

Influential Factors and Generation Logic of Young People's Willingness to Have Children from The Perspective of Big Others

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Abstract

Against the background of the continuous evolution of low fertility, the willingness of young people to have children has shown a significant downward trend. The existing studies mostly explain from the economic cost and the institutional environment, but relatively ignore the construction process at the individual level. Based on this, this article introduces the theoretical perspective of "big others", understands the willingness to have children as a social action embedded in a specific symbolic order, and analyses the key influencing factors and their path in its formation from the three dimensions of norms, discourse and risk perception. The research adopts a qualitative method to carry out semi-structured interviews with urban youth, and analyse it in combination with relevant experience research. The study found that in contemporary society, the narrative of "ideal parents" is constantly strengthened through media discourse and peer comparison, raising the entry threshold of parents' roles; fertility is transformed into uncertain decision-making that requires comprehensive evaluation, and individuals tend to examine fertility behaviour with risk avoidance logic; on this basis, social norms through internal Chemical machine production is used for the main body, which promotes the individual to form "childhood anxiety" in comparison. Transforming fertility from the stage of life to a personal choice that needs to be repeatedly rationalised, thus inhibiting the willingness to have children.

Keywords

Young people's willingness to have children; big others; risky society.

1. Introduction

Against the background of persistent low fertility, the willingness of young people to have children is changing. Statistics show that China's total fertility rate has dropped from about 1.5 around 2010 to close to 1.0 in recent years. At the same time, the age of women's first marriage and first childbearing continues to be delayed. According to the data of the National Bureau of Statistics, the average age of women's first marriage is close to 29, and this trend is especially obvious in urban areas. At the same time, the number of ideal children for young people is also on a downward trend[1]. There are many studies that explain the phenomenon of low fertility from the perspective of economic costs and institutional environment, but when young people face the problem of fertility, they continuously evaluate whether they have the conditions to become parents. In this process, the normative expectations of the role of parents in social culture, the perception of future risks and social comparison jointly shape the individual's understanding of fertility. Therefore, the willingness to have children is not only a rational choice under the constraints of resources, but also a meaningful construction process formed in a specific social context.

Based on this, this article introduces the concept of "big others" as an analysis tool from the perspective of the main body construction, understands it as a symbolic order that continues

to operate through cultural discourse and institutional arrangements, and explores the influencing factors and paths of changes in young people's willingness to have children under the background of low fertility. In terms of research design, this paper adopts the qualitative analysis method, takes semi-structured interviews as the main source of information, and selects urban youth as the research object. Through the analysis of interview materials, this article tries to reveal how individuals trade-off between social norms and real conditions.

Existing studies mainly explain the willingness to have children from the dimensions of economy, system and culture. In terms of economy and system, fertility behaviour is usually understood as a process of rational selection under the influence of resource constraints and structural conditions. Relevant studies show that the socio-economic status, income level and resource endowment of families have a significant impact on the willingness to have children [2], while social mobility opportunities indirectly shape individuals' fertility decision-making by influencing their expectations for future development [3]. Factors such as housing costs, education expenditure and occupational instability also turn fertility into risky decisions that need to be assessed by affecting life stability and future expectations [4] [5] [6].

In terms of culture and values, the study gradually emphasises the social constructivity of fertility behaviour. Studies have pointed out that the ideal number of children reported by individuals largely reflects social norms rather than real preferences [7], indicating that the concept of fertility has significant external shaping characteristics. At the same time, under the influence of social stratification and status competition mechanism, individuals often give priority to realising self-identity by maintaining or improving their living standards, thus compressing the fertility space in resource allocation [8]. In addition, the media environment continuously amplifies fertility anxiety and risk awareness by strengthening negative information and emotional expression, so that individuals can form expected pressure before entering the parenting stage.

In terms of subjective cognition and uncertainty, research began to focus on how individuals form fertility judgements in complex environments. Relevant research shows that there is a general gap between the ideal number of children and the actual birth, and this "will-behavioural gap" reflects the tension between structural constraints and subjective expectations [9]. At the same time, under the background of increasing uncertainty, individuals' subjective perception of risk is often more explanatory than objective conditions, and directly affects fertility decision-making through emotional and expected mechanisms [10].

In general, although the existing research reveals the influencing factors of the willingness to have children from multiple dimensions, it is still mainly at the level of external constraints and structural conditions, and there is insufficient attention to how social norms are perceived at the individual level and transformed into decision-making basis. In particular, there is a lack of systematic analysis of how norms, discourse and risk cognition affect the subject through the internalisation process. Therefore, it is necessary to introduce the analytical perspective of "great others", understand social norms, cultural discourse and institutional structure as a symbolic order, and explore how it affects the willingness to have children through individual cognition and self-assessment mechanisms. Under this framework, becoming a parent is not only a realistic choice, but also a symbolic position constantly defined by social norms. Individuals evaluate themselves by internalised social standards in the decision-making process, thus affecting their fertility judgement [12].

2. Factors Affecting Changes in Young People's Willingness to Have Children

2.1. Normative Factors - Constraints of Ideal Parental Narrative

Judging from the influence path, the normative "big other" changes the individual's perception of fertility conditions by shaping the social standards of "qualified parents", thus raising the threshold of entering fertility and thus suppressing the willingness to have children. Interview data shows that contemporary youth will not become a natural stage of life regarded by parents. In the account of the interviewee, "qualified parents" usually means a stable economic foundation, continuous time investment and systematic educational planning. Therefore, the role of parents is given professional and responsible characteristics. Respondent A pointed out: "Now raising children is not only a living support, but also involves education, companionship and other aspects, otherwise you will feel irresponsible to your children." Similarly, another respondent D also mentioned that if they can't provide a "better growth environment", they will hesitate to have children. This kind of expression shows that the individual's understanding of the role of parents has gone beyond the traditional family division of labour logic and turned to the core expectation of "high-quality parenting".

From the perspective of the formation mechanism, the narrative of "ideal parents" does not originate from individual experience, but is gradually constructed in multiple social discourses. On the one hand, mass media and online platforms continue to spread the concept of fine parenting, shaping the high-investment parenting model into the mainstream standard; on the other hand, peer comparison and daily interaction continue to strengthen this norm, so that individuals can improve their expectations for the role of parents in the peer reference. Therefore, as a normative structure, ideal parents transform fertility from an optional behaviour to a qualification that needs to meet the standard through internalisation of machine production to the subject, thus raising the entry threshold in the initial stage of decision-making.

2.2. Risk Cognitive Factors - Fertility Riskisation

In the context of a risk society, discursive "big others" strengthen individual risk perception by amplifying the cost of parenting and future uncertainty, and making childbirth a high-risk decision, thus reducing the willingness to have children. As Baker pointed out, modernity is essentially an institutionalised production process of risk [12]. In this context, fertility gradually detaches from the understanding of "natural process" and is translated into a set of risks containing multiple uncertainties. Expert discourse and the parenting industry continue to disassemble fertility into links that can be evaluated and optimised, and set ideal standards for each link, thus raising the standard threshold of fertility invisibly. Fertility is not only idealised, but also moralised and specialised, and then continues to produce anxiety. In this framework, "no birth" is not a denial of family values, but is constructed as a rational risk avoidance strategy. Individuals often think that giving up or delaying childbirth is a more responsible choice when the ideal parenting conditions cannot be met. This constitutes the core paradox of contemporary fertility intention: society continues to affirm the importance of family at the value level, but constantly improves the standard of becoming a parent at the normative level, transforming fertility into a "high-risk and failure-tolerant" social task.

Existing studies show that the cost of contemporary fertility has expanded from a single economic expenditure to a multi-dimensional risk structure. The housing problem not only constitutes an economic constraint, but also an important source of risk that affects the future expectations of individuals; the mismatch between house prices and income will significantly reduce the willingness to have children, and it is more obvious in the highly educated group. At the same time, the cost of education affects fertility decision-making through the risk amplification mechanism, causing individuals to have anxiety expectations before entering the

parenting stage. On this basis, unstable employment and income fluctuations further exacerbate individuals' perception of uncertainty about the future, and uncertain living conditions are considered important factors in delaying fertility [13].

The interview materials also confirm this point. In the interview, uncertainty and risk have become frequent keywords. Respondent C pointed out: "It's not that I don't want to have children, but that my job is not stable now. If there is a change in the future, I will feel a lot of pressure." Interviewee B said, "If you want to have children, it means that many things need to be arranged in advance, such as house, work and education, which will affect your future life." Similar statements show that individuals often regard it as a major investment with long-term consequences when making fertility decisions, and need to make a comprehensive trade-off between economic conditions, career development and family responsibilities.

Furthermore, this kind of risk perception does not entirely stem from individual experience, but is constantly amplified in media discourse and public discussion. For example, narratives such as education internal volume and class solidification make individuals perceive potential risks in advance before they enter the parenting stage. In this process, childbirth has gradually changed from a practice with emotion and family as the core to a decision-making behaviour that requires rational calculation.

2.3. Identity Factors - Fertility Anxiety

Under the influence of the social comparison mechanism, the symbolic "big other" triggers individual self-examination and qualification judgement through internalisation of evaluation standards, forming "childbearing qualification anxiety", and further delaying or inhibiting fertility decision-making. Unlike external constraints, this process mainly plays a role through the internal identity and self-evaluation mechanism of the subject.

In contemporary society, norms do not operate in the form of external coercion, but can be maintained through the presupposition of the individual's evaluation of others. With the diversification of life paths, individuals no longer follow a single trajectory of marriage and childbearing, but need to choose from a variety of possibilities and constantly rationalise their own choices. In this process, the individual's question on fertility gradually changed from "whether they want to have children" to "whether they have the conditions to become parents", that is, from preference judgement to qualification judgement.

Under the joint effect of ideal parent norms and risk discourse, this judgement further evolves into multi-dimensional self-assessment. Individuals not only measure economic resources, but also examine time investment, emotional ability and career development, and frequently describe their state as unprepared. However, this judgement does not stem from the absolute lack of resources, but from the gap between realistic conditions and internalised standards. The interview materials further reveal this process. When describing childbirth, respondents often express the contradictory attitude of recognising its value and not having the conditions for themselves. This shows that individuals do not simply refuse to have children, but transform fertility into a choice that needs to be justified in continuous self-assessment.

Therefore, fertility anxiety can be understood as the embodiment of symbolic order at the main level. Its core lies in the continuous evaluation of individuals through internalisation of social standards. In this process, fertility is no longer a matter of "can be realised", but turns into a question of "whether it is worthy", thus significantly reducing the willingness to have children at the subjective level.

3. The comprehensive role and result performance of influencing factors

On the basis of the above analysis, it can be found that normative factors, risk cognitive factors and identity factors do not exist in isolation, but are intertwined in the symbolic order formed

by "big others" and jointly act in the reproductive decision-making process of individuals. Its overall action path is as follows: social norms and discourse structures are transformed into the redefinition of fertility conditions through individual subjective perception and self-evaluation mechanisms, thus changing the formation logic of fertility will.

Specifically, normative factors set a high entry threshold for fertility by shaping the social standards of ideal parents; on this basis, risk cognitive factors transform fertility into an uncertain decision that requires rational evaluation, making individuals more cautious when facing the future; while identity factors are through internalised evaluation. The price mechanism transforms external norms into individual self-examination standards, so that the fertility issue changes from willingness to qualification. The three show an obvious progressive relationship in the mechanism of action: standardise and provide standards, strengthen risks and constraints, and agree to complete internalisation. In the process, the nature of fertility decision-making has undergone a fundamental change. Existing studies have pointed out that reproductive behaviour is essentially the result of the interaction between structural conditions and individual cognition, and in contemporary society, this interaction is reflected in the strengthening of the subjective evaluation process. Individuals no longer make choices simply based on economic conditions or institutional environment, but need to make comprehensive judgements on their own resources, abilities and future expectations under multiple standards and uncertainty. This change has gradually transformed fertility from an institutional stage of life to a personal decision-making that needs to be constantly demonstrated. This transformation is also manifested in the restructuring of the legitimacy of fertility. In the traditional social structure, marriage and childbirth often have strong normative constraints, and individuals rarely need additional explanations for their behaviour. However, in contemporary society, with the increasing degree of individualisation and the diversification of life paths, fertility is no longer a default option, but a choice that needs to be confirmed through self-judgement. Against this background, infertility or delayed childbirth has gradually gained more legitimacy. It is not only no longer regarded as a behaviour that deviates from norms, but also is understood as a rational risk avoidance strategy to a certain extent. Therefore, in the symbolic order shaped by the "big other", norms, risks and identification work together through internalisation mechanisms, transforming fertility from a relatively certain life path to a highly uncertain decision-making behaviour that needs to be constantly justified. This change not only explains why the willingness to have children continues to decline against the background of the gradual improvement of objective conditions, but also reveals the deeper social and cultural mechanism behind the low fertility rate.

4. Conclusion

Against the background of the continuous evolution of low fertility rates, changes in young people's willingness to have children are no longer just a direct result of economic costs or institutional constraints, but are reflected in a deep social construction process. From the perspective of "big others", this article analyses the willingness to have children in the symbolic order, and explores the interaction between social norms, discourse structure and individual cognition. Research shows that the formation of young people's willingness to have children is jointly influenced by normative factors, risk recognition factors and identity factors. Specifically, the normative "big others" raise the entry threshold of fertility by shaping the standard of "ideal parents"; risk cognitive factors transform fertility into a risky decision-making that requires careful evaluation under the background of increasing uncertainty; identity factors trigger the individual's self- I examine and judge the qualifications to change the issue of childbirth from "whether willing" to "whether the conditions are available". The three are nested with each

other on the path of action, jointly promoting the transformation of fertility from an institutionalised stage of life to a personal choice that needs to be continuously demonstrated. Of course, there are still certain limitations in this article. In terms of empirical materials, this article mainly analyses based on limited interview data, and the sample size and representativeness are still insufficient; at the same time, the research subjects are mainly urban youth, and the differences between different regions and groups have not been fully explored; this article lacks systematic quantitative testing, and future research can be combined with questionnaire survey and large Sample data, empirically test the impact path proposed in this paper, and further analyse the difference mechanism between different social groups.

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