

Reasons for the Formation of Young People's Fertility Intention under the Three-Child Policy and Measures to Cope with It--Taking Ordos City as an Example

Yaxuan Dan^{1,*}

¹Faculty of Foreign Languages, Ningbo University, No.818 Fenghua Road, Ningbo, Zhejiang, China

*Corresponding author: 226000586@nbu.edu.cn

Abstract:

In 2020, China's total fertility rate fell below the international demographic threshold. In 2021, China's average annual population growth rate fell to 0.53%. To cope with this situation, the three-child policy and its supporting policies were introduced in July 2021 in China. Taking Ordos City as an example, this paper utilizes semi-structured interviews to investigate the fertility intentions of Chinese youth and the reasons for their formation. The study finds that the overall low fertility intentions of young people are mainly influenced by their one-child families of origin, the rising costs of childcare due to elite education, the spread of feminist views on childbearing, and the suppression of childbearing by social media. In addition, most young people are unaware of the three-child policy and its supporting policies. In order to address this problem, this paper presents multiple policy recommendations, such as improving the financial guarantee mechanism for universal preschool education. While increasing the research on fertility intentions in western China, this study provides a reference for improving the three-child policy and its supporting policies aimed at unleashing China's fertility potential and improve the low fertility level.

Keywords: three-child policy, fertility intention, semi-structured interview, life course theory.

1. Introduction

Population problem is always a global, long-term and strategic problem facing China. The related issue of fertility has also become a public issue of great concern to China [1].

In 2020, there was 12 million births in China, the total fertility rate was 1.3, and the total fertility rate will fall below the international demographic warning line of 1.5. In 2021, according to the data of China's seventh population census, the average annual growth rate of China's population has decreased by 0.04 percentage points compared with the average growth rate from 2000 to 2010, and in the face of such a serious demographic problem, it is urgent to adjust the fertility policy. The three-child policy was officially incorporated into the law on August 20, 2021.

Previously, there has been a great deal of academic studies on the impact of gender perspectives, the role of social media, and the full life-cycle process of childbearing subjects on fertility intentions. Cheng Yuan, Aggie J. Huang Ma, Yang Xiechuan, in a survey of married working

women aged 19-49 years old found that 80% of participants said they had no intention of becoming pregnant in the future [2]. Liu P, Cao J, Nie W, Wang X, Tian Y, Ma C's study concluded that conclusion that higher frequency of Internet use is associated with lower fertility intentions among women [3]. Petra Buhr, Johannes Huinink made the point of utilizing a life course approach to research, emphasizing the link between fertility intentions and other life domains [4].

These studies provide some theoretical support and research basis for this paper. However, looking at the existing studies, although the idea of the whole life course approach to research has been put forward, and there are scholars whose questionnaire design guidelines follow this perspective, the number of studies that formally articulate and follow this approach is not large. At the same time, much of the available research on the role of social media in fertility decision-making are rather one-sided.

In order to learn about the current fertility intentions of young people in Ordos City and the reasons for their formation, this paper adopts the research method of semi-structured interviews, sampling the people who live

in Ordos City for a long time and who are between the ages of 18-35 years old, and selecting 7 of them to be interviewed in the way of online meetings.

2. Conceptualization and Theoretical Basis

2.1 Conceptualization

2.1.1 Three-child policy

The Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) held a meeting on May 31, 2021 to discuss the Decision on Optimizing Reproductive Policy to Promote the Long-Term Balanced Development of the Population (hereinafter referred to as the ‘Decision’). The Decision was officially announced on July 20 of the same year, proposing the implementation of a three-child policy and supporting measures, advocating marriage at the right age, well-bear and well-rear, and the possibility for a couple to have three children [5].

2.1.2 Fertility desire

Fertility intentions indicate an individual’s subjective attitudes and opinions about childbearing, which are not influenced by real conditions such as time and economic conditions. It consists of three levels: ideal number of children, desired number of children and intended number of children [6].

2.1.3 Desired number of children

Desired number of children refers to an individual’s preference for the number of children influenced by the social climate and self-experience, without being constrained by the realities of the situation [7].

2.1.4 Intended number of children

It describes the number of children an individual intends to have given the limitations of the real factors such as material and time costs, which is usually prioritized over the desired number of children [8].

2.2 Theoretical Basis

Life course theory recognizes the individual’s life course

as a product of larger social forces and social structures. The life course is influenced by a multiple dimensional level of interactions between the intrinsic individual, the individual, and the supra-individual, performed and experienced by the individual, and has an impact across time and space [9].

3. Research Design

3.1 Collection of Research Information

This study mainly adopts semi-structured interview method for information collection. Semi-structured interviews are between unstructured and fully structured, which can avoid off-topic and increase the flexibility of the interviews, and help the interviewer to guide at the proper time and the respondents to express themselves freely. At the same time, because qualitative research methods often involve personal privacy, formal interviews were conducted using one-on-one online video methods and were recorded with the permission of the respondents, with the promise that the information obtained would only be used for the study.

3.2 Selection of Research Subjects

Because of the differences in the age definition of youth in different organizations and regions, this study takes into account the regulations of the United Nations World Health Organization, China’s Medium and Long-Term Youth Development Plan (2016-2025), and other documents, combining with the optimal age of childbearing, the age of the survey in this study is set at 18-35 years old. In this study, “purposive sampling” in non-probability sampling was used. After setting the requirements of “household registration in Ordos City” and “age 18-35 years old”, the subjects were selected based on these criteria. Seven young people who met the requirements of the study were selected for semi-structured interviews, including four females and three males, and the basic information is shown in Table 1 Basic information of the respondents.

Table 1. Basic information of the respondents

Number	Age	Gender	Degree	Marital status	Family of origin	Number of children in the family of origin	Remark
1	20	female	Bachelor’s degree	unmarried	Two-parent family	1	
2	20	female	Bachelor’s degree	unmarried	Single parent family	1	

3	24	female	Bachelor's degree	unmarried	Two-parent family	3	
4	33	female	Bachelor's degree	married	Single parent family	1	a daughter
5	19	male	Bachelor's degree	unmarried	Single parent family	2	
6	20	male	Bachelor's degree	unmarried	Two-parent family	2	
7	34	male	Associate Degree	married	Two-parent family	2	a son

3.3 Analysis of Research Information

The inductive approach was used for the analysis of this study. The interview recordings were transformed into transcripts to summarize the fertility intentions of the youth and the factors influencing them according to different perspectives, and based on these, suggestions and recommendations on how to improve the three-child policy and its supporting policies.

4. Results of the Study

4.1 Differences in Low Fertility Intentions

As the economy and society develop and the quality of the population improves, the contemporary youth's views on childbearing have changed significantly, and the overall

tendency of low fertility intention has been shown. During the interview, the author asked the respondents about the desired number of children and the intended number of children respectively, and according to the survey results, it was found that the number of the two was highly similar, mainly including the following three cases: not having any, having one and having two. None of the seven interviewed persons expected or planned to have three children. The specific percentage is shown in Table 2 Percentage of desired and intended number of children, and the specific number of desired and intended children is shown in Table 3 Desired and intended number of children, In general, the variability among the interviewed persons is reflected in the difference in the number of children under low fertility intention rather than rather than differences in high or low fertility intentions.

Table 2. Percentage of desired and intended number of children

Desired number of children	Proportion	Intended number of children	Proportions
0	28.6%	0	28.6%
1	42.8%	1	57.1%
2	28.6%	2	14.3%

Table 3. Desired and intended number of children

Number	Desired number of children	Intended number of children
1	0	0
2	0	0
3	1	1
4	1	1
5	1	1
6	2	2
7	2	1

4.2 Family of Origin Influences

Fertility intentions may be affected by family of origin status and the number and relationship of siblings. 7 respondents who preferred to have two children are from two-parent families, while 3 respondents from single-parent families intended to have at most one child. The two respondents who had no desire to have children were all only child, while the corresponding four respondents who are not only child said they had the desire to have children, but there were differences in the exact number of children they wanted to have. When the author asked about the reasons for their desire to have children, three of them mentioned siblings in their families of origin. The respondent who planned to have two children said that he had been cared for by his sister for many years, therefore he would like to have two children in the future as well. The other two who planned to have one child mentioned the difficulty of taking care of their younger siblings and the conflict of getting along with their younger siblings.

4.3 Differences in Factors Affecting Men and Women

According to the female respondents, the two main elements which affect their motivation to have children as well as fear and resistance to pregnancy and childbirth, and the challenge of balancing family and work simultaneously. For men, the other two main factors are the financial strain of supporting a child and more time and energy required to do so.

4.4 Social Media Plays a Double-edged Role

According to the interviews, all respondents were exposed to information about having children on social media, but the content of the information varied significantly between genders. Female respondents were exposed to information about “birth” and male respondents were exposed to information about “parenting”. However, However respondents had similar comments about the role played by social media: most respondents believe that social media have had a dampening effect on their desire to have children, and that there is exaggerated and inaccurate information, but that early exposure to such information has had a positive effect by enabling them to look at the issue of childbearing in a more rational and scientific manner.

4.5 Lack of Knowledge of the Three-child Policy and Its Supporting Policies

When the author asked the respondents whether they were familiar with the three-child policy and its supporting policies, more than half of the respondents gave the answer that they were not familiar with it, and said that they did not see any obvious benefit effects at present.

5. Discussion

The minimum and maximum age of the respondents in this study spanned 15 years, and they have different educational backgrounds, families of origin, and life experiences, but the desired number of children and the intended number of children are centered on one child, and none of them has the desire to have three children. Young people’s current fertility intentions are influenced by multiple factors.

5.1 Family of Origin Factor

China has been implementing the family planning policy of “encouraging one couple to have only one child” from 1979 to 2013, and young people of childbearing age are all born in this period, which results in most young people of childbearing age being one-child. This policy and the environment in which they grow up subconsciously cause many young people to choose to have only one child or even no children [10]. Their willingness to have children is relatively low compared with that of non-only children.

5.2 Educational and Economic Factor

The growing phenomenon of educational involution has made more and more young people realize from their own experience the importance of high educational qualifications and the high cost of raising a well-educated and well-qualified child who is able to compete in society. Respondents who are willing to have children agreed during the interviews with the concept of “well-bear and well-rear” and that education is a very important part of raising children. However, in order to cope with the seriousness of the social implosion with limited income, in order to realize well-bear and well-rear, the cost of education for a single child will continue to increase, and the resulting economic pressure will force families to reduce their family planning number of children [11].

5.3 Feminist Factors

For women, increased educational levels and exposure to Internet information have to some extent stimulated their feminist and affirmative consciousness, resulting in a feminist view of fertility. More and more women no longer believe that life is incomplete without childbearing and no longer wish to limit their identity to the family [12]. Feminism has weakened women’s desire to have children, and this weakening effect has increased with increased identification with feminism [13].

5.4 Social Media Factor

The role that social media plays throughout the fertility process is complex, and while the results are all about inhibiting fertility intentions, there is a duality in the ways

in which it works. The dominant role is more obvious in the case of women. Through social media, women learn about the physical discomforts of pregnancy, the gore and pain of childbirth, and the irreversible damage done to their bodies after giving birth. This increases the anxiety and fear of women who do not experience the full range of birth processes and reduces to some extent the desired number of children [14]. The hidden effects are more pronounced in the final fertility decision. Indeed, it is only by knowing the negative effects in advance that people can recognize whether they can really take on the responsibility of having a child. However, such a positive effect will invariably reduce the number of children planned.

6. Policy Recommendations

6.1 Improving the Funding Guarantee System for Inclusive Preschool Education

Education funding consists mainly of fiscal and non-fiscal funding, with fiscal funding taking the lead. First, relying on the Government's special funds to continuously increase the coverage rate of inclusive kindergartens and reduce preschool tuition fees. Second, considering that the total amount of special education funding in some less developed regions is relatively low, it is recommended to encourage civil society organizations, such as enterprises, to make social donations to promote the equalization of public services for preschool education [15,16].

6.2 Harmonization of Childcare Balance Policies and Working Women's Fertility Intentions

First of all, as soon as possible to unify the length of national leave. At present, different regions have different regulations on maternity leave, paternity leave and other leave according to their own situation, and there is a lack of unified supervision, and the length of employees' leave is easily compressed by enterprises, which seriously affects the willingness to give birth [17]. Secondly, more tolerance should be given to female workers. Enterprises should avoid women who return to the workplace after childbirth, such as, doubt about the ability to work, the value of organizational rewards [18]. Finally, more consideration needs to be given to the design ideas of childcare balance policies. Under the premise of safeguarding the basic benefits of all female staff members, targeted policies should be formulated for women who return to the workplace during pregnancy or after childbirth, rather than providing the same support policies to all female workers, which may easily lead to some women being more concerned about the results of their work [19].

6.3 Strengthening the Dissemination and Implementation of the Three-child Policy and Its Supporting Policies

Although the three-child policy is now widely known, few people are aware of the specific provisions that have been introduced at the local level in response to the three-child policy and its supporting policies, which has led to a lack of understanding or even a misunderstanding of the policy by many people. Therefore, local governments should provide detailed information on local measures through official public websites and microblog to facilitate the birth of three children for couples who wish to do so and to mobilize the low birth-intention groups. At the same time, the speed and quality of policy implementation should be strengthened so that young people can see the effectiveness of the policy and inspire confidence in child-bearing.

7. Conclusions

This study discusses the reasons for the low fertility intentions of young people nowadays, and makes suggestions and recommendations for the three-child policy and its supporting policies in this regard. Interview questions about family of origin and social media were designed to cover different perspectives vertically and horizontally, and the reasons for the formation of respondents' fertility intentions were analyzed based on the life course theory. Depending on the results of the research, it has been shown that young people in Ordos City have low fertility intentions. There may be three reasons for this situation. First, the only child growing up under the family planning policy has formed the cognition that it is only one child; second, the cost of raising a child is gradually rising due to the reality, and it is difficult to bear more expenses and time and energy for raising other than one child; third, the awakening of feminism makes more and more women advocate having fewer children or even not having any children; fourth, the complexity of the social media increases the emotion of not daring to have a child; and fifth, Fifth, the publicity and implementation of the three-child policy and its supporting policies have been ineffective.

This paper provides some references for the study of the fertility intention of the contemporary youth in Ordos city and the reasons for its formation, and gives some suggestions for the improvement of the three-child policy and its supporting policies, so as to provide references for the policy makers, and to help improve the status quo of the low fertility level in China.

The interviewees selected for this study were mainly university undergraduate degree holders, and there is a lack

of knowledge about the fertility intentions of young people with other academic qualifications, so the results of the study may deviate from the real situation, and subsequent surveys and research can be carried out for different groups of people with different academic qualifications.

References

- [1] Shen C, Wang L. Interactive development: The evolution and prospect of fertility policy and maternity security in the 70 years since the founding of the People's Republic of China. *Social Security Studies*, 2019, 6: 27-36.
- [2] Choi SW, et al. Family policies and working women's fertility intentions in South Korea. *Asian Population Studies*, 2018, 14(3): 251-27.
- [3] Liu PC, Cao JJ, Nie WJ, Wang XJ, et al. The influence of internet usage frequency on women's fertility intentions—The mediating effects of gender role attitudes. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 2021, 18(9): 4784.
- [4] Buhr P, Huinink J. Fertility analysis from a life course perspective. *Advances in Life Course Research*, 2014, 21: 1-9.
- [5] Xinhua News Agency. Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council on Optimizing Fertility Policy and Promoting Long-term Balanced Population Development. 2021. 2024/08/15. Retrieved from:https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2021-07/20/content_5626190.htm
- [6] Wu F. Review on fertility intentions: Theories and empirical studies. *Sociological Studies*, 2020, 35(04): 218-246.
- [7] Shukla A. et al. Gender roles perceptions and ideal number of children: Case study of Emirati youth. *Reproductive Health*, 2023, 20(1): 138.
- [8] Chen MN. The discrepancy between ideal and actual parity in Hong Kong: Fertility desire, intention, and behavior. *Popul Res Policy Rev.*, 2017, 36: 583-605.
- [9] Bernardi L, Huinink J, Settersten RA. The life course cube: A tool for studying lives. *Advances in Life Course Research*, 2019, 41: 100258.
- [10] Wang J, Wang GZ. The low fertility willingness research under China's Three-Child Policy and its policy implications. *Journal of Tsinghua University (Philosophy and Social Sciences)*, 2022, 37(02): 27-36.
- [11] Mi RH, Yang X. Is it necessary to have fewer births in a highly educated society?—Explanation of education to the decline of fertility level. *Journal of Yan'an University (Social Sciences Edition)*, 2020, 42(06): 58-64.
- [12] Yu X, Liang JN. Social norms and fertility intentions: Evidence from China. *Front. Psychol.* 2022, 13: 947134.
- [13] Qiao PH, Li YM, Song YX, Tian X. Female university students' fertility intentions and their psychosocial factors. *BMC Public Health*, 2024, 24: 685.
- [14] Ning CL, Wu J, Ye YJ, Yang NM, Pei HC, Gao H. How media use influences the fertility intentions among Chinese women of reproductive age: A perspective of social trust. *Frontiers in Public Health*, 2022, 10: 882009.
- [15] Chen H, Ling L. Research on the resource allocation of preschool education in urban and rural areas of China from 2021 to 2050 under the Three-child Policy. *Journal of East China Normal University(Educational Sciences)*, 2023, 41(12): 113-126.
- [16] Zhao YJ, Zhao HY. An analysis of the input scale and source structure of preschool educational funds in Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region—Base on panel data of 2010-2015. *Journal of Research on Education for Ethnic Minorities*, 2018, 29(02): 108-117.
- [17] Yang FW, Tuo HF. From maternity leave to parental leave: The path of innovation and legal continuation for maternity leave systems. *Social Policy Research*, 2024, 02: 67-134.
- [18] Morgenroth T, Heilman ME. Should I stay or should I go? Implications of maternity leave choice for perceptions of working mothers. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 2017, 72: 53-56.
- [19] Zhao YR. Childcare balancing policy in Japanese corporations and women's fertility intention. *Social Sciences*, 2024, 13: 175.