

Determinants of the Timing of First Childbearing in Contemporary Japan: Socio-economic or Attitudinal Factors?

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The purpose of this article is to examine determinants of the timing of fertility in contemporary Japan. Like other industrialised countries, Japan has recently displayed a delay in the timing of first and subsequent births after marriage. Causes of this phenomenon as it occurs in western countries have borne substantial examination, and it is now argued that socio-economic and attitudinal factors have a bearing on a rise in the age of women having children. Little attempt, however, has been made to examine what brought about this postponement of childbearing in Japan. In this article, we will investigate whether socio-economic and ideational factors do indeed affect the timing of first birth after marriage in Japan.

We will first examine the relation between the quantum and tempo aspects of fertility pattern in Japan. As is well known, the Japanese total fertility rate (TFR) has markedly declined over the past two decades, reaching the below replacement level. Our investigation suggests that this change is to a considerable extent attributable to a delay in the tempo of childbearing after marriage. The analysis of the timing of fertility is, therefore, essential to the full understanding of recent fertility patterns in Japan.

Next, while focusing on socio-economic and attitudinal spheres in Japan, we will consider factors causing this change in the timing of births after marriage. With respect to socio-economic aspects, it has been identified that, from the 1970s onwards, female earning capacity has increased in Japan. On the other hand, turning to ideational aspects, we see from the results of surveys that the influence of traditional norms and values have gradually waned while individualistic and self-oriented attitudes have gained strength in Japanese society. Theoretical consideration upon these phenomena suggests that these socio-economic and ideational changes lead to a delay in the timing of first birth after marriage.

Finally, we will examine determinants of the timing of first birth by employing the proportional hazard analysis. The results we obtained in this analysis show that socio-economic factors play a critical role in determining the tempo of first childbearing. Compared to women with low educational qualifications, those with high educational qualifications tended to take a longer interval between marriage and first childbearing. This evidence suggests that the greater the earning capacity that women have, the later they will bear their first child. In this analysis, however, ideational factors did not appear to exert a significant effect on the timing of first birth. The length of the period of time taken by women from marriage to first birth bore little relation to the level of their commitment to traditional norms and values. Similarly, we did not find in this analysis that there was a correlation between the strength of women's individualistic attitudes and the timing of their first birth. In other words, it does not hold true that the more individualistic women become, the later they have their first child. From these results, we could conclude that the recent change in the timing of births in Japan is caused by socio-economic rather than ideational factors.