A Study on Adaptation of Immigrant Women Who Divorced Korean Men
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Abstract

This study aims to recognize the problems of immigrant women who married Korean men, and to investigate how they adjusted to their lives after divorce. A research method based on life history is employed to analyse the problem from the angles of social environment and their personal decisions. The group of participants consisted of ten immigrant women who had been separated or divorced for at least a year. The author performed interviews with these women from June to August 2011. Mandelbaum(1973)'s life history framework was analysed. Adaptations were observed by 'new freedom', 'restored peace', 'unavoidable reality', 'social support', and 'stable lifestyle'. Discussions and conclusion were presented on the basis of these findings.

Keywords: Immigrant Women, Life history research, Adaptations of life

1. Introduction

The intercultural family has emerged as a new class in contemporary Korean society, and has been receiving attention and interest from the government, media, private organizations and the academic field. Unfortunately, cases of discord, violence and divorce in these families have rapidly increased since the middle of 2000 to the extent that it has become a serious social issue. In 2008 the number of divorces of Korean couples continued to decrease, reflecting a trend that has been observed since 2004, while in the same year divorces between Korean men and foreign women numbered 7,962 cases, an increase of 39.5% compared to the previous year. In 2011 there were 8,349 cases of divorce involving international marriages in Korea, an increase of 6.3% (Statistics Korea, 2012).

Both the Korean men and foreign women who have opted for an international marriage are part of a rapidly-changing society, yet their decision produces conflicts and tensions in Korean society, where myths of a single Korean race and its pure bloodline still linger. Until now, the focus of studies on international marriages in Korea has been on the couples’ adjustment to their marriages. However, this study aims to examine the immigrant women’s motives for divorce, the reasons for the demise of their relationship with their spouse and changes in their quality of life after divorce. It aims to approach the problem by studying their life history in order to consider the problem from the area of showing their social environment and behavior.

2. Literature review: Divorce in Korean intercultural families

According to studies on divorce among immigrant women in Korean society (Jeong et al., 2007; Park, 2007; Seol et al., 2005), the proportion of married immigrant women who had considered a divorce was 34.1%, 34.5% and 7.3% respectively, while 43.9% of married immigrant women who had experienced domestic violence had considered a divorce (Jeong et al., 2007). In Kim(2010)’s study, 19.8% of married immigrant women had considered a divorce or separation, and 11.9% had discussed a divorce with their husbands. In 2009 the Korea Legal Aid Center for Family Relations released its statistics for divorce consultations in multi-cultural families for the previous year. These statistics revealed that the rate of divorce consultations for those whose marriages had lasted for 3 years or less was 49.8% and that 40.9% of the couples were separated at the time of consultation.

An early study (Park, 2007) reported that those women who had experienced domestic violence were

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most likely to consider divorce, but the reasons for divorce among intercultural families are complex. The majority of the immigrant women who married Korean men had met their husbands through Korean marriage agencies that operated in their countries, especially China, Vietnam, and the Philippines. Many women reported that they had received distorted information about their husbands’ background, health, and financial status from these agencies prior to their marriage and arrival in Korea (Kim et al., 2010). The same study identified a range of other problems faced by the women, including hostility towards foreigners, difficulties in communication, differences in lifestyles, and conflicts over financial affairs, social relations, and residency in Korea, as well as domestic violence. Another study (Mun, 2010) that examined cases of divorce among immigrant women in Korea, reported that conflict was worsened by differences in marital expectations between the women and their Korean husbands. Consequently, many women opted to run away from home, and their husbands responded by reporting them as runaways and filing for divorce.

3. Study method

3.1. Study subjects and data collection

The study subjects were selected from 10 foreign women who had been divorced or separated from their Korean husbands for at least a year. The reason for the minimum period of one year was that it would yield information about their lives both before and after marital dissolution. The foreign women lived in both large and medium-sized cities as well as farming and fishing villages. In-depth interviews were conducted with them with the help of a multi-cultural family support center, counselling center, or welfare center from June to August 2011. In order to collect data on topical life history, one-on-one, in-depth interviews were conducted and the study assistant took notes and recorded the interview on audio, which was transcribed after the interview. Each subject was interviewed an average of 3 times for 120-150 minutes. Table 1 about here

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Marriage period (month)</th>
<th>Job</th>
<th>Number of children</th>
<th>Income</th>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>Educational background</th>
<th>Marriage type</th>
<th>Age gap with husband (year)</th>
<th>Job of ex-husband</th>
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*2 Sons of ex-wife + 1 (Her own son lives in China), ** Includes 1 daughter of ex-wife # Remarriage for her husband
3.2. Data analysis

The data that became the basis for analysis was based on the transcriptions of the recorded interviews. The data was analyzed ‘Adaptation of Life’ as suggested by Mandelbaum (1973), who applied this method to his study of life history. Adaptation of life corresponds to the subject’s ability to adapt and the social correlations after the dissolution of their marriage. Analysis was arranged after the collection of the initial data, and it was conducted repeatedly as data on the subject’s life history was gradually collected according to the analytical method.

3.3. Strictness of the study and ethical issues

In order to enhance the strictness of the study, researcher sought to maintain a close relationship and comprehensive understanding with the study subjects, to enhance the sensitivity of the study and to minimize prejudice and errors from two fellow professors’ advice. Lastly, in order to minimize ethical problems during the course of the study, the researcher strictly honored the principle of confidentiality.

4. Results

4.1. New freedom

“God helped me. I become very healthy, made much money by growing lettuce, and raised my baby well.” (Subject C)

“I am very satisfied. I learned the Korean language and how to cook. I am not good at making Korean food. But I feel very comfortable without my husband.” (Subject E)

“I have no problems or any conflicts with anyone. Where I live now, I get up in the morning, go to work and come back at night. It is quite comfortable. I’ve always worked until now. If I stay at home, not going to work, I have no reason to live.” (Subject I)

The immigrant women maintained an independent life after the dissolution of their marriages. Subject C lives a comfortable life as she raises lettuce and makes some money. Subject I learns what she wants to learn and lives a satisfactory life; she seems to have adapted to her new life. They live confidently on their own terms due to their choice to live alone rather than maintain a painful marriage life. Many immigrant women face financial problems after dissolving their marriages, but they learn to deal with their problems independently and take responsibility for their own lives. These cases show that it is necessary to provide financial advice for immigrant women in order for them to live a stable life after marriage dissolution.

4.2. Restored peace

“I feel satisfied. Now I feel comfortable. I do not have to pay attention to eating and living. I want to learn about computers and cooking.” (Subject B)

“I am satisfied. Though it is a bit hard, I feel comfortable. When I lived with my husband, he did not make money and always fought with me. The inconvenient thing is that I have to be alone when I am sick at night, and when I work. It makes me upset but it cannot compare with the stress which I felt due to my husband. I prefer the present.” (Subject C)

Most of the immigrant women who were interviewed for this study were satisfied with their current situation even though they may struggle financially. Although the dissolution of their marriages may cause a sense of loss to these women, they expressed positive emotions and have shown satisfactory progress in their lives since leaving their husbands.

4.3. Unavoidable reality

“I succeeded more than other people. I frequently worry. What should I do? Because there are no people living near me and I cannot trust other people. My house is not actually mine. It is a house in a village. I work hard to earn money. But I do not make a lot of money. I do not know people whom I can...
borrow money from. Borrowed money is shameful. As I am alone every day, I want to do more things but I do not have enough money.” (Subject C)

“It is very difficult to raise my children. There are no Korean people around me who can help. As I cannot speak Korean, they do not teach it to me. I have to go to work and my baby has to go to a nursery.” (Subject F)

Immigrant women face severe problems after dissolving their marriages in Korea, especially financial problems. Often they do not have a job or receive no alimony for their children. Consequently, poverty may have a negative effect on their children. Therefore, it is necessary to assist them to become financially independent through vocational education and training.

4.4. Social support

“A multi-cultural family support center helped me the most, including a job introduction to a restaurant and visits to my shelter. The owner of the restaurant helped me to get divorced, and teachers in the shelter helped me to go to school. Learning Korean language, songs, cooking, computer skills and praying all made me feel comfortable.” (Subject A)

“All of us who are here are in a difficult situation. We have a place to go. Without the shelter, we have no place to go. I can work, but those who cannot communicate in Korean cannot work and they need protective help. Even if we get a job, we have to have a place for rest.” (Subject G)

The immigrant women are supported by a multi-cultural family support center or a women’s refuge shelter from which they receive various kinds of help, including job introductions, food and accommodation, and education. These cases show that the role of the public support system is vital to the adaptation of such women to life after marriage dissolution.

4.5. Stable lifestyle

“My husband did not want me to acquire citizenship. So I could not get Korean citizenship. Citizenship will be necessary when I raise my baby in the future. My husband did not respond to my demand, saying that I did not need to get Korean citizenship. I want to get citizenship if I can get it.” (Subject E)

“I want to marry again. I want a man who is good-hearted, has confidence and works hard. I want relations between Korea and Japan to improve.” (Subject F)

“I want to earn a lot of money, raise my daughter well, buy a house and buy my own land. Then I will have no worries.” (Subject H)

The immigrant women desire stability in their life. Although their marriages ended in divorce, they wish to remain in Korea and make a better life for themselves and their children. Citizenship is a way for husbands to assimilate their wives into Korean society and to guarantee their future in Korea. However, many husbands oppose their wives attaining citizenship. The reasons for this are not clear in the testimonies. In the case of Subject E, her husband opposed her desire for citizenship on the grounds that it would be ‘useless’, but why this might be so is not clarified. It is possible that the Korean men thwart their immigrant wives from attaining citizenship because they fear the women will leave them in order to make an independent life for themselves in Korea. All the subjects in this study wished to earn money and have their own business. Should they plan to marry again in the future, it would be advisable to arrange counselling for them to ensure satisfactory partner selection.

5. Discussion

Where family dissolution had occurred, the immigrant women expressed satisfaction with their decision as they did what they wanted and had escaped from the conflicts with their husband and his family. However, they complained about the difficulties in their new lives. They wanted to stay in Korea and to achieve financial stability, yet the major challenge they experienced after divorce was economic difficulty, particularly when it came to supporting their children. Some of the women also still owed money to the marriage brokers who had arranged their introductions to Korean men (Mun, 2010). In order to solve these difficulties they had to find stable jobs. At a social level, therefore, it is necessary to provide them with opportunities for developing their skills through vocational training.
Korean citizenship is also high on the agenda of the immigrant women after their divorces. Yet this is not a fait accompli as the immigration authorities grant the women citizenship only when they and their former husbands have children below adult age. Those women who do not have children risk becoming categorised as illegal immigrants. A recent study (Kim et al., 2010) suggested that the immigrant women who did not have children tended to remarry Korean men in order to avoid the risk of becoming illegal immigrants, which raises questions about the sincerity of these remarriages and the prospect of repeat, unstable marriages. This of course is a problem which cannot be dealt with in terms of a simple approach, and as such it needs to be addressed at the individual, family, social, legal, and national level simultaneously.

6. Conclusion

While there have been previous studies on the reasons why these women consider or initiate a divorce, there is a paucity of studies that examine the women’s adaptation after marriage dissolution. This study based on post-marriage testimonies has shown that for these women, divorce was an unfortunate but pragmatic choice following their experience of misinformation from marriage brokers and subsequent alienation, marital conflict, and even domestic violence after arrival in Korea. This study contends that the immigrant women who experience the dissolution of their marriages are multilateral victims. Accordingly, divorce among international couples should be approached from a systematic viewpoint that takes into account its diverse and complex levels, mixed with a multicultural, rather than a fragmentary or prejudicial, viewpoint.

The reality of living as a foreigner in Korea, enduring the stigma of divorce, and living a poor life as a single mother is difficult for outside observers to appreciate. Many of the women struggle to resolve problems relevant to the custody of their children or even face the prospect of deportation to their countries despite their desire to remain in Korea. Those who do have jobs are generally employed as menial workers in restaurants or the agricultural sector. Therefore, the provision of counselling services funded or subsided by the government would serve to offer support for the emotional, social, and psychological needs of these women. For those women who are still married, such services may take the form of crisis-intervention, mediation or arbitration programs that can help them to improve their marital relations and prevent dissolution. Such services would ideally be provided through the relevant agencies or institutions that assist the women.

Finally, it is hoped that this study will serve as a catalyst for future studies on the dissolution of international marriages in Korea and, especially, the need for approaches that promote an understanding of divorces among these couples. Further empirical studies on the lives of immigrant women after divorce would also address what is currently a gap in the scholarship. Ideally, these studies should analyse the problems they experience after the dissolution, and any positive development that takes place.

7. References


