (Burch 1987). Age, as an indicator of cohort, may affect the attitudes toward privacy and coresidence. The oldest people hold the strongest attitudes in favor of coresidence with offspring and hence have the greatest preference for coresidence

(Da Vanzo & Chan 1994). Education (i.e., formal schooling) increases values of privacy. Formal education provides opportunities for involvement in activities outside the family and exposure to life styles and new ideas which favor independent living over coresidence (Goldscheider & Goldscheider 1989b; Thornton et al. 1994). Place of residence may have an effect on the attitudes toward family living arrangements. Like formal education, urban residence will typically increase exposure to new ideas and life styles in favor of independent living arrangements (Thornton et al. 1994). Place of birth can also be used as an indicator of the attitudes toward living arrangements. The elderly born in rural areas would be more likely than their counterparts to favor coresidence with their children.

2. Needs and resources of elderly

Due to the persistence of cultural norms with respect to family responsibility and in the absence of well-developed social systems for the elderly (Sung 1990), the family in Korea continues to be the primary social institution for financial, physical, and emotional support of the elderly in contemporary Korea (Choi 1975; Suh 1992; De Vos & Lee 1993; Rhee et al. 1989; Rhee et al. 1994; Sung 1991). This family support system typically involves coresidence of elderly parents with at least one child⁷ (Hashimoto, Kendig & Coppard 1992).

Elderly parents in need of support from children, including financial, physical and emotional assistance, are more likely to desire coresidence. These needs are expected to differ according to current economic and health status and presence of a spouse. Economic status of the elderly would be indicated by ownership of dwelling unit and the extent to which the elderly are financially independent of their children. Health status would be assessed by the limitation in physical function. Compared to the married, the unmarried would be more likely to seek companionship from coresidence with their children. In conjunction with their needs, the availability of children, particularly a son, would precondition the preference for coresidence. Given the strong patriarchal, patrilineal, and patrilocal family system, those who have only daughters would prefer independent living over living with a daughter and son-in-law.

Data

The data for this study come from the Survey on the Living Status of the Korean Elderly, conducted by Korea Institute for Health and Social Affairs (KIHASA) from 4 April to 5 May 1994. This survey aims to explore the well-being of the Korean elderly and identify their specific needs, with the purpose

of providing empirical data which will help establish imminent and long-term welfare policy for the elderly. The questionnaire was designed to obtain detailed information on various aspects of the elderly including demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, social and economic activities, retirement, health status, attitudes toward aging and familial support for the elderly, exchange of financial, instrumental and emotional support with their children, and family roles.

The subjects of this survey are males and females aged 60 and over who lived in their present residence for more than a month as of the time of the survey. Through stratified multi-stage random sampling, a nation-wide sample of 2,417 non-institutionalized individuals were selected. Overall, 2,058 interviews were completed, constituting a response rate of 84.8%. In cases where the selected subject was not able to respond, the interview was administered to the relative or neighbor most familiar with the subject's situation. Interviews by proxy represented 5.4% of the all completed interviews.

The representativeness of the completed sample was assessed by the KIHASA by comparing demographic information from the survey with recent official household registration data. Results of this comparison indicate that the sample is representative of the Korean elderly population in terms of age and sex (Rhee et al. 1994: 18). Through the analysis, an intensive effort has been made to check the internal consistency of data by examining marginal distributions and identifying errors in reporting, coding, and re-coding.

Sample and variables

The present study limits its analysis to those who are aged 60 and over and who have at least one surviving child⁸ (n = 1,755 persons). Never-married (n = 3) and those ever-married elderly with no surviving children (n = 50) are excluded from the analysis, since living with children is not an option for them. The cases with 'no-response' or 'don't know' to the relevant questions are also eliminated. The definitions and means of the variables employed for the empirical analysis are presented in Table 1.

While most of the variables are clearly defined, a few require additional explanation. Preference is derived from the question "(In the future) do you want to live alone or with your spouse only? Or do you want to live with your children?". The categorical responses are: (1) alone or with a spouse, (2) with eldest son, (3) with one son, (4) with daughter, (5) any child, and (6) others (e.g., grandson). For the analysis, the choices from 2 to 6 are collapsed into one category 'want to live with children'. In the sample, the proportion of the Korean elderly parents preferring separate residence is 51.3%. The degree of economic independence is measured in terms of the source of income.

Table 1. Definitions and means of variables used in the empirical analysis (n = 1755)

Variables	Definition	Mean
<i>Dependent variable</i>		
Preference	1 if the respondent wants to live alone or spouse only; 0 if the respondent wants to live with children	51.3%
<i>Proxy variables for value of privacy</i>		
Place of residence (rural)	1 if the respondent lives in rural area; else 0	66.0%
Age	Age in single years (range from 60–91 years)	68.2
Sex	1 if the respondent is male; else 0	41.5%
Place of birth (rural)	1 if the respondent was born in the rural area; else 0	92.3%
Education (secondary)	1 if the respondent had attended in the secondary school (junior high to graduate school); else 0.	12.5%
Religion		
Buddhist	1 if the respondent is a Buddhist or a Confucianist; else 0.	33.9%
Protestant Christians	1 if the respondent is a Protestant Christian; else 0.	16.4%
Catholic Christians	1 if the respondent is a Catholic Christian; else 0.	7.5%
<i>Economic condition</i>		
Ownership of dwelling	1 if the respondent or his/her spouse owns the house; else 0	60.8%
Degree of economic Independence	1 Dependent on children: the source of income is children. 2. Semi-Dependent: the source of income is both children and the respondent/spouse. 3. Independent of children: the source of income is the respondent/spouse only.	1.807
<i>Health status</i>		
Number of limitation in ADL		
Limitation in ADL: 1–2	1 if the respondent has difficulty in 1-2 items of ADL; else 0.	15.1%
Limitation in ADL: 3–6	1 if the respondent has difficulty in 3-6 items of ADL; else 0.	9.7%
<i>Kin availability</i>		
Marital status (unmarried)	1 if the respondent is currently unmarried (widowed, divorced or separated); else 0.	39.8%
Number of children	Number of Living Children (range from 1–11)	4.752
Absence of a living son	1 if the respondent does not have a living son; else 0	4.3%

Note: Age, Degree of economic independence, and Number of children are continuous variables. All other variables are dummy variables.

The main sources of income are: (1) children, (2) job, (3) pension, and (4) interests. The ability to perform activities of daily living (ADL) is measured by the difficulty in bathing, changing clothes, eating, standing and sitting, walking, and using lavatory. The limitations in ADL refers to the number of ADL in which the elderly respondent has difficulty.

Results of analyses

All analyses are based on data weighted to more closely represent the elderly population in Korea. Using logit models, we first examine the bivariate relationship between preferences and each of explanatory variables. Then, we conducted a series of multivariate analyses. The results of the logit models are presented in Table 2. The logit in this analysis refers to log-odds of preferring separate residence against preferring coresidence with children. The columns of coefficients (β) indicate the effects of the explanatory variables on the logit, while the columns of exponentiated coefficients ($\exp(\beta)$) show their effects on odds.

The first three columns of Table 2, 'Pairwise models', show the bivariate analyses of logit models. The odds of preferring separate residence to preferring coresidence with children (henceforth, odds of preferring separate residence) is greater among rural residents, males, respondents with secondary education, owners of dwelling units, respondents who are more economically independent of children, and respondents without a son. The odds of preferring separate residence is lower among more aged persons, respondents who were born in rural areas, respondents with more difficulties in ADL, and the unmarried. Religion and number of children do not appear to be associated to preference.

Model 1 through 4 show multivariate analyses of logit models. Model 1 includes the variables which have been widely used to represent emphasis on privacy. When controlled for the place of residence, age, sex, place of birth and education, religion has no significant impact on preference. Model 2 expands Model 1 by adding economic conditions of the elderly, ownership of dwelling unit and degree of economic independence. In Model 2, where we controlled for the economic condition of the elderly, the effect of being male on preferring coresidence disappears, while the effect of being a Protestant Christian becomes significant. Model 3 adds limitations in ADL and their interactions with the degree of economic independence to Model 2. Model 3 reveals that the positive effect of economic independence on preferring separate residence differs according to the limitations in ADL. Model 4 indicates that the marital status and absence of a living son have an impact on preference, given the characteristics of the elderly in Model 3. The comparison

Table 2. Results of logit model estimation of preferring separate residence over coresidence with children (weighted n = 1755)

Variables	Pairwise		Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 5	
	β	S.E.	β	S.E.	β	S.E.	β	S.E.	β	S.E.
Constant			4.989	—	1.547	—	1.789	—	1.851	—
<i>Proxy variables for value of privacy</i>										
Place of residence (rural)	0.456**	0.096	0.733**	0.109	0.406**	0.117	0.394**	0.118	0.407**	0.120
Age	-0.081**	0.008	-0.076**	0.009	-0.040**	0.010	-0.042**	0.010	-0.038**	0.010
Sex (male)	0.663**	0.098	0.500**	0.115	0.120	0.125	0.142	0.126	-0.019	0.139
Place of birth (rural)	-0.532**	0.157	-0.551**	0.176	-0.507**	0.184	-0.517**	0.184	-0.508**	0.184
Buddhists	-0.166	0.112	-0.098	0.124	-0.116	0.130	-0.123	0.131	-0.115	0.132
Protestant Christians	-0.016	0.136	0.194	0.149	0.375**	0.157	0.383**	0.157	0.370**	0.159
Catholic Christians	-0.096	0.176	0.162	0.193	0.276	0.202	0.293	0.202	0.297	0.205
Education (secondary)	0.937**	0.137	0.688**	0.160	0.556	0.166	0.587**	0.167	0.542**	0.168
<i>Economic condition</i>										
Home ownership	1.514**	0.104	4.545		1.129**	0.118	1.119**	0.118	1.000**	0.124
Degree of econ. indep.	0.938**	0.060	2.555		0.334**	0.073	0.247**	0.079	0.235**	0.079
<i>Health status</i>										
Limitations in ADL: 1-2	-0.144	0.136	0.866				-0.446	0.355	-0.420	0.359
Limitations in ADL: 3-6	-0.752**	0.177	0.471				-1.035**	0.509	-1.073**	0.514
<i>Interaction term</i>										
Econ Indep* ADL 1-2							0.485**	0.206	0.485**	0.208
Econ Indep* ADL 3-6							0.717**	0.348	0.747**	0.349
<i>Kin availability</i>										
Marital status (unmarried)	-1.216**	0.102	0.296						-0.490**	0.137
Number of children	-0.023	0.027	0.977						-0.008	0.033
Absence of a living son	0.408*	0.229	1.504						0.894**	0.270
χ^2 (d.f.)			210.92	(8)	347.92	(10)	362.25	(14)	385.93	(17)

** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.10$.

Note: Reference Group - Place of residence (urban); Sex (female); Place of birth (urban); Education (less than secondary school); Religion (none); Ownership of dwelling unit (not owner); Limitations in ADL (none); Marital status (currently married); Absence of a son (having a son).

of these nested models, based on the differences in χ^2 and degree of freedom, indicates that Model 4 has significantly improved the other models and that the statistical significance of the variables added together has been proven.

The last column of Model 4 presents the exponentiated values of coefficients (β). Other things being equal, currently residing in rural areas increases the odds of preferring separate residence by 50%. The effect of being male is not significant, although there is negative association between being male and preferring separate residence. The odds of preferring separate residence decreases by 3.7% with an additional year of age. Being born in rural areas decreases the odds of preferring separate residence by 39.8%. Compared to the elderly who do not belong to any religion, the odds of preferring separate residence for the Protestant Christian elderly is 45% greater. Other religious affiliations do not show significant difference. The odds of preferring separate residence is 72% greater among the elderly with a secondary education than among the elderly with less than a secondary education.

Owning a dwelling unit increases the odds of preferring separate residence by 172%. The effects of the degree of economic independence and limitation in ADL are contingent on each other. For the elderly respondents without limitations in performing ADL, as the degree of economic independence gets greater, the odds of preferring separate residence increases by 27%; for the respondents with 1–2 limitations in performing ADL, by 62%; for those with 3–6 limitation in ADL, by 111%. The positive effect of economic independence on preferring separate residence is greater among those with an ADL limitation than those with no limitation in ADL. Being currently unmarried decreases the odds of preferring separate residence by 38.7%, while the absence of a living son increases the odds by 145%.

Figure 1 illustrates the interaction effect of economic independence and ADL limitations on preferring separate residence. The heights of bars represent the probabilities preferring separate residence corresponding to the given level of economic independence as well as limitation in ADL, holding the level of all other variables at certain points (Please refer to the note in Figure 1). Holding ADL constant, the probability of preferring separate residence increases as the degree of economic independence moves from dependent to independent. The extent to which the probability increases as degree of economic independence changes is much greater among the respondents with 3–6 limitations in ADL than among the respondents with no limitation in ADL.

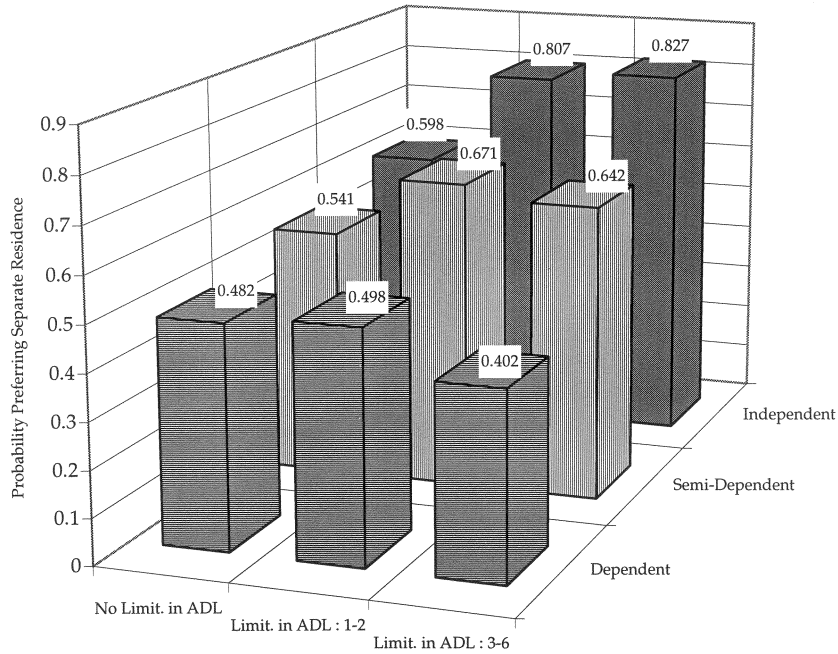


Figure 1. Predicted probabilities preferring separate residence by level of economic independence and limitations in ADL.

Note: The probabilities are for Place for residence = Urban; Age = 68; Sex = Male; Place of birth = Rural; Religion = None; Education = Primary; Home ownership = Yes; Marital status = Married; Number of children = 4.75; Absence of a son = No.

Discussion

This study reveals that, when needs and resources of the elderly are controlled, most of the proxy variables for values of privacy are positively associated with preferring separate residence. The relationships of gender and place of current residence with the preference are not supported. This study reports no gender differentials in preferring separate residence. We believe that the difference between men and women in favoring coresidence is more likely to come from the economic dependency of women on husbands or children, rather than the cultural heritage of gender roles.⁹ The positive association between living in rural areas and preferring separate residence is contradictory to the conventional assumption of the correlation between rural residence and favorable attitude toward coresidence. We speculate that the elderly preferring coresidence with their children migrate from rural to urban areas, following their children to urban areas. This leads to lower proportions of rural elderly who prefer coresidence. The finding that Korean elderly in rural areas are

more likely than those in urban areas to prefer independent living suggests that we need to be more cautious when we use residential area as an indicator of living arrangement preferences.

In addition to the emphasis on privacy, the needs and resources of the elderly are important predictors of preferences. In general, the elderly who need financial and physical supports are more likely than their counterparts to prefer coresidence with children. At the same time, however, living with children seems not the most desired option for the elderly in poor health. This study reveals that, provided that the elderly parents have financial resources, those in poor health are more likely than those in better health to prefer separate residence. It implies that, if they can, the elderly parents want to avoid burdening children through coresidence. Absence of a son, given the patriarchal, patrilocal and patrilineal family system, preconditions the elderly parents to prefer separate residence against living with daughter and son-in-law.

These findings have significant implications to Korean policies toward the elderly. Based on the presumption that Korean elderly parents prefer residing with their children to separate living, the Korean government has encouraged extended living arrangements through various inducements, including annual prizes and economic incentives to those families who reside with their elderly parents (Rhee et al. 1990). This study found that a substantial proportion of the Korean elderly prefer to live apart from their children. As a whole, the likelihood of preferring separate residence is greater among the elderly who are economically better off and healthier. However, for the elderly in poor health, preference for residing apart from their children is conditioned on economic well being; those with economic resources prefer to live on their own. Considering socioeconomic and demographic characteristics of the succeeding cohorts of elderly population, the proportion preferring separate residence is expected to increase. We argue that the current Korean policy encouraging coresidence has failed to consider different types of preferences in living arrangements among the elderly, and suggest that policy makers in Korea diversify and specialize their approach to meet the desire of the elderly in terms of living arrangements at present and in the near future.

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Notes

1. For studies of living arrangements among the elderly in Korea, see Martin (1989), Eu (1992), De Vos & Lee (1993) and Rhee & Kim (1995). For studies of living arrangements among the elderly in other Asian countries, see Martin (1989), Kojima (1989), Tsuya & Martin (1992), Da Vanzo & Chan (1994), and Casterline et al. (1991).
2. To our knowledge, few studies have focused on preferences of the elderly, although the importance of such preferences in explaining actual living arrangements has been widely recognized in the past research focused on the residential patterns of the elderly.
3. These changes include improvement of mortality, decrease of fertility rate below the replacement level, rise in the standard living, industrialization, urbanization, migration, expansion of formal education, rise in the female labor force participation and wide spread of mass media.
4. Despite the difficulty in comparing the surveys due to wording problems and samples, the figures are still substantial enough to indicate decrease in the proportion desiring coresidence.
5. One of the plausible factors, which is omitted in the study, is the relationship of the elderly parents with the potential coresident child.
6. According to national statistics, 59.1% of Koreans aged 60 and over have a religion (Social Indicators in Korea, 1993). Among the religious population, 63.4% are Buddhists; 21.9% are Protestant Christians; 8.5% are Catholic Christians; 6.1% belong to other religions including Confucianism, Won-Buddhism, and Cheongdogyo.
7. To be sure, separate residence does not preclude family support across household boundaries, just as living together does not guarantee the provision of care for the elderly (Martin 1989; Mason 1992). Indeed, there are many instances of non-coresident Korean elderly receiving financial support from children, while some coresident Korean elderly are economically independent of children (Choi 1992; Kim & Choe 1992; Rhee et al. 1989). Nonetheless, because of their more limited economic productivity and need for assistance with routine daily activities as health declines, coresidence takes on special importance for the elderly (Domingo & Casterline 1992). It is unlikely that any other arrangement can meet the wide range of needs of the elderly as fully as shared residence in a household with adult children, in the Korean context (Sung 1991).
8. Restriction of this study to the elderly parents is not intended to de-emphasize the theoretical and practical importance of the childless elderly. In Korea, where adult children are the main source of support and care of the elderly, the childless elderly would be of particular interest and concern (Rubenstein 1987; Siriboon & Knodel 1993).
9. It should be also noted that, while female elderly are socialized to put greater value on living together, they are also more likely than male elderly to be aware of potential conflict with daughter-in-laws when living together. The relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law has been documented to be not always harmonious.

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