

Perception of Childbirth and Childrearing among Korean Married Women

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Abstract

The aim of the study is to examine the relationships between socio-demographic variables (age, number of children, education, occupation, and income), satisfaction level with government policies, and perception of childbirth and childrearing among Korean married women. The study participants were 341 married women who were living in Pyeongteak-si, Gyeonggi Province, Korea. The study used descriptive statistics and hierarchical regression analyses and found that number of children, family income, type of occupation, and the level of satisfaction with government policies contribute significantly to perception of childbirth and childrearing among Korea married women. Implications for practice and policy are discussed.

Key words

Korea, childbirth, childrearing, policy, fertility rate

Introduction

South Korea's fertility rate has been rapidly declining since 1983. The current fertility rate in South Korea is 1.15, which is one of the lowest in the world, and is well below the replacement rate (Cho & Kim, 2010). Replacement rate is the rate required to maintain current population levels. A realistic estimation of the replacement rate for most developed countries is considered to be slightly above 2 children per woman (Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2009). South Koreans are living longer and having fewer children, which accelerates

* Funding for this paper was provided by Namseoul University.

the process of an aging population. South Korea's aging population is higher than France, Germany, Sweden and the U.K (Shimasawa & Hosoyama, 2004). By 2050, this is expected to: a) reduce South Korea's labor force to two thirds of its current size (Minister of Foreign Affairs, 2012); and b) raise the proportion of seniors to 70% of the population (Euromonitor International from IMF, 2007). The low birth rate and increased life expectancy means that fewer economically active people will have to support many more senior citizens. Therefore, this lower fertility rate with increasing aging population has raised serious concerns among South Korea policy makers and the public.

Low birth rate is no longer a problem only for South Korea; many other European countries and developed countries have experienced fertility decline since the late nineteenth century (Caldwell, et al., 1987) because of the development of contraceptive technologies, the increase of voluntary childlessness, and changing marriage patterns (Boulay & Valente, 1999; Koropecjy-Cox & Pendell, 2007). Unlike European countries and other developed countries, studies in South Korea have attributed the causes of low fertility to a number of unique factors. These include economic instability, changed social values and attitudes toward marriage and children, increased women's social and economic activities, and the influence of public policy in regard to family planning (Cho & Kim, 2010). In addition, some researchers have recently attributed the cause of low birth rate to changed perception of childbirth and childrearing among younger women (Jung, 2005; Kim, 2003; Lee, 2006; Oh, 2009). There is growing evidence of linkages between the perception of childbirth and childrearing and fertility rate. Married women's Positive perceptions of childbirth and childrearing lead to earlier childbearing and increase marital fertility (Barber, 2001). However, no empirical studies to examine the association with South Korean married women have been conducted. Thus, the present study examines the perception level of childbirth and childrearing, the level of satisfaction with governmental policies, the relationships between related variables and perception of childbirth and childrearing among South Korean married women.

Literature Review

Relationship between Economic Activities and Childbirth and Childrearing

In recent decades, the workforce participation of women (both married and single) has increased substantially in South Korea. However, many obstacles such as biased perspectives, and financial and time limitations in relation to childbirth and childrearing, have still made it problematic for married women to keep their current jobs. Kim (2003) reported that more than half of women have been fired or resigned within a year after their marriages. In addition, Kim (2003) argued that, unlike their male counterparts, the women's firing is significantly associated between changed marital status and position shift from permanent to temporary job.

Mechanisms of Change in Perspective toward Childbirth and Childrearing

One of major mechanisms of perspective change described in the literature is cohort replacement (i.e. inter-cohort) change. Birth cohorts differ from one another due to exposure to different historical and socio-economic conditions during their early, formative years. Because of diverse socialization experiences, each successive cohort adopts distinctive perspectives, attitudes, and values, which remain relatively stable over the life course. Indeed, inter-cohort differences are seen for a wide range of social and political perspectives (Brooks & Bolzendahl, 2004; Lesthaeghe & Surkyn, 2008; Treas, 2002). Many researchers focus on factors related to socialization of children such as gender, education, parental characteristics, parental family structure, and place of residence to explain changes in family related perspectives (Choi & Kim, 2005; Lee, 2009). In addition to cohort succession, events such as marriage, cohabitation, childbearing, and divorce may alter or reaffirm views about family. Premarital cohabitation, for example, leads to less traditional attitudes toward family issues (Axinn & Barber, 1997). Even though people with more traditional perspectives are more likely to marry and have children in the first place, transitioning to parenthood promotes traditional perspectives toward childbirth and child rearing (Moors, 2000; Morgan & Waite, 1987).

Demographic Variables and Perceptions of Childbirth and Childrearing

As the several theories described above argue, individual-level factors are important predictors of perspectives toward childbirth and childrearing and of changes in perspectives over time. One important individual-level factor is age. Past studies have reported that older people are more supportive of traditional marriage (Pagnini & Rindfuss, 1993) and less supportive of voluntary childlessness (Koropeckyj-Cox & Pendell, 2007); older people also view children as more central to their lives than younger people (Jones & Brayfield, 1997).

Several studies have asserted that education and employment should be considered as important predictors of perspectives of childbirth and childrearing. Cho and Kim (2010) reported that the better-educated delay marriage, have fewer children and view family roles as less central. They also place less emphasis on marriage and hold more positive attitudes toward voluntary childlessness (Lee, 2009). Participation in the labor force also exposes both men and women to non-traditional ideas about family and gender roles; it also increases economic resources and the share of non-kin in personal networks. Employed men and women have less traditional attitudes toward family and children (Trent & South, 1992) compared to those individuals who are not in the labor force, and these differences have increased for American women from 1972 to 1986 (Glass, 1992).

Financial status (income) is another significant predictor of perspectives of childbirth and childrearing. Yang and Rosenblatt (2008) reported that many South Korean couples chose not to have children or to delay having children because they lacked the income and economic security to support their children. Cho and Kim (2010) also proposed that income is the strongest predictor of not having children among South Korean couples.

Public Policy and Perception of Fertility Rate

Recent studies have emphasized the importance of understanding the broader social environment in which fertility decisions are made (e.g., Choi & Kim, 2005). Specifically, government initiated policy regarding family planning significantly affects the decisions of whether to have

children (Cho, 2010; Cho & Kim, 2010). According to the Korea Statistics Department (2012), there has been a sharp decrease in birth rate since a population control policy was implemented by the South Korean government during the 1960s. Cho and Seo (1989) reported that as a result of the government initiated policy, the total fertility rate (TFR) went down from 6.0 to 1.6 in the period from 1960 to 1987.

In contrast to the 1960s, the South Korean government has developed and implemented several programs to increase fertility rate in order to deal with unexpected low birth rate. The South Korean government promulgated the First Basic Planning for Low Fertility and Aged Society (2006-2010) in 2006, which focuses on three areas: 1) extending supports for costs of child care and education, and expanding after-school education to attenuate the financial burden of households; 2) providing various incentives for families with children; reinforcing support for families that adopt; expanding public and workplace childcare facilities, improving quality of service in the private child-care facilities, and extending child-care service to meet diversified demands; 3) establishing a health and nutrition system for expectant mothers and children, providing economical support for couples suffering from infertility, and aid for postpartum and new-born infant care of the poor class (Korea Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2012). There is notable evidence that the number of children increased for the first time since 1994 from 438,000 in 2005 to 452,000 in 2006 and 497,000 in 2007, increasing TFR (total fertility rate) from 1.08 in 2005 to 1.13 in 2006 and 1.26 in 2007 (Lee, 2009).

Theoretical Frameworks of Childbirth and Childrearing

A host of theoretical perspectives have cropped up to explain the demographic transition from a high birth and death rate to a low birth and death rate. One of the earliest theories to explain declining fertility comes from psychological stress theory. Janis (1958) defines psychological stress as the reaction to a physically dangerous event in which pain, bodily injury, or death is anticipated. The way an individual psychologically handles the impending crisis during the pre-impact period is an important determinant for the outcome. Janis postulates that a "work of worry" is essential for successful outcome. This anticipatory

rehearsal or imaginative construction of future events serves to bind anxiety and later functions to reduce uncertainty at crisis impact. Psychological stress theory can explain the current changed phenomenon according to which highly educated Korean women keep avoiding having babies. Some studies have reported that the degree of this avoidance shows a close association between educational level and increased awareness of anticipated risks (Feizi et al., 2010). In addition, Korean women who want to maintain a beautiful appearance may think that baby delivery will be a risky event and destroy their body shapes.

Another theory to explain declining fertility is rationality theory. According to the rationality theory, the fertility decision is deemed to be a psychological process whereby the individual decision maker seeks to maximize utility while taking into account resource limitations and cost constraints (Bagozzi & van Loo, 1979). People have fewer children as their incomes increase when they realize that the decrease in the number of children is offset by an enormous increase in the amount of resources they can invest in each child (Bergstrom, 1996). Easterlin and Crimmins (1985) reported that people are motivated to practice contraception when the potential supply of surviving children exceeds the demand for them. The rational choice approach has several challenges. Friedman, Hechter, & Kanazawa (1994) pointed out that it cannot explain why people continue to have children when their net instrumental value is negative. Cultural norms and climates may affect married women's decision to have babies (Lesthaege, 1983). Others have argued that people behave differently from what the economic model predicts, and often, their behavior is contrary to rationality assumptions (Bagozzi & van Loo, 1979).

Alternative theories see fertility as impacted by social factors at the macro-level, such as labor force participation rates, sexual income differentiation, and relative economic status. Practically, these are societal factors that are beyond individual control but that nonetheless exert influence on people's decisions. Importantly, the fertility decision is a multifaceted phenomenon under the influence of complex social, economic, cultural, and psychological factors. Parallel to this, there is an integrated review of various factors (psychological, social, economic, and public policy) that impact birth rate. Such an integrated lens can be provided by the risk-society theory. The risk-society theory understands that the risks

stemming from economic and technological changes depreciate the value of the family and children through several different mechanisms, including automation and employment insecurity (Beck, 1999). Therefore, risk management has become the most important response pattern that individuals use to direct their thinking and actions in order to maintain a greater sense of certainty or control. The most important aspect of human life – reproduction – has become a major issue, drawing the close attention of policy makers because it affects the supply of human labor and stability of the society.

Based on the literature review and theoretical frameworks, the following research questions have been developed for this study:

- Question 1.** What are the most important concerns when the participants make a plan for an additional child?
- Question 2.** Which aspect of government policies regarding childbirth and childrearing is the most favorable?
- Question 3.** What are the relationships among demographic variables (age, education, income, occupation, years of marriage, number of children), the level of satisfaction with government policies, and perception of childbirth and childrearing?
- Question 4.** After accounting for mediating demographic variables, does the level of satisfaction with government policies significantly predict on perception of childbirth and childrearing?

Method

Study Participants

Using a cross-sectional survey design, we collected data from 341 married women who were living in Pyeongteak-si, Gyeonggi Province, Korea, via a paper-and-pencil questionnaire. The survey was conducted between September and November, 2011 at a childrearing resources center, women's center, and day care center in Pyeongteak-si. We used 341 surveys after removing 9 surveys because of too many missing answers. Participants ranged in age from the 20s to the 50s. Overall, 65.5 % of the participants had two or more children, whereas 32% had one child, and 0.9% had no children. A large majority (57.5%) of the

sample had graduated from college or university, more than those who merely held high school degrees (32.3%). Housewives made up a substantial proportion (43.8%) of the occupation type, followed by full time (34.9%), self-employed (13.5%), and temporary job (7.9%). Those with a medium level of income made up the highest proportion (32.6%) of the subjects (see Table 1).

Table 1
Socio-Demographic Characteristics

Variables	N	Proportion of total (%)
Age		
21-29	40	11.8%
30-39	234	69.2%
40-49	57	16.9%
50-59	7	2.1%
Number of children		
0	3	0.9%
1	107	31.9%
2	186	55.5%
3	37	11.0%
4	2	0.6%
Educational attainment		
Less than junior high school	5	1.5%
High school graduate	110	32.3%
College graduate	196	57.5%
University graduate	30	8.8%
Occupation		
Housewife	133	43.8%
Self-employed	41	13.5%
Full time	106	34.9%
Temporary job	24	7.9%
Equivalent family income (10,000 won/month)		
< 200	27	8.0%
201-300	88	26.1%
301-400	110	32.6%
401-500	62	18.4%
> 500	50	14.8%

Measures

The dependent variables of the study are perception of childbirth and childcare. They are a composite score of ten survey items used by Sin and Bang (2009) from 'Strongly disagree' (1) to 'Strongly agree' (5). Two negative items were reverse coded. High scores on the measure indicated a more positive perception of childbirth and child care. The computed alpha coefficient of the ten items was 0.60.

The independent variables were classified into two categories: socio-demographic variables and level of satisfaction with government policies. Socio-demographic variables were age, number of children, educational attainment, occupation, and monthly family income. Educational attainment was classified into less than junior high school, high school graduate, college graduate, and university graduate. Occupation was classified as housewife, self-employed, full time, and temporary job.

Satisfaction level with government policies was a composite score of five items used by Sin and Bang (2009) from 'Strongly disagree' (1) to 'Strongly agree' (5). The five items of the scale are (1) construction of cultural environment; (2) childcare service support; (3) childbirth medical expense support; (4) childbirth encouragement fund; and (5) social insurance and tax support. High scores on the measure indicated higher satisfaction with government policies. The computed internal validity of the five items was 0.92.

Data Analysis

To explore the first and second research question, mean and standard deviation were calculated. To examine the third research question, a Pearson's correlation was conducted. The fourth research question was addressed by a hierarchical multiple regression equation. The regression model was solved by entering socio-demographic variables as a block, and then entering the level of satisfaction with government policies into the equation as a second block.

Results

The Ranking of Married Women's Perception of Childbirth and Childrearing

Table 2 shows the ranking of the participants' expressed concerns in

relation to deciding to have an additional baby. Sufficient number of trustworthy day care centers is the most highly ranked concern and social values are the lowest ranked concern among the participants.

Table 2
The Ranking of Married Women's Perception of Childbirth and Childrearing

Rank	Questions	M	SD
1	There are a sufficient number of trustworthy day care centers around home	2.83	.91
2	It is easy to return to work after childbirth and infant care	2.06	.88
3	Housing expense is a burden to raise children	2.01	.96
4	It is easy to use flexible work hours	1.93	.85
5	Childcare expense is a burden	1.92	.95
6	Social values make it easy to work and raise children at the same time	1.76	1.03

Notes. Scores ranged from 1 to 5. Higher scores indicated more positive perception.

Favorable Aspects of Government Policies regarding Childbirth and Childrearing

Construction of cultural environment, such as diminishing a gender biased perception on working and childrearing, and promoting the culture of accepting married women's economic activities was the most favorable aspect of government policies. Social insurance/tax support is the least favorable aspect of government policies regarding childbirth and childrearing (See Table 3).

Table 3
The Ranking of Married Women's Satisfaction with Government Policies

Rank	Questions	M	SD
1	Construction of cultural environment	2.33	.79
2	Childcare service support	2.32	.84
3	Childbirth medical expense support	2.27	.86
4	Childbirth encouragement fund	2.26	.89
5	Social insurance/tax support	2.21	.82

Notes. Scores ranged from 1 to 5. Higher scores indicated higher satisfaction.

Demographic Variables and Perception of Childbirth and Childrearing

To examine the third research question on the relationship between socio-demographic variables and perception of childbirth and child-rearing, a Pearson's correlational analysis was conducted. Table 2 shows that the number of children ($r = -0.12$), income ($r = 0.11$) and kind of occupation ($r = 0.12$) were significantly associated with perception of childbirth and childrearing. Satisfaction with government policies ($r = .54$) was also significantly associated with perception of childbirth and childrearing (see Table 4).

Table 4
Correlation between Perception of Childbirth and Childrearing and Independent Variables

Variables	Pearson's Correlation
Demographic variables	
Age	.1
Number of children	-.12*
Educational attainment	.08
Occupation	.12*
Monthly family income	.11*
Satisfaction with government policies	.54**

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .001$

Predictors of Perception of Childbirth and Childrearing

After accounting for mediating variables of socio-demographical variables, the final research question asked whether the level of satisfaction with government policies regarding family planning predicts perception of childbirth and childrearing. After controlling for socio-demographic variables (adjusted $R^2 = 0.03$), the level of satisfaction with government policies accounted for an additional 27% of variance in perception of childbirth and childrearing (final adjusted $R^2 = 0.30$) and indicated that the level of satisfaction with government policies contributed significantly to perception of childbirth and childrearing among Korean married women (see Table 5).

Table 5
Hierarchical Regression Analysis

Variables	Model 1				Model 2			
	B	SE	β	t	B	SE	β	t
Age	.58	.35	.11	1.67	.38	.3	.07	1.27
Number of children	-.75	.31	-.15	-2.42*	-.54	.27	-.11	-2.02*
Educational attainment	.04	.32	.01	.12	.18	.28	.04	.65
Occupation	.16	.2	.05	.83	-.01	.17	-.00	-.04
Monthly family income	.25	.18	.09	1.38	.35	.15	.13	2.28*
Satisfaction with government policies					.48	.05	.53	10.35**
R^2			.05				.32	
R^2 change			.05*				.27**	
Adjusted R^2			.03				.3	

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .001$

Discussion

This study was designed for three purposes. The first purpose was to explore the perception level of childbirth and childrearing. The second purpose was to examine the relationships between socio-demographic variables (age, number of children, education, occupation, and income), satisfaction level with government policies, and perception of childbirth and childrearing among Korea married women. The third purpose was to identify whether satisfaction level with government initiated policies predicted perception of childbirth and childrearing after controlling for socio-demographic variables. Because little research has specifically been aimed at understanding the impact of government initiated policies on perception of childbirth and childrearing among Korean married women, another purpose of this study was to advance the existing literature with information on the impact of government policies with a group not previously investigated.

The results of this study can be summarized in five key points. First, the quality of child care at a trustworthy day care center and whether

women can return to the workplace after childbirth are the most important concerns in a decision to have an additional baby. It is certainly important to help to encourage married women to have additional babies with various kinds of financial support. However, the complexity of having a child suggests that motivational aspects in relation to child-rearing environment and job security also need to be taken into account. Recent reports about child abuse in several day care centers by mass media may negatively affect many married Korean women. In addition, female workers in South Korea have relatively lower job security than male workers. Yoon (2011) pointed out that while 70 percent of females in their 20s are participating in economic activities, the ratio falls to 55 percent for the age bracket between 30 and 34, mostly due to child rearing. Policy makers should recognize it as an important factor to increase birth rate and put more effort toward increasing the return rate to workforce after child delivery. Currently Korea government has implemented a pilot policy to support service fee for all children aged 0 to 5 years old who are cared for by day care centers (Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2012). It is expected to affect working mothers who might be considering additional babies.

Second, unlike the findings of previous studies, construction of cultural environment, such as diminishing gender biased perception on women's working and childrearing, and promoting culture to accept married women's economic and social activities was the most favorable aspect of government policies. Most of previous studies have documented that financial support is the most important factor to increase fertility rate (Kong, 2006; Yang & Lee, 1997; Kim, 2003). According to socio-cultural theory, equality in the workplace is one of the key factors affecting married women in their decision to continue their economic activities with childrearing (Lee, 2010). It is imperative to recognize that fertility promotion efforts should focus on creating a fertility-friendly culture and environment using ceaseless education and large-scale campaigns.

Third, consistent with previous studies, number of children, family income, and type of occupation are significantly associated with perception of childbirth and childrearing (Park et al., 2008; Lee, 2009). Participants who have more children have a relatively more positive perception of childbirth and childrearing than participants who have fewer

children or no children. A previous study reported that women with one child had a significantly higher intent to have an additional child (Park et al., 2008; Jokela, 2010). The number of living children is also strongly associated with women's preference for an additional child, regardless of marital and economic status. Also, participants who were involved in full-time jobs expressed a relatively negative perception of childbirth and childrearing. A possible explanation for the negative perception of childbirth and childrearing among fulltime workers is the lack of compatibility between work and childrearing. Finally, participants who have higher incomes expressed a relatively more positive perception of childbirth and childrearing than those whose incomes were lower. Financial support should be expanded and implemented to change perceptions of childbirth and childrearing among Korea married women.

Fourth, the level of satisfaction with government policies contributes significantly to the perception of childbirth and childrearing among Korea married women. This finding is consistent with prior studies (Choi & Kim, 2005; Chun, 2005; Lee, 2009). Participants who have higher satisfaction level with government-initiated policies have expressed relatively positive perceptions of childbirth and childbearing.

Last, the most promising result indicated that no matter what the socio-demographic variables were, the level of satisfaction with government policies is a significant predictor of the perception of childbirth and childrearing among Korea married women. Although some researchers argue that demographic, social, and economic factors may interactively influence perceptions of childbirth and childrearing, this study's results clearly indicated that satisfaction with the level of government-initiated policies is the strongest predictor of positive perceptions of childbirth and childrearing (Lee, 2009). This means that it may be worthwhile to put more emphasis on developing fertility-friendly policies to increase the fertility rate to the sustainable level in the near future.

The finding of the study partially supported some assumptions of rationality theory. Participants' decision to have additional babies significantly depended on a psychological process whereby they sought to maximize utility while taking into account resource limitations and cost constrains (Bagozzi & van Loo, 1979). However, the causal relationship between participants' psychological reasoning and their decisions should be tested with additional longitudinal studies.

This study has several limitations. The first was the use of a non-random sample of women belonging to a specific group, Korea married women. Data from this survey are not representative of the overall population of Korean married women. In addition, because no variables were manipulated and no longitudinal data were collected, assumptions about causality cannot be made. Third, the possibility of measurement error cannot be ruled out. The reliability of perception of childbirth and childcare was acceptable but low (0.60). Fourth, another question that deserves attention is whether perception of childbirth and childbearing predict subsequent fertility behavior. Previous studies have demonstrated that perceptions of childbirth and childbearing have been significantly associated with fertility behavior (Miller & Pasta, 1995; Schoen, Astone, Kim, & Nathanson, 1999). Future studies that extend multiple waves of data collections with more cities will help in teasing out the causality of the selected variables for the study regarding fertility behavior. In addition, it is crucial to test a path model including some possible mediating and moderating variables. For example, it is necessary to examine whether the economic value of giving birth has a function as moderator or mediator variable in the relationship between perceptions of childbirth and fertility behaviors.

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