

Thematic Analysis of Large Spanish Families: A Social Science Approach

Análisis temático sobre las familias numerosas especiales: aproximación desde las ciencias sociales

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Abstract:

This research addresses the topic of special large families in Spain, which are in decline in this country. The lack of academic research on this type of family justifies the scientific relevance of studying this phenomenon from a social science perspective. In the domain of social sciences, the transformations of these relationships and their associated family dynamics represent some of the most significant indicators of contemporary social change. This study analyses the family dynamics of large Spanish families and provides insight into the social circumstances in which they live. The study takes a qualitative approach, using thematic analysis as the main research tool. Semi-structured interviews with fathers and mothers from special large families were conducted until thematic saturation was reached at eight interviews. Post-interview analysis identified three thematic blocks: (1) Large families: more than meets the eye; (2) family organization; and (3) myths and realities of large families. The results suggest that these families have very specific dynamics based on the organisation and sharing of household tasks, and that they have to confront many myths and fallacies. In conclusion, our approach enabled us to explore new family dynamics within the setting of large families. Further research on this type of family is warranted to facilitate the development of more effective and efficient psychosocial interventions. Similarly, we would like to use this research as a call to action for social intervention professionals to incorporate family diversity as a core area of research and intervention within the social sciences.

Keywords: Family diversity; family dynamics; social intervention; thematic blocks; qualitative research.

Resumen:

En esta investigación nos centramos en las familias numerosas especiales que son una tipología familiar que está decayendo en España. La carencia de trabajos académicos sobre

este tipo de familia justifica el interés científico por parte de las ciencias sociales para abordar este fenómeno. En el ámbito de las ciencias sociales, las transformaciones de estas relaciones y sus dinámicas familiares asociadas representan algunos de los indicadores más significativos del cambio social contemporáneo. Este estudio analiza las dinámicas familiares de las familias numerosas españolas y proporciona una visión de las circunstancias sociales en las que viven. El estudio se desarrolló bajo un enfoque cualitativo, empleando el análisis temático como herramienta de investigación. Se llevaron a cabo entrevistas semiestructuradas hasta llegar al límite de saturación, ocho en total, a padres y madres de familias numerosas especiales. En el análisis de las entrevistas se identificaron tres bloques temáticos: (1) Familias ricas en matices; (2), Organización familiar; y, (3) Mitos y realidades de las familias numerosas. Los resultados sugieren que estas familias tienen dinámicas familiares muy particulares basadas en la organización y en el reparto de tareas del hogar. Además de que se enfrentan a múltiples mitos y falacias. En conclusión, nuestro enfoque nos permitió explorar nuevas dinámicas familiares en el marco de las familias numerosas. Consideramos que se deberían hacer más estudios acerca de esta tipología familiar para potenciar el desarrollo de intervenciones psicosociales efectivas y eficientes. Del mismo modo, nos gustaría utilizar esta investigación como una llamada a la acción para que los y las profesionales de la intervención social incorporen la diversidad familiar como un área central de investigación e intervención dentro de las ciencias sociales.

Palabras clave: Diversidad familiar; dinámica familiar; intervención social; bloques temáticos; investigación cualitativa.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Spanish society has experienced various social and cultural changes, although few have been as striking as those within the family domain (Loaisa et al., 2019; Pastor-Seller and Sánchez Raja, 2020; Rodríguez-Mena, 2020). The processes of change and democratisation that modern societies have undergone since the late 19th century have affected social relationships in schools, workplaces, the media and, most significantly, in the family as an institution. In the domain of social sciences, the transformations of these relationships and their associated family dynamics represent some of the most significant indicators of contemporary social change. Although these emerging types of family have garnered significant attention from the scientific and professional communities, they continue to suffer from a substantial lack of empirical knowledge. This deficiency perpetuates unfounded prejudices and judgements concerning them.

The institution of the family has historically assumed various forms across different regions and throughout history (Álvarez and Monteros, 2019; Rondón, 2012) in response to prevailing socio-cultural, political, and economic circumstances. However, a widely accepted generalisation in the social sciences is that although the family is an institution common to all human societies, it has manifested in diverse forms across time and space. Therefore, the family is best viewed as a dynamic entity imbued with inherent vitality, necessitating an analysis of its changes and transformations to gain a better understanding of the phenomenon (Benítez, 2017).

Its dynamic nature implies that there is no singular and unequivocal definition of “family.” Thus, it remains a challenge to create a definition that successfully encompasses its various aspects and the influences that have shaped its structure and development over time (Rondón, 2011).

Overall, definitions tend to overlook the diversity of changes taking place within this institution. Nevertheless, the majority of the literature on this topic highlights that “affection and emotional support,” particularly for children, are fundamental elements of any family unit. Moreover, these elements seem cannot be replaced or changed by any other institution. We propose that the most accurate definition can be achieved by dissecting the core attributes of a specific family framework prevalent within a distinct historical, political, and societal setting. Therefore, the definition of “family” must take into account increasingly diverse situations and circumstances (Benítez, 2017; Domínguez and Montalbán, 2016).

Since the 1970s, Spain has undergone massive social and political transformations that have contributed to restructuring families and fostering the emergence of a new family dynamic in the country. Several factors stand out: low fertility (Eerola et al., 2023); the widespread integration of women into the workforce and their access to higher education (Moreno and Acebes, 2008); the ratification of the democratic Constitution (Álvarez and Monteros, 2019); the legalisation of divorce in 1981 (Oliva et al., 2014) and shared custody (Becerril-Ruiz et al., 2022); same-sex marriage and adoption rights (García-Villanova, 2005); and the legalisation of access to assisted reproduction techniques and the consolidation of feminism (Trujillo and Falguera, 2019). An equally important factor was the ratification of Law 2/2011 on social equality and non-discrimination based on gender identity, gender expression, and sexual characteristics.

These changes have promoted the emergence of new family models and diverse forms of relationships (Ajenjo-Cosp and García-Saladrigas, 2016). Economic, demographic, and cultural factors have altered the “family” structure in modern Western society (Rivas, 2008). According to Rivas et al. (2011), what stands out is not the novelty of today’s diverse families, as various family structures have historically coexisted; rather, it is society’s overall acceptance of these families as “normal.” Although the concept of “family” has recently evolved to encompass various forms of cohabitation, traditional definitions of family endure (Schadler, 2016). According to Loaisa et al. (2019), the prevail-

ling family model in Spain was the nuclear family, typically consisting of a heterosexual couple who legalized their union through marriage and subsequently had children. Thus, any other family models were perceived as abnormal, incomplete, and even problematic. Moreno et al. (2021) states:

The traditional family unit consisting of a father, mother, and biological children is the dominant model in Western culture. This model is influenced by historic, economic, and religious factors, and offers a reference point for a nuclear, biparental, heterosexual, and monogamous family (p. 64).

The conventional family structure comprising two parents and their children has endured for centuries, spanning ancient civilisations to modern industrialised societies (Del Campo, 2004). For this reason, the nuclear family structure is still regarded as the primary family model across most socio-cultural settings. Traditional models of family organization exist alongside new family trends driven by technology and globalisation (Álvarez and Monteros, 2019). Such factors have fostered other views, contributing to the enhancement of family diversity. In Spain, newly emerging family structures include cohabiting couples who are not married (González, 2009), stepfamilies (Sanz et al., 2013), single mothers by choice (Rivas et al., 2011), homoparental families (Ceballos Fernández, 2012; Cortina, 2016), intercountry marriages (Albert Guardiola and Masanet Ripoll, 2008) and LAT relationships (*living apart together*) (Rivas et al., 2011).

In light of this diversity, we propose the need to delve deeper into the social construction of families. To accomplish this, it is crucial to closely examine the various contemporary family typologies. We focus on a specific type of “special” large family as defined by the Spanish Family Law 121/000151. Given the scarcity of academic research on this family type, there is a clear need to explore this particular type of family unit within the field of family diversity studies.

Spanish Law 40/2003 of November 18, 2003 on the safeguarding of large families defines “special” large families as “those with five or more children and those with four children, at least three of whom are the result of multiple births, adoptions, or permanent or pre-adoptive foster care.” This legislation addresses the unique issues faced by this particular type of family, who require additional support in times of family crises and the birth of new children. As such, it stipulates the necessity of financial provision and maintenance payments in such circumstances. Despite large families being uncommon in modern Spanish society, the Constitutional Court has found it necessary to address the issue, occasionally making reference to the rights stipulated in the aforementioned law (Salar, 2018).

As mentioned, there is little research on families with five or more children, and existing studies have generally portrayed large families as vulnerable. However, Castro Ríos (2016) found that resilience scores tend to be higher in larger families than in smaller families. In Spain, the Spanish Federation of Large Families (2022) conducts annual

quantitative studies that measure various areas of family life, including their economy, support, and family-work balance, in terms of percentages. Social practitioners (for example, social workers) have a special connection with the family unit during their professional practice and, therefore, the family constitutes a field of intervention for social work (Rodríguez Pascual, 2004; Vallejo-Cárdenas et al., 2022). For instance, social workers in community social services must promote interdisciplinary interventions for the prevention and care of families at risk of social exclusion, including the protection of children (Pastor-Seller and Sánchez Raja, 2020).

In an increasingly diverse family context, it is essential for social work professionals to understand the multiple ways of forming a family and their everyday implications in order to undertake social interventions from a Human Rights-based approach (Lorence Lara et al., 2015; Romero-Plana, 2025; Santolaya and Caparrós, 2018). A thorough understanding of the dynamics of large families is required to enhance the competence of social workers in providing optimal services to the members of these families and, therefore, to improve their interaction with governmental institutions (Dierckx et al., 2025). The complexity of child and family protection demands a professional approach based on expert knowledge of the associated family dynamics and, consequently, entails significant implications for the discipline of social work (Orock and Navratil, 2024).

Given the lack of knowledge on large families, our objective was to conduct a qualitative study to delve into the experiences of individuals within these family units, thereby gaining a comprehensive understanding of this family type. Our approach was to focus on the perspectives of the family members and, in particular, explore their family dynamics and address the myths often associated with large families.

MATERIALS AND METHOD

To meet the study objectives, we chose a qualitative phenomenological approach as the most appropriate and innovative method for analysing the collected data (Husserl, 2002). Phenomenological studies focus on everyday and shared life experiences within a given group. The fundamental aim of this approach is to describe the nature of a given event (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Thus, this methodology facilitated deeper understanding and insight into this specific family type by elucidating members' experiences across various settings.

This design is rooted in the concept of theoretical sampling as developed within grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). It facilitates insight into the meanings of phenomena within the respective social and cultural settings in which they arise. Social constructionism served as the theoretical basis for our choice of methodology (Gergen et al., 2007; Ibáñez, 2003; Íñiguez Rueda, 2007). This approach suggests that our knowledge and perceptions of a given phenomenon are a product of constructed reality, with reality being shaped by individuals through their social interactions (Bruno et al., 2018).

We not only addressed the voices of the individuals involved, but also the various scenarios in which they are spoken and heard. This approach helps us to understand the discourses that form the basis of the different scenarios that shape this type of family. Hence, the large family social construct is a product of how members explain and experience this phenomenon within its historical, social, political and cultural setting (Arias Cardona and Alvarado Salgado, 2015).

Guided by this theoretical background, we applied thematic analysis to the textual content of the documents used to collect data. Thematic analysis is a novel method for data collection and evaluation (Berg, 2001). It allowed us to identify, organise, and establish lines of argument that facilitated our understanding of the discursive strategies used to socially construct the dynamics of these families. Hence, the texts analysed are not only approached as containers of content, but also as social products that are organised and generated through collective action. As such, they give rise to and reflect the social and historical setting of the phenomenon under study. In this way, the social nature of the analysed materials becomes “social facts” rather than transparent or coherent representations of social reality (Braun and Clarke, 2012).

This analysis revealed several common “thematic blocks (themes)”. These themes are the collective lines of argument found in the transcribed documents to describe and explain the reality of the phenomenon under investigation. The thematic blocks assist in addressing the question of what defines and explains the reality of large families (Domínguez and Montalbán, 2022).

Participants

Our original plan was to interview 16 participants from families with five or more children. However, data saturation was reached by the seventh interview, resulting in the inclusion of only eight participants in the study. The saturation criterion is used as a cutoff for further interviews, indicating that all the data needed for research has been obtained and that further data collection is unwarranted (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). According to Grady (1998), the saturation limit is reached when participants’ discourse becomes repetitive.

The participants were selected using the snowball sampling technique. Recruiting participants can be challenging, particularly when targeting large families with limited availability. The snowball technique was instrumental in overcoming these challenges by facilitating the process of searching for, reaching out to, and gaining access to participants. The search for large families was initially conducted through a purposive sampling procedure (Otzen and Manterola, 2017). Families with at least five children were selected. Table 1 shows the characteristics of the participants.

Table 1. Characteristics of the participants

Participant	Age (years)	Gender	No. of children
Participant 1	+60	Female	7
Participant 2	+60	Male	7
Participant 3	41	Female	8
Participant 4	39	Female	5
Participant 5	40 (approx.)	Female	5
Participant 6	40 (approx.)	Male	5
Participant 7	39	Female	8
Participant 8	39	Female	6

Source: Own work.

Data collection

Semi-structured in-person interviews were employed to encourage reflection and debate. Through this technique we sought to identify and describe the meanings of the central themes that shape the lives of these families (Domínguez and Millán-Franco, 2021). In line with the work of Taylor (1992), our interviews were characterised by a sense of intimacy, openness, and flexibility, and their content, order, and depth were adapted to each participating family (Piza et al., 2019).

Semi-structured interviews enable participants to engage in a formal question-and-answer exchange in a comfortable environment, fostering communication and emotional connections with the interviewer (Ozonas and Pérez, 2004).

The interviews were conducted in an appropriate location, prioritizing respect and familiarity, with the aim of putting the interviewees at ease and encouraging their active participation. Thus, most of the interviews were conducted in locations chosen by the informants, (i.e. their homes, public parks, or cafes they frequented regularly). The purpose of the research was explained to each participant, and they were assured that their personal information would be kept confidential and their statements anonymous. In addition, we have followed the code of ethics of social work in Spain (General Council of Social Work, 2012). The participants consented to the interviews being recorded to facilitate the transcription of the interviews and subsequent data analysis. The interviews were conducted in November 2022 and January 2023; the duration of the interviews ranged from 45 minutes to 73 minutes.

The interviews followed a predefined script encompassing various topics and sub-topics that were designed to address the pre-established research objectives. The script included some of the most relevant questions identified in the literature, while

leaving the interviewees free—and without specific guidelines—to provide their own narratives that would form cohesive units without the need for intervention from the interviewer.

The script included the themes common to the participants, but the questions that made up each thematic section were tailored to the members of the family units interviewed. As a result, the interviews were generally structured into three main sections. The first set of questions collected socio-demographic information, such as the age of the participants, the number of children in the family unit, and their cohabitation status. The second set obtained an overview of the process involved in the decision to have a large family and the resulting family dynamics. These questions mainly addressed beliefs, prejudices, stereotypes, conflicts with traditional values and societal values, and the resources available for their families. The third set focussed on their perceptions, experiences, and insights related to issues concerning the balance between family and personal life, family satisfaction, and new perspectives regarding the inclusion of their families. Finally, a space was left for comments, suggestions, or specific messages they wanted to include (e.g. advice for other families).

We recorded each interview, which enabled us to more precisely identify the discursive strategies they used to describe, explain, and construct their family realities. Hence, we gained insight into the potential repercussions that hegemonic/normalising approaches have on their own families, identified the discursive elements that often go unnoticed, and elucidated the frameworks through which these families contemplate their daily lives, social position, and contribution to family diversity.





Data analysis: Procedure

The raw data comprised the verbatim transcripts of the interviews, forming a textual basis for analysis framed within a specific social scenario. The procedure involved structuring the data collected during the research using thematic analysis, which primarily centred on describing the meanings inherent to the data extracted from the transcripts. Thematic blocks were systematically assigned meaning within a constructionist framework. The initial analysis enabled us to identify, organise, analyse, and specify the themes by a close reading of the transcribed information. As a final outcome of the process, several categories emerged that facilitate a thorough understanding of the themes (Arbeláez and Onrubia, 2014).

The analysis procedure comprised six stages:

1. Search for, selection of, and preparation of the material for analysis.
2. Verbatim transcription of the interviews. A close reading of the transcripts to verify that they included all the information collected during the interviews.

- 3. Familiarization with the material through repeated readings, comparing and contrasting conflicting messages, and following-up the main lines of argument. This process was conducted independently by each researcher.
- 4. Organization of the information into same-meaning categories in order to code the data.
- 5. Examination of the coded categories to identify common patterns that could serve to construct the thematic blocks. The categories for each theme were coded by the research team. Following the work of López and Deslauriers (2011), categories were viewed as unifying principles in which a series of statements can be grouped without forcing their meaning. It was decided that the categories should arise from the analysis of the material on the basis of an open or emergent model. Figure 1 shows the stages of the analysis.

Worksheet for the thematic analysis of content	
	Composition of the family unit interviewed
	Relevant aspects of each family
	Classification of recurring themes in each interview according to the same line of meaning
	Definition of thematic lines

Source: Own work.

- 6. The creation of a consensus report by the researchers, after reaching agreement on the shared themes that contributed to the conceptualisation of the thematic objectives.

The analysis was facilitated using Version 9.0 of ATLAS.ti software. The procedure was divided into two distinct, non-sequential stages: the textual level and the conceptual level. At the textual level, the software was used to aid in identifying lines of argument (citations) during the code construction process, enabling us to obtain the initial thematic blocks.

RESULTS

A comprehensive analysis of the interviews enabled us to identify three themes that facilitated our description, explanation, and construction of the reality and dyna-

mics of large Spanish families. Table 2 shows the main themes and the coded items identified when analysing the interview narratives.

Table 2. Themes emerging from the interviews

Theme 1: Large families: more than meets the eye	Theme 2: Family organisation	Theme 3: Myths and realities about large families
<ul style="list-style-type: none">– Elements defining their family– Values– The parenting process and related issues– Costs and benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none">– Family dynamics– Daily life and leisure time	<ul style="list-style-type: none">– Myths about large families– Demystification of family dynamics– The future of large families– Perception of their own family

Source: Own work.

In the following sections, we explore these themes in more detail, showing how these families define and organise themselves, as well as to what extent their form of parenthood aligns with current societal norms. The themes are illustrated by using textual fragments obtained from the interview transcripts.

Thematic block 1. Large families: more than meets the eye

This section presents the various lines of argument used by the participants to define and explain their own family units, while clarifying some of the main elements or aspects that characterise large Spanish families. It also describes their values, aspects related to the educational process, and the advantages of belonging to a large family.

The large families interviewed defined themselves using a plethora of adjectives, encompassing positive ones (champion team, crazy, beautiful, large, cheerful, close, happy, entertaining, fun, peculiar, etc.) and negative ones (a disaster and noisy). Most of the parents emphasised terms associated with joy and happiness. These data are in line with those obtained by the Spanish Federation of Large Families survey (2022), which found that three out of 10 large families interviewed associated their family with positive feelings and one out of five with words such as sacrifice. However, the parents repeatedly pointed out that their family is like any other. Hence, they listed aspects related to their own experience within the family unit: “From the outside, people see everything looking very nice, right? Like in a family photo, but then,

there are issues, fights, shouting, selfishness, like in any other family.” (Participant VII, personal communication, November 2, 2022).

In terms of values, the parents see large families as a “school of life,” and highlight the personal qualities related to family coexistence and the fact of living with several siblings. Thus, Benítez (2017) suggested that the family serves as the first school in which many individuals learn key values and behavioural rules. Helping others, whether their younger siblings, parents, or schoolmates, was the most cited value, and love was the second. Closely related values were “teaching others,” “caring for others,” and a “spirit of service.” Hence, they also expressed the values of generosity and sharing (some of the parents said that living with many siblings was something they were obliged to do). They also suggested that their children had greater autonomy compared to their peers. For example: “About Dalia, we were told last year that she was very self-sufficient. They had to take a family photo [to school] for a project and a mother in a typical WhatsApp group said that the teacher had told her that it was the last day to hand in the family photo. And I said to her ‘Dalia, you didn’t tell me about having to take a family photo to school.’ And she replied ‘Hey mum, don’t worry, I already got a photo from the album last week and I took it [to school].’” (Participant V, personal communication, November 5, 2022).

When asked about the advantages of children growing up in a large family, they emphasised many positive aspects, which can be summarised by the phrase “They develop a lot of personal qualities.” (Participant I, personal communication, November 3, 2022). In fact, the values highlighted in the foregoing paragraph were often reiterated by the participants. In this sense, all the families stressed the act of “looking out for each other.” They also emphasised that their children do not feel lonely in the sense that they always have someone to play with, siblings are a source of support, advice, and help, and that they learn to cope with frustrations from an early age: “Even if this is mine, someone else can come and take it, even if it’s mine, someone else can come and break it...but this kind of frustration is experienced in the family and from an early age, and so when things like that happen as an adult, out there in the world, it’s easier to deal with and that’s very beneficial, I think.” (Participant VII, personal communication, November 2, 2022); or “Above all, they learn that there is someone else, someone else to care for, to give in to, and you learn to share.” (Participant IV, personal communication, January 18, 2023). These data are in line with the results of the Spanish Federation of Large Families survey (2022), which showed that the main benefits for children growing up in large families are sharing, mutual care, and helping others. Finally, some parents emphasised “being happy with what you’ve got” and “being very grateful”.

Regarding childrearing, all the participants agreed that having a large family is easier than having just one or two children. The main reasons they provided were as follows: (1) siblings learn values from each other; (2) they do not compete for parents’ attention; and (3) parents gain experience in raising children. The following lines of argument illustrate this:

- “I think it’s easier to have a lot rather than just one [child], because only one... you have to teach them many things. Our home is a living school.” (Participant V, personal communication, November 5, 2022).
- “[Having] two kids is more demanding than having six.” (Interviewer) “Why?” (Response) “Because two children fight for the parents’ attention, six don’t, six kids become friends and play with each other.” (Participant I, personal communication, November 3, 2022).
- Some of the mothers said that having a large family is more challenging in the early stages of motherhood, but everything becomes easier as they gain experience: “You’ve already got a lot of experience of being...of having been a mother for a long time.” (Participant V, personal communication, November 5, 2022).

In this regard, the parents said that: “It’s not as complicated as people think. The amount of work to be done isn’t multiplied by the number of children. They [the children] help a lot.” (Participant VI, personal communication, November 5, 2022). Similarly, all the families emphasised that their children arrived one by one and that they [the parents] therefore had time to get used to and (re)adapt to the new arrivals. They also stressed that having so many children meant that they eventually learned how to make time for the important things: “as time goes by you value them more.” (Participant I, personal communication, November 3, 2022); or “simplify a lot and prioritise, and value what is really important. A virtue that’s getting lost.” (Participant I, personal communication, November 3, 2022).

Thematic block 2: Organisation of the family

This theme derives from the first and focuses on family dynamics. In particular, it addresses married life, rather than parenting, as well as planning daily routines and leisure time.

When questioned on the feasibility of married life and having so many children, all the parents agreed that it is entirely achievable: “It’s possible to combine them perfectly.” (Participant VI, personal communication, November 5, 2022). Similarly, all the participants drew attention to several key aspects. Firstly, they prioritise their marriage and take care of it by spend time together on their own: “I chose him, I didn’t choose my children, I chose to have them, but then everyone is the way they are.” (Participant I, personal communication, November 3, 2022); or “We organise ourselves so that we both have time, like...not like mum and dad, but like husband and wife.” (Participant VIII, personal communication, January 13, 2023). Secondly, they stressed the importance of the marital bond in bringing up children: “We are an impenetrable wall.” (Participant I, personal communication, November 3, 2022); or

"I think it's very important that the couple is very united in a big family." (Participant V, personal communication, November 5, 2022). Finally, they explored how bringing up children has benefited the marriage, and how it has been a very positive and enriching experience for them. In the words of the participants: "We don't argue about silly things." (Participant IV, personal communication, January 18, 2023); or "Having so many children helps communication." (Participant III, personal communication, January 19, 2023).

When asked how they organise their daily life, the participants were clear that planning is an indispensable factor for their daily functioning. In other words, order, schedules, and the distribution of tasks are fundamental to family functioning:

- We established rules from the beginning, rules that were negotiable and others that were not. (Participant I, personal communication, November 3, 2022).
- They have their chores; basically, they are in charge, the older ones put their clothes away, make their beds, and also deal with the dishwasher, set the table, clear the table. Then, some days they make dinner, the older ones, I mean. Carmen also helps them, they prepare dinner, yes. (Participant VI, personal communication, November 5, 2022).
- Yes, we take turns...there are strict turns, regarding dishes, clothes, right? Everyone has to deal with their own clothes. I leave the clothes on their beds and everyone puts them away,... sweeping or helping to sweep, put on the dishwasher, prepare their school snacks. I,...it is true that everyone collaborates to the extent that they can, all adapted to their level, of course. (Participant III, personal communication, January 19, 2023).

Although there were various lines of argument on the topic of leisure, they mainly revolved around two central pillars. The first concerns the organisation of free time. Some families argued the need to have a strict schedule: "Organisation, of course, and you have to stick to it, otherwise..." (Participant VIII, personal communication, January 13, 2023). Other families preferred to have more freedom regarding organising leisure and free time: "Improvisation on the leisure aspect...is constant." (Participant IV, January 18, 2023).

The second pillar concerns whether or not to go on holiday. Some parents have the economic means: "We try to go on holiday, we usually go to a Sierra Nevada camp in summer. It's a different environment and the children really like it, it's a kind of camp for families, in a hotel. And try to go when we can but, it's true, it's quite a lot of money." (Participant VI, personal communication, November 5, 2022). Others stated that: "We've never been able to afford a holiday." (Participant I, personal communication, November 3, 2022). They all emphasised that they try to do as many activities as a whole family as possible: "We...when Manuel [father, pseudonym] is

on holiday, eh...they [kids] hardly go out,... so that we can do things together." (Participant VII, personal communication, November 2, 2022).

Thematic block 3: Myths and realities about large families

This theme mainly addresses perceptions about large families. Firstly, we explore the beliefs that large families have regarding what other family types think about them. This repertoire highlights the main myths they face, and the aspects that characterise them according to the perceptions of other family types. The participants also discuss their perspectives on the future of large families in Spain as well as societal perceptions of them.

When asked about their perceptions of how society or other families view them, all the interviewed families stated that opinions greatly vary. In fact, the parents used expressions that encompass a wide range of contrasting perspectives. For example, they pointed out that some families think that "they are crazy," whereas others feel "great admiration" for them. This point is in agreement with the data obtained from the Spanish Federation of Large Families survey (2022), which found that seven out of 10 individuals in their sample feel that society is surprised by their having so many children. In the words of participant VIII (personal communication, January 13, 2023): "There are people who see you as irresponsible because you've got so many children, right? [But you also see] faces [expressing] awe and admiration". Large families frequently reported receiving a good deal of positive feedback regarding their strengths. The following lines of argument illustrate this kind of feedback:

- I think that they think that I'm very brave, that I do great or that I cope so well with everything. (Participant VII, personal communication, November 2, 2022).
- Individuals value it and appreciate it and, a little bit like...I don't know...like they feel...kind of...that you're so brave! There'll always be someone who might see it as stupid, or absurd, or will see it as something crazy. (Participant VI, personal communication, 5 November, 2022).
- When individuals see that we are happy, and that we have fun,...[they say] Wow, you seem so happy, blah blah... (Participant VI, personal communication, 5 November, 2022).

However, they also claim that they are sometimes harassed by society and receive comments that they feel are inappropriate about their personal choices regarding their family: "'Huh! Not the fourth, but the ninth!' People sort of scold you, don't they?" (Participant III, personal communication, January 19, 2023). There are also many discursive references to the opinions of other families about their children's education:

“‘Oh, you have to work day and night, you have to work a lot.’ ‘Well...don’t worry, that’s my problem.’ ‘Oh, it must cost you so much...’ “You know, individuals are so rude, aren’t they? But, well...we say to that kid of disrespect: Look, the important thing is that we work hard to give them what they really need, and not whatever they fancy, right?” (Participant VIII, personal communication, January 13, 2023).

These families, like other types of family, admitted that they are confronted with some myths and stereotypes. The main ones revolve around their socio-economic status, political and religious ideology, child-rearing practices, and the “level of support” they receive from the state.

Indeed, the participants pointed out that most individuals see them as “very conservative families” (Participant VIII, personal communication, January 13, 2023). They are told that the “siblings are left to their own devices, taking care of each other.” Some families feel upset about the opinions that other families project on their family dynamics: “Your parents are religious fanatics who are involved in a sect.” (Participant I, personal communication, November 3, 2022). Regarding economic and livelihood issues, attention is directed at discursive elements such as: “You are freeloaders who live on subsidies.” (Participant II, personal communication, November 3, 2022).

Large families have even been connected to problems such as pollution and overpopulation. As Participant VII put it (personal communication, November 2, 2022): “Individuals say such stupid things...like we’re the worst bunch in the world for having so many children, they say that we’re polluting the world and that there’s not enough food for everyone, and so, to comply with the standards, we should kill some of our children and stick to one or two.”

The large families stressed that these criticisms are myths or fallacies, which society fails to challenge: “Individuals don’t question. Look, for example, a large family pollutes less than a family with two children, for one single reason, clothes are recycled among siblings. I mean, there are so many things, you don’t throw food away, we reuse a lot of things...There is a problem of overpopulation...but Spain has the highest aging population in the European Union.” (Participant I, personal communication, November 3, 2022). In this sense, we highlight the way these families construct their arguments to dismantle the stereotypes and prejudices they encounter.

To conclude this section, we present the interviewees’ perceptions of their own families. All the statements revolved around two main elements. The first element is related to pride and happiness, and the second is linked to the contribution of their family model to society. In the words of the protagonists of the study:

“I’m happy! Because of, really, what I see... I mean, I’m contributing to society, with my family.” (Participant V, personal communication, November 5, 2022). “You can set a big table, you can share with them all the time, right? Their things, their struggles, their...for me, it makes me happy, really, and I see that it’s a gift to have a

big family and that's it. I'm very happy with them." (Participant III, personal communication, January 19, 2023).

CONCLUSIONS

This study analyses the family dynamics of large Spanish families and provides insight into the social circumstances in which they live. Cordero del Castillo (2010) argued that the family is a key pillar of Spanish society and is highly valued. This author suggested that the family is the cornerstone of solidarity in Spain, a source of support, education, and a means of transferring values. We believe that it is important to continue research on the family as an institution and thus contribute to the theoretical corpus of models. In the present case, our objectives were to explore the characteristics of large families, gain insight into their organisational strategies, and explore their role in society (self-perception, future, and myths). We used a qualitative methodology: specifically, a thematic analysis of the textual content acquired from the transcripts of the interviews with the participants. Three primary themes emerged from our study, which shed light on the general and specific characteristics of families with at least five children: (1) Large families: more than meets the eye; (2) family organisation; and (3) myths and realities about large families.

As with other family models, such as stepfamilies, there is still a substantial lack of research and information on large families with at least five children. This means that the needs of such large families remain unknown, which can result in a lack of effective policies to address them. It also fosters preconceptions and unfounded judgements about these families. Hence, we believe that gaining a deeper understanding of this family type holds the potential to enhance psychosocial interventions within family settings. It can also equip professionals with the knowledge and tools needed to better assist these families. As López (2020) and Álvarez-Pérez et al. (2015) suggested, further research is needed to bridge the gap between legislation and policies and social reality.

Ripoll-Núñez et al. (2013) proposed that increasing the number of research studies on family dynamics and conducting more in-depth analysis could play a vital role in advancing the development of psychosocial interventions that are both effective and efficient. In this sense, the main objective of this research was to collect data that could improve our understanding of the family dynamics of large families, thus contributing to building a more substantial theoretical knowledge base, which, in turn, could serve as a basis for the development of effective policies for promoting the well-being of these families in the future. Furthermore, studies on family diversity have predominantly used quantitative methodologies. Hence, it would be advantageous to adopt qualitative or mixed methods to investigate and further explore other relevant issues (Domínguez and Millán-Franco, 2021; Uengwongsapat, 2022).

The principal challenges faced in this study were the limited availability of families with at least five children, and the time constraints for participants to take part in interviews, which were influenced by their own family dynamics. One limitation of our study was the lack of diversity among our participants; they all comprised married couples with children in a traditional family structure. Unfortunately, we were unable to find any stepfamilies with five or more children. Therefore, future studies that explore the similarities and differences between these two family models would be of great interest.

In this regard, with respect to the transferability of results, the lack of diversity in the sample (comprising only nuclear families) calls for particular sensitivity to the specific characteristics and needs of each individual family unit (e.g. large single-parent families). Nevertheless, given the scarcity of studies on this family typology, this approach can be considered valuable for transferring knowledge to social work practice with these families.

Likewise, it is crucial to study the impact of changes in Spanish legislation on families with at least five children and how they perceive the removal of the term “large family” from Family Law. Furthermore, it would also be interesting to understand how the lifestyle—including values and ideals—of large families correlates with the prevailing trends in modern Spanish society, such as individualism, consumerism, and low birth rates.

Based on Hernández Matisán (2021), it is essential to highlight the role of social work in the care and protection of children. Family composition has relevant implications for child poverty and, as with other family typologies, large families constitute a group at risk (Mesa Raya, 2023). Research into and the transfer of knowledge about their family dynamics enables social work professionals to intervene with members of these families (e.g. children, adolescents, young people, adults) while upholding the core principles of the discipline (dignity, freedom, and equality), defending their rights, and supporting their life projects (Rodríguez Pascual, 2004; Romero-Plana, 2025). In this way, social work is fundamental to addressing and meeting the needs of these families. In terms of public policy, given that large families are among the most vulnerable groups in relation to poverty, it is necessary to strengthen their social protection (e.g. social benefits) and thereby help to resolve their most pressing challenges (e.g. access to housing, work–family balance, financial difficulties) (Cabello Roldán, 2023).

The Public Social Services System stands as a key instrument for channelling state support and social intervention with large families. In the context of specialised child social services, it is crucial to continue promoting support programmes for large families that enhance the well-being of their members through joint and coordinated action with community social services (Pastor-Seller and Sánchez Raja, 2020). Moreover, it is a priority to continue developing legislation on the protection of particularly

vulnerable families, grounded in respect for the different forms of family and their specific circumstances (Rodríguez Pascual, 2004).

In conclusion, our approach enabled us to explore new family dynamics within the setting of large families. Our primary focus was on families with at least five children. This approach allowed us to explore how they define their families, how they organise the household with so many family members, and how they perceive the future of their type of family in Spain. We found that love and unity were among the key elements shared with other types of family (Babincak and Kacmarova, 2023). We also identified certain constraints in how this type of family perceives its future within society, including concerns that it may gradually fade away in the not-so-distant future. However, given the limited number of studies on such large families, further research is needed to monitor their evolution. Similarly, we would like to use this research as a call to action for social intervention professionals to incorporate family diversity as a core area of research and intervention within the social sciences. This would necessitate the active participation of these professionals in developing policies for the social protection of these families. Consequently, social workers could establish new operational guidelines to better inform interventions.

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