

# **Multi-child families in Korean media and popular culture**

## **1. Introduction**

Following the concern of government officials for the decreasing fertility rates in Korea and coinciding with the enactment of childbirth encouragement policies since 2005, there has been an increasing visibility of multi-child families (3 or more children) in media representations in the country. This emergence breaks the monopoly that the father-mother-1,2 children-family had had for several decades prior, since being proposed as normative family size in the 1970's.

Starting in the 1960's, family size and specific ideas about the nature and duties of parenting had been proposed together, within a broader discourse of national modernization. In this sense, the reduction in the number of children came to be proposed partially as a result of those ideas, which provided the justification. The patterns of childrearing and education dominant today in the Korean society can easily be seen as an exasperation of values and practices that were proposed then.

On that backdrop, a question emerges about the childrearing practices and ideals in the media image of multi-child families. Are multi-child families' representations accompanied by new approaches to childrearing? Are their quantitative differences justified by qualitative novelties in family life as well? Is there a comprehensive discourse about multi-child families that articulates the relationship between number of children, parental role and education, as was the case with the previously dominant family model of four?

These questions cannot be isolated from the relationship between the family and macro and structural realities like the state or the market. The hegemony of the small family with its childrearing and educational practices was part of a national campaign that in the opinion of some acquired traits of nation-building (Cho 2012). Actually, it is commonly agreed that those practices were instrumental to creating the labor force the state required in its developmental phase. The educational habits of Koreans today still perpetuate the same logic of adjustment to the market. So how do state and market relate to the media image of multi-child families? To put it bluntly, when multi-child families are given visibility, whose voice is actually being heard?

In this paper I intend to respond to the above questions by examining media representations of multi-child families in Korea as they have been proposed to the public in the last decade. My intention is to identify the cultural meanings attached to them, trace elements of continuity and rupture with respect to the dominant family model, and explore their significance and implications, especially in the field of childrearing and education. A close attention will be given to the articulation between these latter aspects and the demands of the market and the state. Here I take the notion of cultural meaning in the Weberian sense of "idea-patterns by which individuals and social groups attach significance to their actions" (Hall, 2000).

## **2. Literature Review**

Ever since low fertility became a matter of national concern, social researchers have turned their attention to this issue and an inflation of studies has ensued. The perspectives considered are varied, ranging from structural factors such as demography or social and economic conditions, to more intangible aspects such as cultural norms and values regarding marriage, childbearing and rearing, and the family.

However, this large volume of research is frequently motivated by the immediate intention of evaluating the existing birth encouragement policies and proposing corrections or improvements to it. Studies tend to empirically measure the relative weight of some fertility variables and jump to practical conclusions that instruct the state on how to reach its population goals in more efficacious ways. It comes as no surprise that this production is mostly coming from academic fields closely related to policy making, such as social welfare, public health and population studies. Even in the field of sociology, qualitative analysis based on a broader approach is deficient. The result is that the increasing volume of research is not reflected in an increased understanding of why Koreans are behaving like they are.

This study is expected to contribute to an integrated understanding of the complexity of factors surrounding fertility decisions by paying a special attention to the weight of cultural factors. We have mentioned earlier how a change in social perceptions and values accompanied and made possible the drastic decrease of childbirth and family size in Korea. Confirming the importance of culture, research is showing how the failure of the present population policies responds to the limitation of their perspective to the economic aspect (Lee et al. 2006, Lee 2011, Yeom 2013). In a similar vein, an increasing volume of studies on fertility intentions documents the strong weight personal attitudes, values and beliefs about the ideal family size have on these intentions, as well as the influence of what significant others or the surrounding group believe (Lee 2006, Lee & al. 2011, Jeon 2014). However, very little research has been done analyzing related representations proposed by the media and popular culture, and no studies have yet been published on the specific topic of multi-child families.

A number of case studies aiming at presenting the meanings, motivations and gains multi-child parents seem to attribute to their childbearing decisions have appeared (Moon & al. 2007; Lim 2011; Lee & Lee 2012; Yum & al. 2013, Kwon & Choi 2015, Kim 2016, etc.). Their results provide useful data for the analysis I intend to do, but their approach differs in significant ways from my proposed research. Whereas they consist mainly in a qualitative and micro-level analysis of real families, I intend to focus on how the perceptions, meanings and experiences of multi-child families are translated and projected in the mass media. Besides, in the present research, media representations are utilized as a proxy for detecting potential cultural novelties in the way the family and its function is conceived and realized with relation to the state and its political and economic priorities.

### **3. Research Methodology**

For the organization and analysis of my sources I used a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods.

I started data collection searching for the keyword ‘multi-child’ and its cognates –da-ja-nyeo, da-dung-i (‘다자녀’, ‘다둥이’)- in the printed versions of 8 daily national newspapers and in 2 TV news programs -one public and one commercial- for the period between January 2008 and

December 2017<sup>1</sup>. The newspapers selected amount to more than half the total number of national dailies in circulation in the country and are representative of a diversity of tendencies. The time frame was fixed in dependence of data availability and sufficiency. These latter criteria determined the choice of printed newspapers over online versions.

The resulting selection consisted of 1519 articles and 261 TV news clips. Basic data analysis was applied to categorize this collection and draw some initial observations. Subsequently, data sources were extended to other types of TV programs and media such as television dramas, reality documentaries and variety shows broadcasted by the two aforementioned companies, and to internet comic strips ('webtoon') and advertisements, within the same time frame. The retrieving of material was done by systematically searching for keywords whenever possible, or in a chain-like manner, by looking for references among the newspaper clips, among the newly found media sources, and by directly searching the web for related material when systematic search was not an option. In the case of TV programs, I selected 1 to 3 hours of program contents per year, to make analysis viable. Despite the inevitably random character of this collection method, I consider the quantity of accumulated data to be sufficient to guarantee the absence of any selection bias.

This second collection of sources consisted of around 13 hours of TV program contents -of which many corresponded to reality programs covering the daily life of multi-child families-, a 50-episode TV drama entitled *Five enough*, broadcasted by the national channel *KBS 2* from February to August 2016, the 2014 TV advertisement of a renown local domestic artifacts brand that portrays the family life of a real family of 13 children, and the web-toon 'Family size' that was launched in June 2014 and continues to be published today. The total body of data was subjected to qualitative analysis, applying direct interpretation guided by a loose theoretical framework built in dialogue with insights obtained through literature review.

## **4. Theoretical Insights**

### **4.1. Children number, parenting and the state**

In the last 50 years the typical Korean household has dramatically changed its aspect due to a drastic drop in the national fertility rates, which plummeted from 6.2 in 1960 to 1.2 in 2014, hitting one of the lowest marks in the world (World Bank data).

Childrearing patterns are affected by social transformation and cultural norms and values, which imbue notions of appropriate parenting behavior and set standards or normative expectations about good parenthood. In Korea, new notions of parenthood were introduced starting in the 1960's to encourage and support fertility control.

"As late as the 1960s, Koreans believed in the maxims "more sons, more fortune" and that "babies are born with their own fortune." People considered children insurance measures for their later years, viewing them as "successors to keep the bloodline and hold ancestral rites."

---

<sup>1</sup> The newspapers selected are *Dong-a Ilbo*, *Hankook Ilbo*, *Hankyore*, *Kookmin Ilbo*, *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, *Munhwa Ilbo*, *Seoul Shinmun* and *Segye Ilbo*. The news programs are *KBS* and *SBS* news.

There was a firm belief that a population of at least fifty million people was necessary for economic development. ... the idea of controlling childbirth was a very unfamiliar one” (Sohn 2013, 109).

While economic considerations were the ultimate reason for the population policy of the state, the discourse that aligned the Korean families with said policy was that of ‘family planning’. Family planning connected the daily sexual behavior of couples with careful planning of the home economy and number of children, compensating limited childbearing with more devoted childrearing, with the promise that ‘less’ would mean ‘more’. Campaign slogans are strongly expressive of this logic: “Let’s have the adequate number of children and rear them in an excellent way!” (1961), “Let’s have two without sex discrimination and rear them well!” (1971) or “Even two is too much. Let’s have one and give her our best” (1982) (Wee 2011).

Maternity went beyond its affective character to become a rational enterprise. The modern housewife figure as the one in charge of resourcefully managing the children’s education appeared then. In this context, education meant specifically the provision of formal education, since this was the required means to become a qualified workforce for the developmental priorities of the state, and the state compensated it by guaranteeing a stable and well remunerated employment in the job market (Chang 2010). This frequently led to subordinating the quality of family life to external demands, as the concept of ‘instrumental familism’ has well captured (Ibidem).

Undoubtedly, having fewer children makes possible a more concentrated allocation of parental resources on each child. In this sense, the population policy opened the doors to what was to become an escalation in educational investment per child by Korean parents. Actually, the logic of competition caused this escalation to widely surpass the amount of fertility decrease (Lee 2008)<sup>2</sup>. Strong indications link the persisting trend of low fertility to the burden this escalation is perceived to impose on parents in a scenario where job insecurity increases and compensation for education is uncertain (Shin 2009, Lee et al. 2015).

#### **4.2. The media image of the family**

The ample mobilization of all types of communication media to spread the ideology of family planning is a well-documented fact. Since the beginning of fertility control policies, families with more children than the number proposed as ‘adequate’ were associated in the media to negative connotations such as backwardness, poverty, unhappiness and lack of education or responsibility, soon becoming an ‘abnormal’ reality.

The ‘normal’ Korean family was shaped as constituted by father, mother and one or two children. This model was then reproduced in popular culture, its hegemony maintaining and reinforcing normativity (Chung 2007, Cho 2012). Actually, even if the use of family images

---

<sup>2</sup> Among OECD countries, Korea ranks first in the private expenditure share on educational institutions of tertiary level and seventh on the non-tertiary level (OECD 2016). What this means is that the high level of educational achievement that characterizes the country is more the result of the effort of Korean families than the state’s. This does not even include supplementary education expenditure (private tutoring, after school activities, academies), which according to 2010 data constituted a sizable market of 1.8% of the GDP (OECD 2014, <http://kostat.go.kr>).

was very frequent in visual media due to the tradition of strong familism, the cases in which these images strayed away from the typified model were practically non-existent. TV advertisements from 1970 onwards tended to represent the typical family as composed of parents, son and daughter, until during the 1980's the government pursued a one child policy and images of one parent with one child increased (Chung 2007). TV dramas were advised to limit to 2 the number of children that appeared in families and novels in the 1970's depicted big families as structures of irrational violence and exploitation, while the nuclear family was represented as the ideal institution (Cho 2012).

At the turn of the millennium, the prospect of social unsustainability related to an aging population brought about a change in national policy. In 1996, with the establishment of the 'new population policy', the birth limitation measures that had been in vigor for more than 3 decades were eased and limited to "vulnerable groups" (low-income, rural populations). When the decreasing trend of fertility intensified following the Asian financial crisis, the government put up an emergency plan of childbirth encouragement ('Framework act on low birth rate in an aging society'), implementing and gradually expanding it since 2005.

The first five-year plan had the government as main agent and was focused on the provision of financial assistance to low-income multi-child families. The second plan, implemented during the 2011-2016 period, broadened its target to include middle class families. It sought to actively involve companies, civil groups and civilians in birth encouraging efforts, and aimed at extending cultural awareness (Lee & Lee 2012).

It is in this context that multi-child families started to resurface in popular culture. A neologism -'da-dung-i'- to indicate these families was coined. Celebrities from the entertainment industry or the sporting world that have multi-child families started to be introduced in TV shows, in many occasions, to stay. Multi-child families became protagonists in the press, talk-shows and reality documentaries, web cartoons, product advertisements and TV drama productions. The tacit ban on big families removed, they seem to be the new rising star in the constellation of family models proposed to the public.

For a correct interpretation of these reappearance, it is useful to recall a distinctive feature of the Korean media culture: its ethos of public edification. The historical circumstances in which journalism was born and developed in the country contributed to consolidate as absolute media values ideological premises such as patriotism and national interest (Chang & al. 2015). The strong deontic attitude Koreans had internalized through the Neo-Confucian tradition also reinforced this aspect. This explains why, even today, it is not uncommon for Korean media to take it as its responsibility to serve the national interest and to easily adopt a lecturing tone towards its public (Yang & al. 2007).

Keeping this backdrop in mind, the emergence of multi-child families in the media can easily be interpreted as a continuation of the logic of public control over the definition of family. Korea has a long history of state normativity and control over family definition. As explained above, in line with this tradition, the national process of modernization that was kicked off in the 1960's did not only mobilize the families as main agents for its execution but also restructured the Korean family according to necessity.

In fact, the Korean family had been transforming to match state priorities that changed according to time and circumstances. Even during the implementation of a policy of birth control, the number of children appointed to families as appropriate decreased from 4 to 1 along the years. So it would not be forced to assume as a working hypothesis that the present

visibility of multi-child families is yet another normative adjustment of the ‘adequate’ number of children in a new demographic setting.

### **4.3. Cultural meaning**

Assuming media intention to be that of encouraging childbirth, we are lead to wonder: is this encouragement accompanied by a qualitatively new family ideal as was the case with ‘family planning’? In other words, are multi-child families in media a sort of window on a distinct and comprehensive family model, which then becomes the object of cultural persuasion? Specifically, do these representations offer alternative ideals about child-rearing and education? Do they affect the role of the state and of society as a whole with respect to the family? If ‘family planning’ corresponded to a strategic adjustment to the conditions and incentives of the market, one could wonder if suggestions are offered on how multi-child families should manage to fit into those conditions.

If the answer to the previous questions was negative, we should conclude that no new cultural meanings were being introduced by the visibility of multi-child families in Korean media. These representations would bring along solely quantitative -not qualitative- differences with respect to the existing family model. In this sense, they would have a limited effect of cultural liberalization over family models in that they would leave intact the existing childrearing model and the logic of subservience that seems to sustain it, with the burden they impose in both parents and children.

As for the alternative outcome, it is a fact that fertility encouragement aims at solving the prospected shortage of workforce to keep the national economic levels to their present standard or to cover for the social costs of maintaining passive population. The logic of family subservience to the state continues to be acting here. However, the relative weight of coercion and persuasion cannot be the same in policies of control and policies of encouragement. In times when contraceptive means have been made easily available to all and financial incentives are less alluring, the state has no real coercive power on fertility. Insecure social conditions have also made persuasion very challenging. In a situation like this, the state is more likely to give in to negotiation. If we then assume that many Koreans still value childbearing positively, we could reasonably expect to hear voices and demands coming from sources different from the official ones. We will try to trace them and look into them now.

## **6. Research presentation: General Observations**

What follows is a series of initial observations from the first data analysis of dailies and TV news.

1. News articles mentioning multi-child families tend to slowly augment in number as we move ahead in time.
1. Over the total number of news articles that mention multi-child families (1780) the amount of real families presented is very small (92). The majority of the articles treat multi-child families as an abstract category. They are presented as eligible recipients of supportive actions performed by state, regional and local governments, or by civil entities such as businesses or non-profit organizations. In this context, multi-child families are usually mentioned among socially disadvantaged or vulnerable groups

such as mixed marriage families, low income families, under aged head of family, elderly people, handicapped. The case is similar with TV news (24 on 261). This disproportion seems to indicate the unilaterality of the state effort.

2. Of the families that are actually presented, most correspond to celebrities / upper class (43) or middle class families (38). References to lower class families are reduced (11). I have counted each family only once whenever several articles reproduced the same contents, with the exception of pieces on celebrities that are temporally distant to each other.
3. A pattern of representation can be identified for each of these social classes. *Celebrities or other public figures that have more than 2 children or have many siblings become news for this fact*, commonly saying that they “join the ‘da-dung-i’ celebrity club”. The presentation carries a positive tint, multi-child family membership becoming an indication of humanness, happiness, personal quality or personal capability (to conciliate intensive professional and family life), with the frequent use of qualifications such as “happy”, “harmonious” or “blessed” home, “lovebird” couple, and “superman” or “wonderwoman” dad and mom. A number among these celebrities frequently appear openly sharing their parenting principles and practices.
4. *Lower class families are passive beneficiaries of supportive actions performed by the government or civil entities*. The case can be positive or negative, depending on media orientation. But even when the article points out at the fact that due help is not provided or is insufficient, the fact that these families are seen as passive recipients remains unchanged. These families are also usually portrayed under a positive light, as hard-working and concerned parents with bright helpful children. However, they tend not to present reasoned educational principles and practices nor voice out interpretations about their family life.
5. *Middle class multi-child families are introduced for being such, with occasions as varied as the month of the family, the birth of a new member, or in ad-hoc newspaper sections, TV programs, etc.* The context is usually the same: These families are news because, in a society marked by low fertility rates, they are an exception to the rule. These articles are also the richest in references to parenting values and habits.
6. Contents reporting a negative image of multi-child families are rare. I have only spotted a handful, related to criminal cases such as domestic violence and burglary or to abuse of privileges. Most limit themselves to a presentation of facts, without comments or value judgments connecting crime to family constitution. If ever, value judgments are connected to wealth, assuming privileges for multi-child families should not apply in the case of wealthy people.

## **7. Parenting Multiple Children: Representation Patterns**

I have identified some common patterns of parenting in the representation of multi-child families and have conceptualized them as follows:

### **7.1. High level of affective satisfaction**

Multi-child families are usually presented as forming happy, lively, full, joyful homes, where “laughter never ends”. This is strongly and steadily emphasized both by the media producers through the choice of titles, pictures, text or script, background music and voice over, and by the family members themselves, especially the parents. Happiness is always explained as stemming from the existence of children. It is usually paired with the admission that parenting is highly demanding but that it is over-compensated by the children, who make parents feel “rich”, “blessed”, “happy”, “secure”. In this sense, most representations portray parents who are satisfied with their childbearing decisions, even if some of these decisions resulted from accepting what had not been planned.

“Neighbors console me by telling me how hard it must be, but the joy, reward and happiness I experience rearing 8 kids is bigger (than the hardships)” (parent of 8, Hankook Ilbo, 28 aug. 2013).

The high value of children is also shown to sustain difficult childbearing decisions, when financial constraints and especially social and familial opposition (friends, neighbors, parents, husband) act as deterrents.

In short, parenting multiple children is paid off with the immediate affective satisfaction the children bring, as opposed to extrinsic, instrumental, material or future compensations. Also, satisfaction is not self-referential, since the frequent mention of a sense of inadequacy before the task is compatible with it. On occasions, dissatisfaction about one’s parenting performance is precisely overcome by reassurance coming from the children.

“Occasionally, when feeling sorry to the kids, I regretted (having had so many)··· but seeing how the kids care for and support each other, their joy and how they tell me that they love me, regret and worries melt away like snow” (father of 6, Dong-a Ilbo, 1 may 2015).

## **7.2. Lower educational demand on children and emphasis on character building**

Multi-child parents are frequently shown as having a lower level of knowledge-education demand on their children than average Korean parents.

In many cases, this responds to parenting ideals and educational goals being different from what is common practice in Korea, where parents act as supporters and managers of content-transmission-based cognitive education. Instead, emphasis is put over character-building.

“Instead of raising my 6 children to match certain standards, I am focusing on supporting them so they become persons of upright character that can work hard in following their own dreams” (father of 6, Munhwa Ilbo, 26 oct 2010).

On a similar vein, a popular Korean rapper who is a father to 4 compares the children’s cognitive education to a marathon, where rather than trying to gain the race in the first few minutes, long run strategies are important. In a country where the parents’ zeal for educational achievement and their drive to gain competitive advantage for their children frequently leads to advancing the cognitive education of kids to a very early age, he explains his own alternative childrearing method.

“Other children might be able to read the word ‘love’, but many (among them) might not know what its precise meaning is. But even if our girl cannot read the word, since she knows

exactly what love is, it is ok if she is a bit late (in learning)” Host: “So let’s teach the kids when they want?” Parent: “Yes, when she shows interest” (SBS, 15 dec 2014).

Multi-child parents mention specific aspects of character building such as educating in frugality and appreciation, fostering cultural interests, inculcating self-discipline, selflessness, an attitude of sharing, etc.

“Children nowadays can have whatever they want easily, but they also give up easily. Seeing how they don’t know why they want what they want and how they do not make much effort, I thought I don’t want my kids to be like that. In our house, even if we buy crayons, we talk about whether we buy because we don’t have or because we want better ones, and whenever we do something I remind the kids of an attitude of gratefulness to their dad who sacrifices for us. I think these things can be learnt in the family” (mother of 7, KBS, 11 may 2014).

In some cases, changed priorities seem to partially respond to financial impossibility, which limits the option of relying on outsourced supplementary education. In this sense, some multi-child parents often show the ambition most Korean parents have for their children’s education but seem to be forced to restrain due to monetary issues.

“People around me envy me because I have many children, but in that aspect (childrens’ requests for extracurricular activities) there are things that make me suffer. When one daughter tells me she wants to learn something, I have to multiply by 6, think carefully before making a decision. Also, if one of the girls wants to do something then the rest also want, so I really don’t dare much when it comes to private education” (mother of 6, KBS, 8 jan. 2013)

These and similar occasions are the moments in which multi-child parents are represented as feeling guilty before their children for not being able to provide them with more, in terms of affective dedication, educational conditions and material comforts.

### **7.3. Children’s empowerment**

A result of the changed educational priorities mentioned above is that the children’s characteristics and agency are placed at the center of the educational enterprise, while parents are displaced to the role of facilitators. This also implies that unilateral emphasis on academic performance and ‘safer’ professional paths gives way to increased diversification. A mother of 3, who is a popular singer, is quoted saying:

“I don’t expect my 3 children to be good at studying. (….) Honestly speaking, aren’t professional options for women or men who study well obvious in our society? I myself was not good at studying but, as you see, now I live doing what I like to do. I think that my mission is to help my kids discover what is it that they do well” (Munhwa Ilbo, 19 oct 2010).

Actually, it is not uncommon to see some of these children pursuing artistic, sportive or less standard career paths. The empowerment of children is thus connected to a parenting style where attention is given to each child’s particularity. The distinct personality of each and the need to cater to their specific needs is repeatedly shown or alluded to.

Children’s empowerment is also reflected in the fact that exposition to direct experience is prioritized over standardized content education. This means that money investment is

substituted by parental time and dedication. A mother of 5 is portrayed saying that “raising kids is not about money but about dedication. Moms only need to create the right conditions for the kids to have diverse experiences” (Dong-A Ilbo, 11 oct 2011).

In this context, the educative potential of outdoor activities, family trips, volunteering to help the needy, playing instruments together and in general a rich family life are frequently presented. The importance of quality time spent with the children is frequently referred to. In a reality program, a couple with 10 kids explain their decision of working less hours outside of the home to spend more time with their children in their maturation years.

“Even if we lost a bit in income, we agreed on devoting our time to the children. Income is something you can get later, but for the children when this time is gone it will not return. So now we spend this time with the children, we leave aside more time to spend affectively with the children” (father of 10, KBS 26-30 jan. 2015).

#### **7.4. Distribution of care, children independency and decreased self-demand**

Another observable pattern is that of a relatively relaxed conception of parenting obligations, limiting interventions and allowing the kids to learn naturally from one another and at their own pace.

“Instead of being perfectionist parents, house chores are shared with the children (…). The house runs smoothly because where the parents don't reach, the children fill that gap” (voice over, KBS 26-30 jan. 2015)

The decreased attention multiple children receive from their parents is said to make them self-sufficient and independent at an earlier age. Examples of young kids from big families that are able to wash themselves, eat without help and clear their own room are frequently shown.

“(The couple) explained that “after deciding our family would live not a “children-centered” but a “couple-centered” life, we managed to have many children without feeling the burden”. To begin with, they made all the kids sleep independently before their 50<sup>th</sup> day of life. After 9 pm they had a time for them alone to talk to each other and that is how they could easily conceive children in succession” (Dong-A Ilbo, 22 feb. 2016).

Due to their earlier independence, kids are able to collaborate with their parents in household chores and in the care of younger siblings. The distribution of care in multiple relationships eases parental stress.

“You might easily think that the more children the bigger the childrearing stress is, but it is the opposite way. If there is one child all the attention is focused on him, and both mother and child cannot but be stressed. But when the children are many they grow up helping themselves and each other” (mother of 3, Dong-a Ilbo, 11 oct. 2011).

To see the children assisting each other without relying on the parents is pointed out as one of the most rewarding aspects of their parenting efforts.

Finally, in contrast to what is habitual in many households in the country where the father is

the breadwinner and the mother the sole responsible of running the house and educating the children, references to a more involved father figure abound, especially among middle and upper class multi-child families. Bringing up the children is a task where both the father and the mother are actively involved. This is often mentioned as a factor that leads to improving the relationship of the couple.

### **7.5. Enrichment and educational outcomes coming from intensified family life**

Multi-child families are portrayed as social spaces of intense shared life. This feature is often contrasted to “silent” or “lonely” spaces marked by few or no children. The suggestion is that family life, signified by valuable time spent together with other family members, is facilitated by member size.

“It seems to me that the parents’ role in children education is ‘time investment’ more than ‘money investment’... When the 8 of us return from the sauna each with an ice cream in their hand, laughter never ends and those around us seem to envy us” (father of 6, Munhwa Ilbo, 12 oct. 2010).

Multiple siblings are shown to be play mates, conversation mates and attention-givers. They are also portrayed as tutors or substitute parents of younger siblings. In whatever case, companionship is emphasized as an advantage given by number.

Family life can also mean the common use of spaces and things. This is noticed as bringing with it non-intended educational outcomes in character-building such as a predisposition towards sobriety, generosity and attention to others, detachment from material goods, etc.

Another educational outcome of intensive family life is the acquisition of social capabilities and skills. Spirit of cooperation, team work, sociability and capacity to handle relationships with different kinds of persons, ability to manage tensions with others, leadership skills are often mentioned as educational advantages provided by life with multiple siblings.

“Being my children 7, they form a society. Within that society, they naturally acquire the habit and character to cooperate and be considerate to each other, while egotistic characters and actions are not easily condoned. In the case of families with few kids, if you treat them like ‘you are the best in the world’, a tendency for egoism can spring up and become a problem” (father of 7, Munhwa Ilbo, 9 nov. 2010).

Finally, the existence of siblings is proposed as strength that will support them in the future, as repeatedly stated by both parents and children of multi-child families.

Many of the aspects mentioned above are best conveyed in extended narratives, as those contained in fiction works or in TV reality programs. Among these, we focus on the fiction productions for the level of popularity they reach and the fact that their narratives portray families of middle class, increasing their appeal to the general public.

The ‘web-toon’ *Family size*, published two times a week on *Naver*, one of the most popular Korean web portals, since June 2014 portrays the daily family life of the cartoonists and their 4 young children. Apart from punctual remarks about childrearing methods, the public is mostly exposed to simple daily family happenings and practices, with abundant smile-provoking depictions of children’s occurrences and reactions, whose uniqueness is clearly

evidenced. The continuity of this kind of micro-level narrative is what conveys the message of the value and happiness of a 'big size' family life.

The TV drama *Five enough* broadcasted by the national channel *KBS 2* from February to August 2016 is another such example. Here, a divorced working mother of 3 falls in love with her workplace superior, a widower and loving father of 2 children. Their romance and remarriage story is spotted with abundant references to parenting styles, challenges and tasks. Many of the patterns identified in other representations are also reproduced here, in particular, the affective and educational outcomes deriving from a richer family life. The 3 children of the working mom are portrayed as more independent, mature, cooperative and easily contented than their 2 same-age counterparts (children of the widower), who enjoy a greater material abundance, provided by their wealthy grandparents. After their union, the joy and fullness of their family-centered life is contrasted to that of a sterile couple formed by the divorced husband of the protagonist and her best friend.

Last of all, a recent TV advertisement of a well-known company brand of Korea portrays the family life of a real family of 13 children (*LG U+*, 2014-07). Homey scenes such as birthday celebrations, shared rooms, waiting queues, siblings helping in house chores and big family meals make up an overall image of liveliness, cooperation and fun in a wholesome growing environment.

#### **7.6. Judgment on and expectations from the society and the state**

Lastly, it is of interest to notice how these parents are shown to relate to the social reality around them. Concretely, two points deserve to be mentioned. In the first place, a feeling of going against the grain, somehow mitigated in recent years and joined with the awareness of being the object of invidious admiration. Many narratives refer to negative judgment or opposition to the decision of having a new child coming from acquaintances, friends and close family members. "Back talking" or subtle expressions of "discomfort" at the sight (and noise) of many children, coming from strangers at public places are also recurrent. Together with this, expressions of congratulation and of invidious longing for more children are increasingly reported as common reactions.

"I have four children. Wherever our family of 6 goes, people's looks turn to us. I feel like an alien who has come to the Earth. Initially I felt burdened by people's interest. Then I developed a capacity to go past it with a smile. I also grew used to the torrent of questions by people around me. Normally when they hear I have four children they ask with initial surprise: "Really?". The following question is inexorably "are you wealthy?" "are your parents wealthy?" Finally, the addition of "I envy you. I also want to have one more child" is also a must" (father of 4, Dong-A Ilbo, 11 jan. 2016).

The above seems to indicate a favorable change in the public opinion about multi-child families, while the common idea that you cannot have more children unless you are wealthy still persists. It is also perceptible that there is a mismatch between the reality of these families and the culture of the social institutions they interact with (workplace, schools). A columnist who is a father of 3 shares about the difficulties he encounters when he tries to be a helping father.

“To have three children and be recognized by society as a “good office worker” and also as a “good father” that cares about his family is an excessively tough and hard path for a father who is a simple salary man” (Dong-A Ilbo, 17 jan. 2013).

Secondly, before the dominant childrearing and educational practices, we find two possible reactions in multi-child parents that are often presented together. On the one hand, there is the tendency to attribute the negativity of the current system to wrong parental dispositions and values.

Low fertility results from “the egoism of parents and a value system centered in material happiness” (father of 4, Munhwa Ilbo, 30 nov. 2010)

“I think the problem of private education appears because of the parents’ ambition” (mother of 13, Munhwa Ilbo, 16 april 2016).

But more generally, multi-child parents voice out expectations of structural reform to ease and support the load of parenting. As stated before, caring for many children is represented as a heavy task, imposing both personal sacrifice and financial burdens. Sorrow or pain for not being able to provide better for the children’s needs (especially supplementary education) due to their number is a common feature. This explains the general request for more government support, ranging from financial aid to more structural support such as solutions to the problem of childcare by working couples.

“The government should not simply encourage birth, but create the conditions that make childrearing less burdensome” (father of 11, Seoul Shinmun, 9 jan. 2012).

“If we want to overcome the problem of low childbirth, we need to increase social support for childrearing and education” (mother of 8, Hankook Ilbo, 28 aug. 2013).

## **8. Findings and Discussion**

This paper aimed at analyzing the variety of multi-child family representations emerging in popular culture, with a focus on the parenting ideals and practices presented. Its ultimate purpose was that of capturing the cultural meaning of the emergence of these representations with respect to family model and parenting practices.

The review and analysis of sources lead us to the following findings:

1. When solely presented as passive object of government or social help, multi-child families’ portrayals often confirm the rhetoric of birth limitation that linked number of children to poverty, irresponsibility and precariousness. Therefore, even if they are depicted under a positive light, these representations introduce little cultural novelty, except in the cases when families are given a voice.
2. For celebrities being pointed out as having multi-child families, the quantity-cost equation that frequently introduces the narratives of what makes big families different is rarely mentioned, probably due to the assumption of their privileged situation. In most cases, ‘multi-childness’ is simply associated to positive values and acts as

additional social capital.

3. Narratives voiced out by ordinary multi-child families of middle and upper class contain numerous aspects of variation with respect to dominant parenting values and practices. Here, several elements that imply cultural diversification can be spotted: Childrearing and educational philosophies that place the children and their unique features at the center of the parenting task, lessening the pressure that early competition in formal education usually places on the children; emphasis on character-building over cognitive learning; educational methods that prioritize rich experiences done within the family over cognitive learning through commercialized educational consumption.
4. However, there are signals indicating that, to a certain measure, parents give up on supplementary education for their children not as a result of choice but of constraint. This practice, therefore, carries with it a certain ambivalence. In sum, multiple-children parents are shown as having the zeal for education that characterizes average Korean parents, only maybe with differences in focus and in degree.
5. Unintended educational advantages to multi-child families are noticed and emphasized, that are a new cultural factor on the backdrop of smaller size families. Among these, we can mention a lessened reliance on material goods, earlier self-sufficiency and social skills.
6. In a more fundamental and profound way, the element of novelty that multi-child family representations could bring along can be pinpointed as a parenting experience conceived as an end in itself (family life as the main object of enjoyment), as opposed to an instrumental notion that sees parenting as a means to providing non-parental educational goods which in turn point towards visible achievement. Even to the risk of over-simplifying things, we could say that while one paradigm emphasizes the value of present, affective and immaterial goods, the other stresses the value of future, visible and material goods.
7. As for the source of these family values and educational convictions, a connection to religion and more specifically to Christianity is frequently suggested. This is done through the mention of children as gifts of God that should be accepted unconditionally and other faith-derived declarations, or through showing or mentioning habitual church attendance and active involvement or ministry in a Christian group. Other times, references to the influence of foreign cultures and lifestyles are also present.

To end, I will relate these findings with the initial inquiry about the role of the state. My findings can be summarized in two points:

1. The timing and discursive context of the emergence of multi-child families in popular culture and the uniformly positive image they carry seems to confirm the continuation of a logic where collective and social needs as visualized by the state redefine the contours of the Korean family. The use of coercive means being no longer an option, the 'return' of the multi-child family to the public space through visibility in popular culture might carry the meaning of an attempt to cultural persuasion.
2. Once the door to visibility is open, real multiple-child families also gain a voice and

partially control the way they are represented. Through this space of freedom, an input of new cultural values and practices that might modify the logic of adjustment to the state takes place. Parenting values and practices that do not totally conform to the dominant education system emerge. The direction of demands changes from state to family to family to state. Popular culture could be thus imagined as a space for negotiation. Once ordinary multi-child families gain access to it, not only the state but also they can make use of that space to voice their demands.

## References

- Chang, Kyung-Sup (2010). *South Korea under Compressed Modernity. Familial Political Economy in Transition*. Routledge, USA and Canada.
- Cho, Eun-joo (2012). *Population and Governmentality: the Family Planning Program in South Korea*, Department of Sociology, Yonsei University, PhD dissertation.
- Choi, Yu-Jung et al. (2015). Social perception on South Korea's various family types and lifestyles. *Family and Culture* 27 (2), 180-211.
- Chung, Gee-Hyun (2007). The change of family value system in Korean advertising: Content analysis of Television Advertisements from 1970 to 2006. *The Korean Journal of Advertising and Public Relations* 9 (4), 197-229.
- DiMoia, John (2008). "Let's have the proper number of children and raise them well!": Family planning and nation-building in South Korea, 1961-1968. *East Asian Science, Technology and Society: An International Journal* 2 (3), 361-379.
- Jeon, Eun-Wha (2014). A study on the childbirth intention of married women in double income households. *Korean comparative government review* 18 (3), 325-350.
- Kim, Sun-Young (2004). *A study of the family ideology reflected in television advertisements*. Department of Sociology, Ehwa Womans University, PhD dissertation.
- Kim, Seung-Kwon (2011). Prospects and counter-measures of future Korean family. *Health Welfare Policy Forum* 5-22.
- Kim, Yong-Mi (2016). Influence of multi-childbirth on family relations and meaning of children. *The Journal of Child Education* 25 (2), 47-64.
- Kwon, Young-In & Choi, Ji-Eun (2015). Construction of thoughts and roles of parents with multiple children. *Journal of Korean Home Management Association* 33 (4), 83-104.
- Lee, Hye-Kyoung (2011). Maternal nurturing experience from a household of three or more children. *Early Childhood Education Research & Review* 15 (6) 377-406.
- Lee, Hyeon-Song (2006). What is our family changing into? *Health Welfare Policy Forum* 56-63.
- Lee, In Sun (2011). *A study on the factors causing married women in Korea to avoid giving birth*. Department of social welfare, Inje University, PhD dissertation.
- Lee, Jungmin (2008). *Sibling size and investment in children's education: an Asian*

instrument. *Journal of Population Economics* 21, 855-875.

Lee, Sam-Sik (2006). A study on impact of the change in values on marriage and fertility behaviors. *Health and Social Welfare Review* 26 (2), 95-140.

Lee, Sam-Sik et al. (2015). The 2015 national survey on fertility and family health and welfare. Korea Institute for Health and Social Affairs.

Lee, Sam-Sik et al. (2015). Family change and its impact on marriage and fertility. *Kihasa*.

Lee, Yoon-Soo & Lee, Ki-Young (2012). The directions of family welfare practice serving in coping with low fertility in Korea. *Korean Journal of Family Social Work* 38 (12), 139-167.

Lim, Sang Won & al. (2007). *Korean Journalism in the Era of Post-Democratization (2007)*. Nanam.

Lim, Choon-Hee (2011). A study on multi-child families' perceptions of family strengths. *The Korean Journal of the Human Development* 18 (1), 19-64.

Moon, Sook-Jae & al. (2007). A qualitative study on multi-child families' investment in human capital. *Journal of Korean Management Association* 25 (6), 43-57.

OECD (2014). *Lessons from PISA for Korea, Strong Performers and Successful Reformers in Education*. OECD Publishing.

OECD (2016). *Education at a Glance 2016: OECD Indicators*. OECD Publishing, Paris.

Oh, Yoo-Seok (2015). The low fertility and individualization – 'birth strike' vs 'birth choice'. *Journal of Korean Social Trend and Perspective* 45-92.

Park, JaeYeong & al. (2016), *Mapping Journalism. Journalists, News and Society*.

Paxson, Heather (2004). *Making Modern Mothers: Ethics and Family Planning in Urban Greece*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Shin, Hyo-Young (2009). Individual values on giving birth and social view on childbirth encouragement policy, Department of Child and Youth Welfare, Hanseo University, PhD dissertation.

Shin, Soo-Jin (1998). Tradition of Korean familism and its Transition. Department of Home Management, Ehwa University, PhD dissertation.

Sohn, Aelee (2013). Socializing childbirth: Korea's family planning program in the 1960's and 1970's. *Journal of Social Research* 14 (1) 101-131.

Son, So-Young (2012). A study on maternal role image of Korean women in TV commercial ads. Department of Design and Craft, Hongik University, PhD dissertation.

Woo, Nam-Hee et al. (2009). Examining mothers' perceptions and current status concerning their children's education and nurturing in the low birthrate era. *Journal of Future Early Childhood Education* 16 (3), 297-325.

Yeom, Ji-Hye (2013). Factors affecting additional childbirth intention: focusing on Gangnam-gu. *Korea Journal of Child Care and Education* 75, 43-63.

Yoon, Soo-Yeon (2016). Is gender inequality a barrier to realizing fertility intentions? Fertility aspirations and realizations in South Korea, Asian Population Studies, DOI: 10.1080/17441730.2016.1163873

Yum, Joohee & al. (2013). Family planning experience and service needs among families with three children. Health and Social Welfare Review 33 (1), 35-77.

이주영, 박재완 (2015). 한국의 출산격차 영향요인 실증분석. 희망자녀수와 현실자녀수의 차이를 중심으로. 한국정책학회보 24 (4), 1-32.

인구정책 국가기록원. <http://theme.archives.go.kr/next/populationPolicy/policy1950.do>

위영 (2011). 기록으로 읽는 ‘인구정책’. 어제와 오늘. 기록인 16, 70-77.