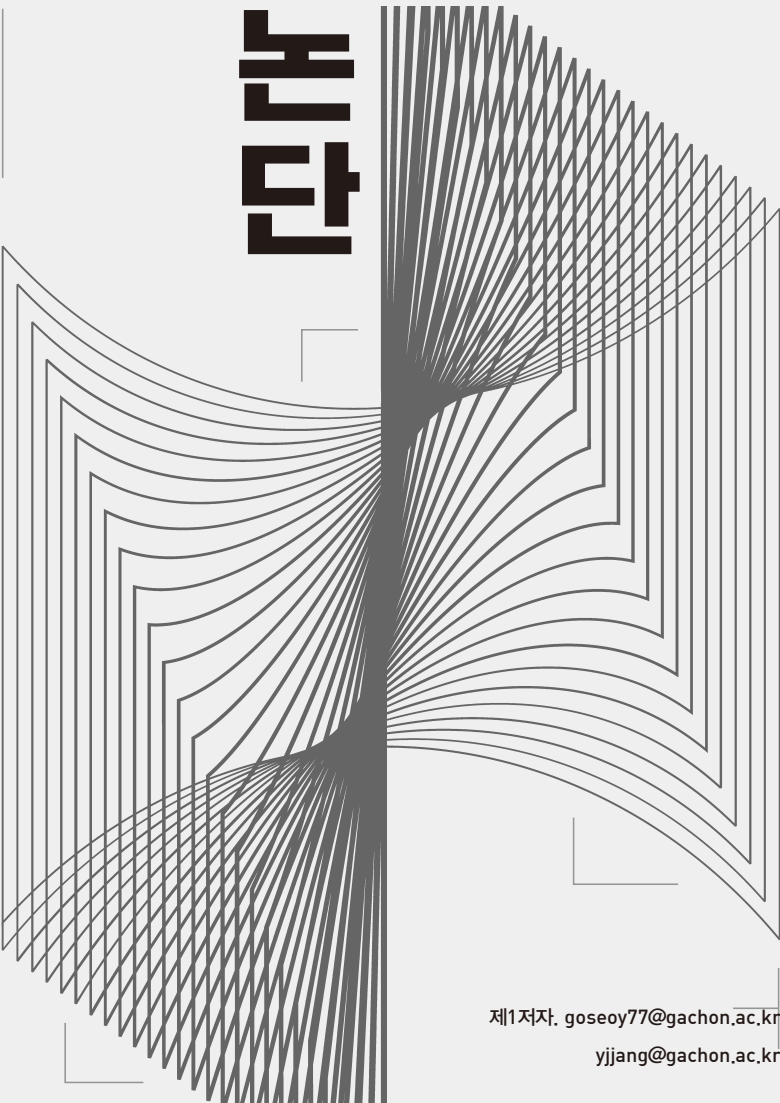




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A Theory-Informed Case Analysis of the DINKWAD Phenomenon in South Korea

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<https://doi.org/10.21738/JHS.2026.4.58.319>

I . Introduction

■ South Korea is currently facing the most severe fertility crisis in the world. In 2024, the total fertility rate stood at just 0.75. The rate had already fallen below the replacement level of 2.10 in 1983, when it dropped to 2.06. Since then, the decline has accelerated. It was 1.48 in 2000, 1.23 in 2010, and by 2020 had reached 0.84 (Statistics Korea, 2024). In 2023, the figure hit a historic low of 0.72. Such a persistently low fertility rate poses a serious threat to sustainability. According to The Korea Times, Joan Williams exclaimed, “Korea is so screwed. Wow!” (Williams, as cited in Lee, 2023) when she heard the 2022 fertility rate. To understand this issue in depth, it is essential to listen to the voices of young couples who are at the center of decisions about childbirth. Their lived experiences must be taken seriously, alongside reflections on the recent transformations in family forms. The process by which couples delay or even give up on having children is rarely straightforward. Many factors are involved, which makes it necessary to explore the psychological, social, and economic conditions that shape such decisions.

In Korea, as in many other countries, diverse family forms

are becoming more common. Instead of the traditional nuclear family of parents and children, some couples choose to remain childfree, while others raise pets in place of children. In Korea, the terms “DINK” (Dual Income, No Kids) and “DINK-Pets” are widely used. DINK couples are typically dual-earners who place high value on financial independence and personal fulfillment. The derivative term ‘DINK-Pets’ refers to couples who raise companion animals and regard them as family members in lieu of children. In international scholarship, the term ‘DINKWAD’ (Dual Income, No Kids, With A Dog) is more common. It describes the trend of redefining pets as family and investing emotional and material resources in them, a phenomenon that has been rapidly increasing among millennials and Generation Z (SuperStaff, 2024).

By the end of 2022, 5.52 million Korean households were raising pets. This accounted for roughly 25% of all households (Lee, 2023). The pet industry itself has been expanding quickly, with an average annual growth rate of 9.6%. This expansion has also reshaped the educational landscape. In 2020, only eight universities in Korea offered majors related to companion animals; by 2023, the number had increased to fifty-seven — a sevenfold growth in just three years. This development stands in stark contrast to the closures of kindergartens and childcare centers, as well as the elimination of early childhood education departments, which are directly affected by declining birthrates. South Korea’s compressed modernization has left a legacy of chronic employment instability and hyper-competition, thrusting the society into what Ulrich Beck describes as a ‘risk society’. In this context, individuals have

adopted a form of ‘survivalist individualism,’ where marriage and childbirth are perceived as high-risk ventures that threaten personal security. As traditional nuclear family structures dissolve under these pressures, companion animals have emerged as a ‘secure alternative,’ offering emotional stability without the irreversible and overwhelming burdens associated with traditional parenthood.

This study explores the “DINKWAD” lifestyle — a phenomenon under-researched in academia — to analyze how caregiving practices and family reconfiguration occur within this group. Specifically, it examines whether this lifestyle reflects changes in family structure and emotional intimacy, and how these choices relate to South Korea’s low fertility crisis. As a qualitative inquiry, this research aims to provide an initial conceptualization and a theoretical framework for this new sociocultural phenomenon, establishing a foundation for subsequent studies. To this end, the DINKWAD phenomenon is analyzed through the lenses of postmodern family theory, evolutionary psychology, and human development. Based on this framework, interview cases are interpreted using a “theory-informed case analysis” approach.

The primary objective of this study lies not in statistical generalization based on sample size, but in the conceptual structuring of the phenomenon through specific theoretical lenses, such as those of Erikson and Maslow. In this regard, theory-informed case analysis typically employs abductive reasoning rather than strictly inductive or deductive methods. This process involves identifying the most plausible theoretical framework to explain the observed data, while simultaneously heightening theoretical

sensitivity by uncovering areas where existing theories may fall short in addressing new sociocultural shifts. Unlike conventional qualitative studies (e.g., naturalistic inquiry) that prioritize the passive observation and description of phenomena, this approach actively utilizes established theories as interpretive lenses. By doing so, it facilitates a dynamic reconfiguration of lived experiences, allowing for a deeper understanding of the DINKWAD phenomenon within the specific structural complexities of South Korean society.

II . Theoretical Analysis

1. Integrated Perspective of Erikson and Maslow: The Meaning of Life and the Desire for Care

The human desire to care for others is widely discussed across theoretical frameworks. Maslow (1943) systematized human needs into a hierarchy of five levels — ① physiological, ② safety, ③ love and belonging, ④ esteem, and ⑤ self-actualization — where advancement to higher levels depends on fulfilling lower ones. Later, he added a sixth: self-transcendence, the aspiration to contribute to a greater existence beyond oneself, such as community, humanity, belief systems, or future generations. This aspiration is closely linked to caregiving, value transmission, and childrearing.

Erikson (1950), in his psychosocial developmental theory, defined adulthood (ages 40–65) by the tension between generativity

and stagnation. Generativity involves contributing to and taking responsibility for the next generation, not limited to biological reproduction but encompassing the transmission of values, culture, knowledge, affection, and morality. He presented childbearing and childrearing as core expressions of generativity, enabling individuals to construct continuity and meaning in life. In many sociological theories, parenthood marks a transition to social adulthood and the establishment of social identity. Raising children transcends biological reproduction, serving as an ontological practice through which humans experience continuity beyond the self and expand self-identity. Caring for and taking responsibility for another is both a self-transcendent experience and a key source of life's ultimate meaning (Erikson, 1982).

Relationships with companion animals can thus be interpreted as an alternative path to fulfilling self-transcendence and generativity needs. Rather than a simple substitution, this bond functions as a proactive life strategy. For those who choose not to have children, companion animals offer emotional resonance and existential meaning. Although DINKWADs may not contribute to humanity in the conventional sense, they appear to partially satisfy these needs by caring for the lives of non-human beings.

2. Postmodern Family Theory and the Theory of Individualization

The postmodern family theory or discourse is not a singular, unified theory, but a sociological framework analyzing how the

concept, structure, and meaning of the family have changed in postmodern society. From this perspective, the family is no longer viewed as an institutional necessity but as a selective alliance between individuals (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Traditional family structures based on blood ties and marriage have transformed, and family is now regarded as a chosen design for living. Whereas earlier notions centered on kinship, procreation, and child-rearing, contemporary family forms are redefined as “intentional communities” based on emotional intimacy and mutual responsibility (Smart, 2007).

Smart (2007) interprets family as a domain of emotional practice transcending legal and biological boundaries. She positions relationships of care and responsibility as central to “personal life,” arguing that family should be understood as a relational construct formed through emotional closeness and mutual engagement. Through “family practices,” families can be designed and selected, and relationships with pets, friends, or community members can hold familial significance. Some couples choose not to have children and instead invest emotional attachment in pets, both for emotional satisfaction and to pursue “meaningful relationality” (Rastogi, 2024).

The postmodern theory of individualization depicts society as one of “self-choice and self-responsibility,” where traditional institutions weaken and individuals must bear the weight of their life decisions. In this context, marriage and childbirth are often perceived as “irreversible choices” that potentially threaten personal freedom. From this standpoint, the “DINKWAD”

group is symbolic; they reconstruct familial relationships through emotional bonds with companion animals rather than pursuing biological parenthood. By choosing pets as family, they align with concepts of intentional community and emotional family, reinterpreting care from a non-procreative perspective that diverges from traditional childbirth-centered ideologies.

3. Avoidance Motivation Theory

The postponement or renunciation of childbirth among DINKWAD individuals can be explained through Avoidance Motivation Theory, which examines the psychological and emotional drivers of behavior. According to approach-avoidance motivation theory, people act based on the interplay between approach motivation — the drive toward anticipated rewards — and avoidance motivation — the drive to evade negative outcomes (Gray, 1987; Elliot & Church, 1997). The dominant motivation determines action, and individuals often respond more strongly to fear of negative consequences than to the anticipation of positive rewards (Elliot & Church, 1997).

Childbirth and parenting entail long-term responsibilities, substantial financial burdens, and persistent anxieties regarding parental competence, rendering them high-stakes and inherently uncertain endeavors. When negative emotions surrounding parenting become excessive, avoidance motivation often outweighs approach motivation, leading individuals to strategically exclude childbirth from their life choices. Consequently, the decision to

remain childfree reflects a psychologically driven response shaped by anxiety, fear of failure, and the perceived weight of responsibility (Elliot & Church, 1997). In this context, the practice of maintaining generativity through companion animals can be interpreted as a proactive future time perspective strategy (Kim et al., 2025), as it enables individuals to secure emotional stability and navigate the uncertainties of a hyper-competitive environment.

In South Korea, this psychological pressure is further compounded by structural shifts. Despite the abundance of parenting information available through media and social networks, the nuclearization of families has significantly reduced access to direct role models or hands-on communal support. This gap often fosters overidealized views of parenthood and perfectionist standards, while practical caregiving support remains scarce. Furthermore, as social media involvement is positively correlated with other-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism, the intensified fear of failing to meet these unrealistic standards prompts many couples to avoid parenting altogether as a rational defense mechanism.

4. Evolutionary Psychology and Conditional Reproductive Strategies

Evolutionary psychology explains human psychology and behavior as products of natural selection and survival strategies, assuming that emotions, motivations, desires, and social behaviors are shaped by the evolutionary imperatives of survival and

reproduction (Buss, 1995). A core concept is the gene replication theory, in which Dawkins (1976) argued that the ultimate goal of organisms is not individual survival but the survival and replication of their genes. Thus, bearing and raising children function as biological mechanisms for gene propagation.

Parenting, from this view, is a biologically evolved survival strategy. Trivers' (1972) parental investment theory posits that time and resources invested in offspring increase the survival probability of one's genes, framing affection, responsibility, and caregiving toward children as evolutionary instincts. At first glance, DINKWAD individuals seem to abandon this strategy by not reproducing. However, many fulfill caregiving instincts through emotional bonding with companion animals, often calling themselves "mom" or "dad" and engaging in parenting-like practices. Rather than replacing child-rearing, this behavior may represent a reconfiguration of caregiving needs shaped by modern social structures. Anecdotally, early childhood education faculty remark that "young couples are raising dogs instead of children" or "they're not having kids because they already have pets." From an evolutionary perspective, such behavior may indicate a shift in caregiving instincts from children to socially acceptable, emotionally meaningful alternatives such as pets.

The concept of conditional reproductive strategies (Kaplan & Lancaster, 2000) is also relevant. Humans tend to reproduce only when conditions favor high survival probabilities for offspring, such as stable housing, adequate income, and social security. In urban societies like South Korea, soaring housing costs burden

younger generations, prompting many to delay or forgo marriage and childbirth, concluding that “now is not the right time.” From an evolutionary standpoint, this is a rational, adaptive response to environmental constraints.

III. Methodology

1. Participants

This study involved three “DINK-Pet” (Dual Income, No Kids, With Pets) individuals — married adults who have voluntarily opted out of biological parenthood to form intimate relationships centered on companion animals as family members. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, and the study was conducted following informed consent and approval by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Detailed participant profiles are presented in Table 1.

〈Table 1〉 Participants

Name	Gender	Ages	Years Married	Job	Pet Name	Species
Jin	M	41	8 years	Clothing Retailer	Coco	Dog
Ka	F	38	3 years	Korean Language Teacher	Bom	Dog
Yoo	F	42	10 years	General Office Worker	Daram	Cat

2. Data Collection and Procedure

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews. After obtaining written informed consent following an explanation of the study's purpose and data usage, each 90-120 minute interview was conducted in a familiar setting to ensure comfort. To prioritize participants' narratives and agency, the researcher maintained a non-hierarchical dialogue, ensuring an atmosphere of emotional safety (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

While guided by a pre-developed protocol, the interviews remained flexible to capture each participant's unique lived experiences, consistent with narrative inquiry principles (Riessman, 2008). The primary thematic areas included: ㉠ motivations for opting out of parenthood, ㉡ relationships and caregiving with companion animals, ㉢ shifts in family perception, ㉣ social reactions, and ㉤ the reorganization of daily life and relational dynamics.

Interviews followed key thematic guides but remained flexible, with all sessions audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The analysis prioritized the holistic context of participants' stories, respecting biographical events and identity turning points. These procedures facilitated a deep examination of the interaction between personal narratives and sociocultural conditions, highlighting the ongoing dialogue between individual agency and structural forces.

3. Method of Analysis

The study used a theory-informed case analysis approach, interpreting lived experiences through existing theoretical frameworks (e.g., postmodern family theory, evolutionary psychology, generativity, hierarchy of needs) while preserving case uniqueness and expanding theory.

Following qualitative case study procedures, the researcher repeatedly reviewed transcripts to derive thematic codes from meaningful units. Themes were developed per Braun and Clarke's (2006) process and reinterpreted through theoretical lenses. To reduce bias, analysis was refined through discussions with a co-researcher, ensuring interpretive validity (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012). Themes were compared with theoretical categories to examine explanatory limits and potential extensions.

The following is the English translation of the analytical procedure, refined for academic clarity: The analysis was conducted in four distinct stages. In the first stage, the interview transcripts were thoroughly reviewed to extract meaningful units. The second stage involved establishing specific theoretical lenses, incorporating postmodern family theory, evolutionary psychology, and human development theories. In the third stage, a constant comparison was performed between the participants' narratives and the established theoretical constructs to ensure analytical depth. Finally, the fourth stage culminated in the derivation of integrated themes that holistically represent the DINKWAD phenomenon.

Some themes were reclassified into higher-order categories

and reconceptualized for theoretical alignment. Guided by theoretical sensitivity, the process deepened understanding of meaning structures. Reflexivity was maintained throughout (Finlay, 2002). The final analysis was an interactive dialogue between theory and narrative, balancing case particularity with theoretical expansion.

Analytic steps: a. Initial Reading & Familiarization, b. Open Coding (Meaning Units), c. Searching for Theoretical Links, d. Thematic Reorganization (Team Discussions), e. Theory-Informed Case Analysis, f. Self-Reflection and Validity Check.

〈Table 2〉 Summary of Theory-Informed Case Analysis Results

Case	Empirical Narrative	Theoretical Category	Analytical Implication
Jin	Coco was the only being I could trust entirely; I gained the energy from her to keep moving forward	Maslow: Self-Transcendence	Pet bonding as a source of self-transcendence and existential meaning
Ka	In such a hyper-competitive educational system, I didn't have the confidence that I could raise a child properly	Avoidance Motivation Theory	Childlessness as a rational avoidance of structural threats
Yoo	"If a stable housing environment were secured, I might consider having a child.	Conditional Reproducti-ve Strategies	Reproduction as a contingent strategy based on resource stability

IV. Findings

1. A Choice for Emotional Fulfillment and Care: “I don’t plan to have children, but I want to give and receive love” (Meaning in Life and the Desire to Care)

The decisions of DINKWAD participants were not mere acts of avoiding childbirth, but meaningful practices of care grounded in personal identity and life satisfaction. This section explores how these choices connect to psychosocial developmental and human motivation theories.

Originally, I didn’t believe in marriage. But over time, I became certain that spending my life with my husband — as my best friend — would bring me happiness. As early as my mid-twenties, I had already decided I wouldn’t have children. The love I might have given to a child, I now give to my pets, and in return, I experience happiness. (Ka)

When we love our pets as part of the family, the happiness and strength we receive from them is immense. During a tough period when I lost trust in people, it was Coco who gave me strength. Coming home to her became the most peaceful moment of my day. Just having someone I could trust entirely gave me the energy to keep going. (Jin)

Even without kids, we realized a household can still be meaningful and full of joy. We chose not to bind ourselves to the traditional belief that marriage must be followed by children. Whether it’s children or

pets, both offer us love and comfort. In some sense, the emotional bond we have with our pet is even richer. (Yoo)

These decisions reflect autonomous choices to pursue life meaning and the emotional need to care, rather than simple rejection of having children. This aligns with Erikson's theory, particularly the adult tasks of intimacy vs. isolation and generativity vs. stagnation. Investing emotional energy in companion animals instead of biological children represents a transformation of traditional life tasks into alternative caregiving.

From Maslow's hierarchy of needs, participants, having fulfilled physiological and safety needs, met their needs for love, belonging, and self-actualization through relationships with companion animals. Their motivation to care for another living being and the satisfaction derived from such care indicate a choice driven by meaning and emotional self-realization, reframing it as proactive, value-oriented caregiving.

2. Reconstructing the Family: "A pet is not a child, but a member of the family."

This section analyzes how DINKWAD participants reconstruct the notion of family through relationships with companion animals. Although they did not explicitly call their pets "children," they saw them as beings with whom they share emotional bonds, caregiving responsibilities, and daily solidarity. This reflects postmodern family theory's emphasis on relationship-

centered definitions of family and the chosen intimacy concept in individualization theory. Familial identities were formed not through legal or biological ties, but through reciprocal emotional bonds and sustained care — exemplifying alternative family practices departing from the normative model.

To me, having a pet means giving up a part of my life. I wouldn't recommend it unless you can sacrifice a part of yourself without it feeling burdensome. Bomi is like a young sibling who still needs constant care — like a baby. Since she can't speak, I have to be even more attentive, always keeping an eye on her. (Ka)

She's my baby. I want to give her only the best. However, I don't think pets can replace children; while a child brings pressure to sacrifice my life for their success, Coco is a companion to live happily with, side by side. I trust her more than most people, and that mutual trust means everything to me. (Jin)

Darami is a member of our family. We naturally call her our 'daughter' and even use titles like 'Grandma' when family visits. I care for her the way a parent cares for their kid. Maybe some people are better suited to raising children, while others — like me — are better suited to raising pets. (Yoo)

While they avoid labeling pets as “children,” participants recognize them as beings toward whom they bear deep affection, responsibility, and care. In the postmodern context, family is

redefined through relational dynamics rather than institutional or biological terms. These experiences show that emotional stability and life purpose can be built through bonds with animals, affirming that lives feel complete and legitimate outside traditional norms. The DINKWAD model illustrates family as an emotional community rooted in voluntary caregiving beyond institutional or kin-based frameworks.

3. Structural Constraints and Low Fertility: “Avoiding childbirth may not be a matter of values, but a structural consequence.”

This section analyzes how DINKWAD participants’ decisions to forgo childbirth reflect structural constraints rather than mere personal preference. They made these decisions within a web of threats — economic insecurity, housing burdens, intense educational competition, and fear of social stigma — aligning with approach-avoidance theory, which views avoiding threatening stimuli as a strategic survival mechanism.

Watching students endure intense competition in a hypercompetitive environment made me realize I wasn't confident I could raise a child to become a person of sound character in such a system. The idea that someone like me — who doesn't have it all figured out — would be responsible for shaping another life? It felt overwhelming. Furthermore, my partner and I were only able to buy our home because we had already agreed to remain a childfree couple. (Ka)

Raising children is not only financially burdensome, but also emotionally painful in a society where they'll be constantly compared to others. Thinking about my child getting hurt in a system where kids are ranked against one another made me realize I couldn't throw a child into this society. If I can't give them the support they need to survive this brutal competition, then maybe it's better not to have kids at all. (Jin)

In reality, people can't balance work and home life. Debt keeps piling up, house prices rise, and the cost of living has skyrocketed. In the end, I simply didn't have the confidence that I could raise a child, feed them well, and provide the education they need to grow into a decent adult in this environment. (Yoo)

While DINKWAD's rejection of childbirth might appear selfish, it can be understood as rational avoidance behavior shaped by structural and economic constraints. This aligns with avoidance motivation theory (Gray, 1987), which frames avoidance in the face of threats as survival-oriented. Participants cited burdens such as unstable housing, high education costs, and the risks of social comparison and stigma. Their decision sought to maintain a stable life structure and safeguard the potential quality of life for future offspring. Statements like "I don't want my child to inherit the injustices I've experienced" show how structural risks suppress reproductive motivation, leading them to invest emotionally in controllable relationships with pets.

4. Preconditions for Childbearing: “I would consider having children if housing prices stabilized and education and childcare policies improved.”

This section analyzes how participants view the decision to have children not merely as a matter of personal values, but as one conditioned by socio-economic structures. This aligns with the conditional reproductive strategies framework in evolutionary psychology (Kaplan & Lancaster, 2000), which posits that reproduction occurs when environmental resources are sufficiently secured.

After paying for basic living expenses for my spouse and parents, and repaying a mortgage, there isn't enough financial room to raise a child. Korean policies come with income-based restrictions, and the support is barely enough to cover a fraction of education costs. If there were meaningful government intervention and things improved significantly, I might consider having a child. (Jin)

Just booking a wedding hall, honeymoon, and housing makes it nearly impossible for couples to get married on their own. The financial burden of parenting is enormous. If a system like France's — without university hierarchy — were fully adopted along with an overhaul of childcare policies, I would be open to becoming a parent. (Ka)

Stable housing is the foundation for raising a child; if parents have to keep moving, the entire process becomes unstable and stressful. These days, most couples start thinking about where they would raise a child

even before they get married because of high housing prices. (Yoo)

Rather than outright rejecting childbirth, participants indicated they might reconsider under improved policy and environmental conditions. Housing stability, living costs, and education and childcare systems were repeatedly cited as prerequisites for childbearing. Without these, reproduction was delayed or avoided — not from aversion, but as a survival-oriented adaptation to structural realities. Statements such as “I would consider having children if childbirth, parenting, and childcare policies changed” highlight that institutional trust must precede personal decisions.

These views align with conditional reproductive strategies (Kaplan & Lancaster, 2000; Hill & Reeve, 2005), which argue that humans adjust reproductive timing to resource quality and stability. Concerns about housing, education costs, and social safety net fragility emerged as critical determinants of childbearing. For DINKWAD individuals, deferring childbirth is not a rejection of reproduction but a strategic response to socio-economic uncertainty — an evolutionary adaptation shaped by resource scarcity and diminished institutional reliability.

V. Discussion

- This study aimed to explore the relationship between South Korea’s critically low birthrate and the emerging DINKWAD

(Dual Income, No Kids, With A Dog) phenomenon through a theory-informed case analysis approach. Drawing upon four major theoretical frameworks, the study sought to understand the DINKWAD phenomenon by analyzing in-depth interviews with three participants who had deliberately chosen a childfree life and embraced companion animals as part of their family structure. These individuals were redefining familial norms and reconfiguring life paths by choosing non-biological kinship grounded in emotional attachment and care practices.

First, the participants expressed fulfillment of emotional needs and care through their relationship with pets, even in the absence of children. This behavior aligns with Erikson's developmental task of generativity in adulthood and Maslow's (1943) higher-order need of self-transcendence. Despite not having biological offspring, they experienced personal expansion, continuity of life, and a sense of responsibility through caregiving to their pets. This suggests that generativity is not bound to biological reproduction but can be manifested through intentional caregiving practices that foster emotional intimacy.

Notably, some DINKWAD participants did not merely regard their pets as affectionate companions, but rather as central figures that imbued their lives with meaning and shaped their identities. By reconstructing their identities as 'parents' to non-human beings, they actively navigate the existential void created by the postponement of traditional parenthood in a precarious social environment. This form of caregiving functions as a core resource for emotional support rather than a mere object of attachment,

aligning with recent findings that meaning-making and staying connected play a decisive role in psychological adaptation amidst external structural crises (Kim et al, 2024). Ultimately, this illustrates a non-biological extension of the human desire to leave a legacy and reflects a concrete transformation in the construction of family and life significance.

Second, from the perspective of late modern family theory and individualization theory, participants were seen to reconfigure the family model by moving away from traditional bloodline-based norms and emphasizing emotional ties and shared responsibilities. This transition reflects a broader social shift in South Korea, where marriage and childbirth are increasingly viewed as selective life designs rather than institutional imperatives. Although their pets were not equated with children, they were acknowledged as family members and functioned as emotional anchors within the household. This supports the notion of elective kinship based on emotional intimacy and mutual care, departing from normative assumptions about family (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Weston, 1991). The global increase in DINKWAD households challenges pro-natal family ideologies and promotes a redefinition of family as a chosen, affective community built on intimacy and accountability.

Third, the participants' avoidance of childbirth should not be interpreted merely as a matter of values or personal preference, but as a complex outcome of structural constraints, including economic insecurity, housing instability, and the high cost of education. Their narratives reflected a classic approach-avoidance conflict, wherein positive motivations such as "emotional meaning

and family belonging” coexisted with aversive factors such as “exorbitant housing costs, burdensome childcare and education expenses, and societal pressures.” This conflict is intensified by the hyper-competitive nature of Korean society, where the perceived risk of failing to provide a ‘perfect’ environment for a child acts as a powerful deterrent. These conflicting motivations often hindered progression toward childbirth and led participants to opt for caregiving arrangements that were more predictable and within their control — namely, pet companionship. Such decisions underscore that caregiving is not being “avoided” but strategically redirected toward alternative relationships. The choice to raise pets rather than children thus emerges not from simple value avoidance but from a rational coping strategy within the broader context of structural adversity.

Fourth, from the perspective of evolutionary psychology, the DINKWAD lifestyle is not a rejection of biological productivity, but a strategic adaptation to South Korea’s high-cost, resource-scarce environment. As individuals perceive that the resources required for successful offspring competition are increasingly scarce and unpredictable, the postponement of childbirth functions as a rational response to environmental instability. This suggests that reproductive decision-making is not merely a reflection of personal values, but an adaptive response regulated by access to resources and structural support.

Consequently, the DINKWAD phenomenon represents more than just stress avoidance or a substitution for children. It reflects a multifaceted pursuit of life meaning, emotional care, and relational

stability amidst economic constraints and social contradictions. In the Korean context, choosing pets over children is a sophisticated strategy to navigate structural realities, redirecting caregiving instincts toward more manageable and emotionally rewarding alternatives that ensure personal and relational stability.

In conclusion, the lives of DINKWAD individuals illustrate how the meanings of family, reproduction, and care are being redefined in contemporary society, and how individual decisions are constructed in interaction with broader structural conditions. This highlights the need to go beyond individualistic or value-based explanations in the discourse on low fertility and to understand it within the context of social structures and institutional frameworks. The insights gained here offer important implications for future discussions on childbirth and family policy.

A limitation of this study is its reliance on a small number of cases and interview data. Future research should incorporate diverse data collection methods, such as video recordings or direct observation, to achieve more comprehensive data triangulation. Moreover, this study did not sufficiently examine how interactions among DINKWAD family members or other influential factors (e.g., marital quality, relationships with parents, or community dynamics) shape decisions around childbearing or pet companionship. Subsequent studies could benefit from conducting text-mining-based analysis in parallel to provide a more robust and multifaceted perspective on evolving family discourse. It is also suggested that future research adopt a life course perspective to trace how DINKWAD life choices are formed and evolve over time. Furthermore, just as

digital care services and AI-based monitoring function as crucial emotional safety nets in rural community care (Oh et al., 2025; Oh & Yoo, 2025), companion animals for DINKWADs represent a new paradigm of caregiving that bridges the gap in traditional familial support through non-human emotional mediation. Exploring the commonalities between these diverse forms of ‘alternative care’ will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of emotional stability in contemporary society.

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한국의 덩펫족(DINKWAD) 현상에 대한 이론 기반 사례분석

■ 본 연구는 저출산 맥락에서 대안적 가족 형태로서 덩펫족¹의 삶을 탐색하였다. 이론 기반 사례분석을 적용하여, 자발적으로 무자녀를 선택하고 반려동물을 양육하는 3인의 심층면담 자료를 분석하였다. 그 결과 네 가지 핵심 주제가 도출되었다. 첫째, 참여자들은 반려동물을 통해 정서적 욕구와 돌봄 욕구를 충족하며 삶의 의미를 구성하였다. 둘째, 관계적 실천을 통해 반려동물이 ‘가족’으로 재정의되었고, 이는 후기근대 가족이론에서 말하는 개인화 경향을 반영하였다. 셋째, 한국의 경제, 교육, 주거의 제약이 출산 회피를 촉발하였으며, 이는 행동적 회피 이론과 연결되었다. 넷째, 출산은 정책 및 구조적 변화에 대한 조건부 전략으로 유예되었고, 이는 진화심리학의 관점과 맞닿아 있었다. 이러한 결과는 덩펫족이 단순한 생활양식 선호가 아니라 현대 사회조건에 대한 전략적 적응임을 시사한다. 본 연구는 현대 사회의 변동 속에서 재생산, 돌봄, 가족을 이해하는 새로운 해석의 틀을 제안한다.

1 ‘덩펫족’이라는 용어는 한국에서 만들어진 신조어로 한국에서만 사용되며, 국제 사회에서는 ‘DINKWAD’라는 용어를 사용한다.

주제어: DINKWAD (Double Income, No Kids, With A Dog), 덩펏족, 자발적
무자녀, 이론 기반 사례분석, 저출산 담론



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This study explores the DINKWAD (Double Income, No Kids, With A Dog) lifestyle as an alternative family form in the context of low fertility. Using a theory-informed case analysis, we examined interviews with three individuals who voluntarily chose to remain childless and raise companion animals. Four key themes emerged: (1) participants fulfill emotional and caregiving needs through pets, constructing meaning in life; (2) pets are redefined as family through relational practices, reflecting individualization in late modern family theory; (3) economic, educational, and housing constraints drive childbirth avoidance, aligning with behavioral avoidance theory; and (4) childbirth is postponed as a conditional strategy based on policy and structural change, in line with evolutionary psychology. These findings suggest that DINKWAD is not simply a lifestyle preference but a strategic adaptation

to modern social conditions. This study offers a new lens for understanding reproduction, caregiving, and family in the shifting landscape of contemporary society.

Keywords: DINKWAD(Double Income, No Kids, With A Dog), DINK-Pets, Voluntary Childlessness, Theory-Informed Case Analysis, Low Fertility Discourse

- ◎ 투고 접수 2026. 02. 13.
- ◎ 심사 완료 2026. 04. 22.
- ◎ 게재 결정 2026. 04. 27.