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# The Extended Family in Contemporary Korea: Changing Patterns of Co-residence

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## Introduction

Recently, a Korean daily newspaper reported that, due to the hardships of the so-called “IMF era,” young Korean women who formerly had shunned “living with their parents-in-law” (*shijip sari*) are now being driven into patrilocal co-residence. It is not simply traditional norms or demographic constraints which decide family types, and the “traditional norm” governing living arrangements and filial piety is increasingly losing its binding force. Furthermore, changes in family structures and living arrangements are by no means unilinear.

In order to explore the conflicts between the “text” and “practice” of Korean culture, this paper will focus on family life in contemporary Korean society, particularly cases of “extended family” practices.<sup>1</sup> It attends to the concrete practices of extended families in Korea, and assumes that these families illuminate important negotiations and changes now underway in the lives of many families. We can expect that current extended families will be different from the extended families that existed in the past. Thus, this paper raises questions why people choose to practice extended family, even while the conjugal nuclear family is generally held as the ideal, and what kinds of negotiations are going on among its members. In the course of the analysis, the following points will deserve special emphasis.

First, extended families in contemporary Korea cannot be regarded as continuing the traditional family structure. The generally-held view that the Korean family structure has shifted from the extended stem-family system to one based on the

conjugal family is too simplistic and hinders understanding the complex processes involved in family dynamics. It also fails to notice that many of the “modern” extended families are results of active responses to and negotiations with the contemporary environment.

Second, the fact that many contemporary extended families are not simply continuing the tradition underlines the need for a more dynamic approach to family lives and practices in their analyses. Simply put, the cultural norms governing the traditional extended family were determined by Confucian ideas and morality of which patrilineal succession, patriarchy and filial piety composed the greater part. However, accompanying Korean modernization, this cultural “text” was compromised and reconstituted. This paper will pay special attention to how the cultural norms of family life are changing and explore the characteristic relationships among members of extended families, the sources of the conflicts occurring in their interactions and the directions in which they are under pressure to orient themselves.

Third, the family is not just a “private” sphere which can be analyzed according to its own principles independent of factors stemming from the “public” spheres. Rather, the family is closely related to conditions within the public sphere such as economic ups and downs and levels of social welfare programs. Relationships among family members cannot be fully explained only by the application of traditional principles such as dedication and sacrifice.

In explicating the above-mentioned questions, this paper will (1) provide a review of family struc-

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tures and behaviors in contemporary Korean society; (2) explore major characteristics of “modern” extended families; and (3) discuss major social aspects which shape family arrangements and relationships and which have important implications for the forming of social policies.

### **Demographic Sketch and Social Features of Extended Family**

Various “stories” frequently encountered in the Korean media these days underscore that “the strong cultural prescription that the Korean elderly live [with] their married first-son and his family” (Soh 1997, 184) is a story of the past and that totally new norms are emerging in respect to family life, especially regarding inter-generational relationships.

In fact, eldest sons have been placed in a disadvantageous position in the marriage market because young females want to avoid the “first son's burden” including co-residence with her husband's parents. More recently, many street expressions – such as “TONKS,” an abbreviation of “two-only-no-kids,” or “grey-haired youths” – have attested that both the young and elderly generations want to avoid inter-generational co-residence. Thus, the conclusion may be stated: “It is now the parents' choice whether to live with married children or to take care of the grandchildren.” If they ever choose to live with their married children, it is said, parents do not insist on the first son but weigh various factors before choosing with whom they want to live.

As a whole, these stories reflect at least partial truth regarding currently changing trends and attitudes. Then what kinds and degree of changes are occurring in family living patterns? Below, I will review the results of demographic surveys and research which show the trend of recent changes.

#### *Percentage of the Extended Family in Contemporary Korea*

The traditional family pattern of Korea has often been described as a stem family in which multi-generation family members live together with the elderly supported by the young generation. Recent studies, however, have made it clear that in traditional society, extended families were not realized by the majority of the population (Kwon, Kim, and Ch'oe 1995) due to high mortality and general poverty. In fact, since the 1920s the average size of the Korean household continuously increased until the mid-1960s, after which it rapidly decreased (see Table 1) because of a decrease in fertility rates and accelerated breakdown of the household caused by urbanization.

From 1920 to 1995, extended families decreased by two-thirds (see Table 2). One-generation families, on the other hand, increased about three times during the same period.<sup>2</sup> The increase in elderly-only households has been the most critical (Kwon, Kim, and Ch'oe 1995, 262). This implies that more and more of the elderly population who co-resided with their adult children in the past have become “independent” from the extended family, and the traditional mores dictating stem-family co-residence have been greatly weakened.

#### *Extended Family and the Elderly*

Attitudes of the aged generation toward family types and relations will provide valuable insights into the state of the extended family in modern Korean society.<sup>3</sup> Table 3 indicates the changing proportion of those who live in elderly-only households. According to the Table 4, only 47 percent of the elderly population is currently co-residing with younger-generation family members and indicates that 32.5 percent are living with married children. The proportional change of the elderly who live with the eldest son's family shows a remarkable decrease over the last couple of decades. This historical change is reflected in Table 5.

**Table 1. Average Household Size, 1920-1995**

YEAR	1920	1930	1940	1960	1966	1975	1980	1985	1990	1995
SIZE	5.03	5.35	5.42	5.57	5.44	5.01	4.55	4.09	3.71	3.4

Sources: Kwon, Kim & Ch'oe (1995) for 1920-1990; Office of Statistics, Republic of Korea for 1995.

**Table 2. Percentage Distribution of Family Types, \*1960-1995**

YEAR	1960	1966	1970	1975	1980	1985	1990	1995
1 GENERATION FAMILY	5.30	5.21	6.75	7.06	8.81	10.46	12.00	15.26
2 GENERATION FAMILY	65.42	68.01	70.04	71.76	73.06	73.28	74.06	73.29
FAMILY OF 3 GENERATION & MORE	29.27	26.78	23.21	21.18	18.12	16.26	13.95	11.44

Sources: Kwon, Kim & Ch'oe (1995) for 1960-1990; Office of Statistics, Republic of Korea for 1995.

\*Family types here exclude one-person or non-kin households. In 1995, the proportion of one-person or non kin households was 14.8 percent.

**Table 3. Percentage Distribution of Korean Elderly Aged 60 and Above Living in an Elderly-only Household, by Selected Years**

YEAR	1975	1981	1990	1994	1996
PROPORTION	7.0	19.7	23.8	41.0	53.0

Source: Office of Statistics, Republic of Korea for 1996.

**Table 4. Percentage Distribution of Korean Elderly Aged 60 and Above by Household Types and Co-residing Members, 1996**

ELDERLY ONLY	CO-RESIDENCE WITH OTHERS					TOTAL
	W/ELDEST SON	W/2ND OR OTHER SONS	W/ DAUGHTERS	W/UNMARRIED CHILDREN	OTHERS	
53.00	20.1	8.7	3.7	6.8	7.7	100
53.00			47.00			100

Source: Office of Statistics, Republic of Korea for 1996.

**Table 5. Percentage Distribution of the Elderly Aged 60 and Above Living with the First Son, by Selected Years**

YEAR	1975	1981	1990	1994	1996
PROPORTION	78.2	47.3	44.0	39.1	20.1

Source: Office of Statistics, Republic of Korea for 1996.

**Table 6. Main Reasons for Separate Residence Named by the Elderly Living Separately from their Children**

MORE COMFORTABLE	35.0
CHILDREN FEEL UNCOMFORTABLE WITH CO-RESIDENCE	20.8
HAVE NO SON	1.3
INSUFFICIENT HOUSING SPACE	11.8
JOBS	14.4
OTHERS	16.7

Source: Institute for Gerontological Studies of Korea, 1996, "Living Conditions and Attitudes of the Elderly" (see *Dong-A Ilbo*, 8 December 1996).

**Table 7. Percentage Distribution of the Elderly Living in Extended Families by Age Groups**

AGE	60-64	65-69	70-74	75-79	80-84
PROPORTION	22.6	30.3	38.9	46.3	52.4

Source: Office of Statistics (1997a).

**Table 8. Percentage Distribution of Elderly Household Type by Sex and Region**

HOUSEHOLD TYPE	SEX		REGIONS		TOTAL
	MALE	FEMALE	CITY	COUNTRY	
SINGLE PERSON	5.0	18.2	10.0	16.9	12.9
ONE-GENERATION	37.7	18.1	19.1	35.3	25.9
TWO-GENERATION	33.9	24.7	31.3	24.3	28.4
THREE-GENERATION OR MORE	23.4	39.1	39.6	23.5	32.8
TOTAL	100	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Office of Statistics (1997a).

**Table 9. Preference for Co-residence and Ways of Decision-making by Working Status of the Daughter-in-law**

	PREFER CO-RESIDENCE	CHILDREN'S COUPLE-CENTERED DECISION-MAKING
EMPLOYED	14.8	80.5
UNEMPLOYED	11.2	63.4

Source: Institute of Health and Social Affairs, 'Economic Activities of Women and Family Welfare' (Chosŏn Ilbo, 13 April 1997).

As many as 78.2% of the aged population were co-residing with their first son in 1975, but a remarkable decrease in this number to 20.1% was witnessed in 1996. Urbanization accompanied by massive out-migration of the young population from rural regions is regarded as the major cause in the increase of elderly-only households between 1975 and 1981. However, changes of attitudes toward extended families are thought to be the main reason for the sharp decrease of co-resident households between 1990 and 1996. A research report titled "Living Conditions and Attitudes of the Elderly" released by the institute for Gerontological Studies of Korea in 1996, showed that respondents' main reasons for their co-residence were a matter of "practicality" than it being "natural"(see also Table 6).

Then what kinds of factors lead contemporary Koreans to choose generational extended family patterns at a time when multigenerational co-residence was losing its ground both practically and normatively? Before we examine a few selected cases of extended family, the major aspects affecting extended families will be reviewed briefly.

#### *Major Influences on Extended Families*

Many social and economic factors seem to affect the actors' decisions about residence choices. Age and marital status have been shown in various studies to exert clear influence on extended family arrangements (Office of Statistics 1995; Kim, Choi, and Park 1994, etc.). More than anything else, these two aspects affect the degree of independence of the elderly parents. The age factor has positive effects in the establishment of extended families, while the presence of a living spouse affects the creation of elderly-only households. With increased age, economic independence,<sup>4</sup> as well as physical and spiritual health weakens the aged parents, making it more difficult for them to manage their daily lives independently. The likelihood of the survival of one's spouse also decreases (see Table 7).

Parents tend to live separately from their children when both spouses are alive, while single parents tend to live with their adult children. Besides age and marital status, the sex and locale of the parents are also often analyzed (see Table 8).

The proportion of elderly women living in three-generation households is higher (39.1%) than that of elderly men (23.4%). Region of residence also appears to be a significantly influential factor, resulting in a larger proportion of extended families in urban than rural regions. The ratio of single-person households is also higher in rural areas, indicating that, at least from the perspective of family pattern, "the elderly problem" is more serious in rural regions.<sup>5</sup>

One of the few studies which has attempted to analyze statistical data on the relationship between adult children and their living arrangements is that of Kim, Choi, and Park (1994). One notable result of their analysis relates to the birth order of the son: "Our results indicate that being the eldest son was the most important factor influencing co-residence with parents" (269). "Economic Activities of Women and Family Welfare" (1997), a report by the Institute of Health and Social Affairs, suggests that the younger the employed daughter-in-law, the higher her educational level, and the younger the children, the higher the ratio of co-residence (see Table 9). Also, co-residence appeared higher in the case of professional women than in women working in sales or in factories. When the elderly parents' health deteriorates, however, non-employed daughters-in-law showed a higher ratio of co-residence than their employed counterparts.

#### **Practicing the Extended Family**

Compared to the relatively large body of research concerning the profound transformation of Korean families in terms of their structural changes,

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not enough attention has been given to the importance of concrete interactions and negotiations.

Below are two selected cases of extended family which illustrate in what ways various factors affect family structures and what kinds of interrelationship are practiced in “modern” extended family arrangements. Also, I use the cases to provide some useful illustrations of important aspects of the family in present-day Korea. Because the interview data were mainly collected from the daughters-in-law in each family, I will make my descriptions from their point of view.

#### *Song Mi-gyong's Family*

Song Mi-gyong's family is composed of five members: Mi-gyong and her husband, their six month-old daughter, and her parents-in-law. Mi-gyong, 32, first worked for several publishing companies and then at a private language institute before taking a temporary leave for childbirth. Her husband, 33, is employed at an insurance company. Her father-in-law, 64, is working at a medium-sized construction company, while her mother-in-law, 60, ended her more than thirty-year career as an elementary school teacher as a result of her acceptance of an early retirement package.

Mi-gyong's husband is the youngest of two sons. He therefore is traditionally not obliged to live with his parents after his marriage. Mi-gyong's parents-in-law moved to a four bedroom apartment in Pundang. After Mi-gyong agreed to marry her husband, there began frequent negotiations and discussions between her natal and in-law family members concerning her post-marital living arrangements. Because both bride and groom had worked for several years before getting married, they saved some money with which they thought they could rent a small apartment in Seoul. Mi-gyong did not desire co-residence at first, and people around her, including her natal family, advised her to live apart from her in-laws. On the other hand, her husband's par-

ents indirectly expressed their wish for co-residence, causing Mi-gyong to consider co-residence. She also thought that if she and her husband lived with the parents for about two or three years, they might expect some financial support from them.

Furthermore, the couple found out that two-bedroom apartments in the Kangnam area were hardly worth the hard-earned money they had saved. It was her future mother-in-law who drove Mi-gyong to her final decision to co-reside, saying, “we will not ask you to pay living expenses. Instead, save your money for housing and move out after two or three years.” While Mi-gyong was a bit angry, thinking that her fiancé's mother was imposing her opinions upon the couple's decision-making, she felt that it would be difficult not to agree with the mother after she had expressed her “wish” so emotionally. Although worried, Mi-gyong's natal family members said that Mi-gyong had few choices besides accepting her mother-in-law's suggestion. They added that, considering the difficulties in securing housing in Seoul, it would not be so bad to live with the in-laws, especially as the parents would be paying the living expenses.

They have practiced living as an extended family for about two years, and all the family members at present appear to be satisfied. Among the four bedrooms, the parents are using two interior ones including the master room, and the young couple uses other rooms located near the entrance. During work days, interaction and sharing between the members of the family occur mostly at night.

As for conflicts and difficulties, Mi-gyong mentioned several items including generational differences in life-styles and values, the parents' meddling in the children's life, in addition to the general uncomfortableness of sharing a living space with “elders.” Being critical about both of her elderly parents-in-law while feeling that she was not in a position to express her criticisms freely, and being tired of the same stories again and again, Mi-

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gyong really felt like moving out. Also, because they are living with the elders, Mi-gyong has to participate, even when she does not wish to, in the various affairs of the extended family related to kinship ties, such as visits by outside family members.

These days, Mi-gyong and her husband are weighing different options in deciding their future living arrangement. During the past two years, several new factors have emerged which affect their decision-making. First, Mi-gyong gave birth to a baby and is now planning to go back to her old job. Second, her mother-in-law retired. Third, under the current IMF bailout program, the couple cannot be sure of their job security. Mi-gyong knows the high cost of hiring a baby-sitter and cannot feel at rest with the thought of entrusting her baby to “a stranger.”<sup>6</sup> Thankfully her mother-in-law has expressed her intention to take care of her granddaughter if Mi-gyong goes back to her work.

What they do consider these days is how to invest their savings. Now, they have saved enough money to buy a small three-bedroom apartment. Whether they buy an apartment soon or not, what Mi-gyong has made clear is that they are not going to move out in the near future unless the parents insist on it.

#### *Min Yong-ae's family*

Min Yong-ae's family is composed of five members: Yong-ae and her husband, their son and daughter, and Yong-ae's mother-in-law. Yong-ae, 37, is a middle-school teacher. Her husband, 39, is a professor at a junior college. Her mother-in-law, 68, was widowed about seven years ago. Yong-ae's son is 11 years old, and her daughter is 4. Married for 12 years, Yong-ae has lived with her mother-in-law since her daughter was born. Yong-ae's husband was the second son in his family, and his mother was living with her first son in Ch'onari.

Yong-ae got married just after she finished her

master's degree in English literature and her husband finished his in mechanical engineering. Since both continued their doctoral studies while working as part-time lecturers, they were barely able to stay independent in terms of finances. While Yong-ae could expect little financial support from her husband's family, her own relatively well-off parents have supported the couple in various ways. After Yong-ae gave birth to her first baby, her parents had prepared a new apartment bought a car for the couple.

When the baby turned four months old, Yong-ae had could not afford a baby-sitter and, therefore, left him in Ch'onan with her maternal aunt. At that time, Yong-ae started to work at a middle school because her family needed regular income and thus became the bread-winner of her family. When her son became three years old, she brought him back to Seoul and sent him to a public nursery located near her school.

Since marriage, Yong-ae has not been getting along well with her in-laws. According to her, they have always harassed her in various ways. She believes the reason for this is their feelings of inferiority toward Yong-ae and her natal family.

It was only when Yong-ae gave birth to her unplanned second baby that she began to co-reside with her mother-in-law. The decision was made in consideration of the “welfare” of the newborn baby and the mother-in-law. According to Yong-ae, her widowed mother-in-law was living a wretched life by that time, mainly because of ill-treatment by her first daughter-in-law. Yong-ae felt sympathy for the aging matron and was in need of someone to baby-sit anyway. The mother moved in just before Yong-ae's daughter was born.

They have lived together for four and a half years. Because of the large gap in life-styles and housekeeping methods (including childcare), Yong-ae had difficulties living with her mother-in-law. But now they have more or less adjusted to

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each other. More than anything else, Yong-ae said, she is very thankful to her mother-in-law for taking care of the children. Asked about her future plans, Yong-ae said the couple want to “take care of” the mother because they know of the first daughter-in-law's ill-treatment, and because the mother herself also wants to live with her second son. Sometimes, Yong-ae feels worried as she looks at her aging and weakening mother-in-law, because Yong-ae is unprepared should the old woman become bedridden.

*Discussion: Who Lives in Extended Families?*

I have reviewed two cases of extended family in some detail. In both cases, the parents are living with their second son's family. Mi-gyong's family is a type of extended family where economically<sup>7</sup> capable “parents have taken in married children in order to help the latter become independent,” while in Yong-ae's family a kind of interdependence is practiced. Both cases show that extended family types are often chosen more for practical than normative considerations. In fact, notorious housing prices make it very difficult for newly-married couples to be independent, and the shortage of reliable and affordable child care facilities frustrate many women who want to work outside the home. Furthermore, insufficient welfare programs for the elderly leave few options for the aged population who cannot easily support themselves in their late stage of life. Inter-generational co-residence provides a viable alternative to these problems.

We may emphasize the following factors as exerting great influence on family types. First, economic factors weigh heavily, including whether the parents' and the children's ability to maintain respectively independent household economies is secure. Second, practical considerations, especially related to child and elderly care, appear significant in deciding living arrangements. In these

cases, the extended family functions as a substitute welfare institution. Third, normative and affective factors are also thought to have effects on decision-making about family patterns. For instance, the notion, however weakened, that “the first son should take care of his elderly parents” does to some extent exert normative pressure. Affectively, either the children or the parent may want to co-reside due to their psychological attachment to each other.

As is revealed in the above cases, these factors are interrelated, and decisions about family types are not made based on any one single factor. “Modern” extended families in Korea, despite their structural similarities, vary greatly in terms of who lives with whom, why they live together, and types of interrelationship among family members.

At any rate, economic factors loom critical in deciding family types. This means that it is the members of the upper class who have the greatest number of options to choose from. This fact calls for welfare policies for the elderly which pay more attention to the lower-class aged population, who have the fewest number of options.

## **Conclusion**

As we have examined in the above sections, extended families in contemporary Korea result from active negotiations in specific contexts. An individual may choose to practice extended family only temporarily according to his/her stage of life, or may be driven into the arrangement by some unexpected exigencies of personal and social reality. This paper draws several tentative conclusions as follows:

First, reasons and factors leading actors to choose extended families vary widely, and often multiple interrelated factors rather than a single reason lead to formations of extended families.



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However, for analytical purposes at least, we may categorize “modern” extended families of Korea into three types: the normative and affective type, the substitute welfare type, and the economic strategic type. The economic strategic type can be further divided into two sub-types: one in which “capable” parents support the married couple, and the other where the parent and couple cannot afford two separate households. Compared to the first case where the parents usually pay the living expenses, the latter case demands pooling of resources from both generations. In contrast to the idealized “text,” “modern” extended families are rarely formed solely by reason of “being the first son.” Other situational factors and considerations combine to influence decisions on living arrangements. This fact indicates that the extended family in contemporary Korea should not be interpreted as a simple continuity of tradition.

Second, maintaining an extended family arrangement does not mean that particular activities, roles and behaviors are shared among all family members. Indeed, the issue of “sharing” or “separation” is an arena which needs continuous negotiation and which often incurs tensions among family members. Third, what the daughters-in-law point out as a major source of difficulties and conflicts while living in extended families is the continuous involvement in affairs of extended kin and conflicts about childcare and education, in addition to the general difficulties involved in “living with elders.”

Fourth, as has been emphasized in many recent studies, the family should not be regarded simply as a private sphere. Family life is closely interrelated with the welfare conditions of the society. The trend in living arrangements since the start of the IMF bailout program clearly attests to this fact and welfare conditions for childcare and the elderly have important effects for each family in considering options for family types. Thus,

some people are now calling for more active government policies towards the family, based on the assumption of the family as a “public,” not a private institution.

It should be pointed out that investment in and facilities for social welfare programs for the elderly and children are absolutely inadequate in Korea and that this makes it difficult for many individuals to care for their family members and adapt to changing patterns in family relationships. We have focused this paper on cases of extended family, which were established by inter-generational “consensus” and are being maintained without serious conflicts. But there are also cases of extended family whose members experience serious conflicts: they want “separation” but maintain the co-residence out of necessity. In such cases, the (inter-generational) family relationship tends to worsen rather than improve, and the living arrangement either depends on unfair sacrifices by one side or causes discontent among family members. In this sense, if society would take a larger share of the welfare “burden” of its members, families would be freer to select the particular living arrangement most suitable to their needs.

## NOTES

- 1 Researchers do not show complete agreement in their definitions of family types use the term “extended family” simply to refer to the families. In this paper, I examine parents who live with married children. Thus, it includes two-generation families, families of three generations and beyond, and families where aged parents live with their married sons or daughters.
- 2 Besides the dramatic decrease of extended families and increase in one-generation families, demographic studies point out that the rapid increase of single-person households is another major change in Korean family patterns during the last several decades

- 3 As is mentioned above, researchers have paid little attention to extended families in the contemporary context and much of the existing research has been undertaken as part of gerontological studies. Therefore, it is not easy to find data which shows the attitudes of the young generation toward extended families.
- 4 According to a report by the Institute for Gerontological Studies, only 1.5% of the elderly population aged 65 and above are currently receiving pensions.
- 5 Even though quite a few studies (including Kw6n, Kirn, and Ch'oe 1995) conclude, based on the fact that the proportion of elderly-only households is higher in rural areas, that the living conditions of rural elderly are inferior to those of their urban counterparts, deeper analysis is needed before a final conclusion on the quality of life of the elderly can be reached. For instance, research data related to the degree of life satisfaction of the elderly co-residing with their adult children has drawn inconsistent conclusions, undermining the simple conclusion that co-residing elderly always show a higher degree of life satisfaction. Aged people in rural areas living in elderly-only households can expect help from and contact with neighboring residents and may enjoy a more autonomous lifestyle than those living with their children.
- 6 There are several frequently-heard horrifying rumors and stories about Korean babysitters' (*pach'ulbu* or *ajumma*) strategies to lessen their job load, which discourage working mothers from entrusting their babies to baby-sitters. One of the most notorious rumors is that they feed tranquilizers to the babies so that they will sleep for most of the day.
- 7 For many Korean people, both parents and children, being married does not necessitate economic independence of the couple. In ethnographic studies of urban middle class families of Korea, for instance, Kim (Kim 1993; 1995) shows that young couples, while living in conjugal fam-

ilies "independently" from their parents, consider economic support from their parents to be "natural," and have little concept of independence and autonomy.

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