

More Happiness or More Payment: Psychological and Influencing Factors of “Two-Child” Women of Childbearing Age in the Context of “Three-Child”

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Abstract: The paper aims to investigate the psychological well-being and determinants of women of childbearing age who have already had one child, and to identify their practical needs for fostering a supportive environment to encourage additional childbearing. In-depth interviews were conducted with 21 mothers of two children, and the interview data were subjected to axial coding. The influencing factors of reproductive willingness among women of childbearing age can be integrated into a three-layer structural model: the first layer includes four nodes: economic investment and energy; The second layer covers 16 nodes, including education expenses and work family imbalance; The third layer consists of 40 nodes, such as high education costs and energy shortages. In summary, the fertility challenges currently faced by women of childbearing age with a second child are the result of the interaction of multiple factors, and addressing these challenges requires joint efforts from the national, social, family, and individual levels

Keywords: Women of Childbearing Age with Two Children; Psychological Status; Influencing Factors

1. Introduction

According to data released by the National Bureau of Statistics, the national population in 2023 stood at 1,409.67 million, a decrease of 2.08 million from the end of the previous year. The birth population was 9.02 million, with a birth rate of 6.39%, and the death population was 11.10 million, with a death rate of 7.87%, resulting in a natural growth rate of -1.48%. In 2022, the national population was 1,411.75 million, with a birth population of 9.56 million,

a decrease of 850,000 from the previous year, a birth rate of 6.77%, and a death population of 10.41 million, with a death rate of 7.37%, resulting in a natural growth rate of -0.6%. In the long term, the trend of population decline and the intensification of population aging are inevitable. To actively address this situation, in August 2021, China’s “three-child” policy was formally enacted, allowing each couple to have up to three children, with corresponding support measures provided [1]. Research indicates a positive correlation between fertility intentions and the annual birth population [2]. Currently, there are over 300 million women of childbearing age in China, yet the overall fertility rate continues to decline. This report will analyze the psychological status of women of childbearing age with a “second child,” focusing on economic investment, energy, social support, and psychological experiences. The study on the psychological status and influencing factors of women of childbearing age in the context of the “three-child” policy is beneficial for understanding the real issues and needs of these women. It aids in constructing a fertility support system tailored to their needs, promoting the development of a new allocation system, and increasing the protection of women of childbearing age. This will provide a reference for relevant departments to further improve the “three-child” policy and facilitate its implementation.

2. Object and Method

2.1 Object

This study focuses on the psychological status and influencing factors of women of childbearing age with a “second child” under the “three-child” policy. A convenience

sampling method was used for the interviews, with the principles of maximum differentiation of sample characteristics and information saturation. Twenty-one mothers of two children, mainly from Jiangxi Province and Hubei Province, were selected as research subjects. Inclusion criteria: (1) Women with reproductive capability who have already given birth to two children. (2) Age between 24 and 45 years. (3) No mental or cognitive impairments. (4) Informed consent to participate in the interviews.

2.2 Method

This study applies the grounded theory from qualitative research as its methodology. Data and information collection were conducted using a semi-structured interview method. The interviews were conducted in the form of online telephone recordings and face-to-face meetings. The interview topics are:

1. How many children do you have?
2. Are they a boy and a girl?
3. Now that the “three-child policy” is open, will you consider having a third child?
4. What are your reasons for this decision?

Before the interviews, the purpose, content, and methods of this study were explained to the subjects, and it was promised that the interview calls and recordings would be used solely for academic reporting. After obtaining informed consent, the online interview process and face-to-face meetings were recorded and transcribed. When no new information emerges, it is assumed that information saturation has been reached, and data collection is concluded. After the interview, the information is coded. This study uses three levels of coding for information coding.

2.2.1 Third level coding

The three levels of coding adopt the open coding method. Through the analysis of the collected original textual data, 127 nodes were organized, such as: high education costs, feeling of insufficient sleep, inadequate policy benefits, high psychological pressure, etc. To adhere to the “localization” principle of grounded theory, the node names are all derived from the original text.

2.2.2 Secondary encoding

The second level of coding uses axial coding. Building on the open coding process, the 127 nodes previously identified were further analyzed by identifying and establishing

relationships such as causality, structure, and strategy among the nodes. Through continuous comparison and validation of these relationships, a three-level structural relationship was finally established, as shown in Table 1. From the table, it can be seen that there are a total of four primary nodes: economic input, energy, social support, and psychological experience. Economic input factors account for 44.10% of the total nodes, energy factors account for 30.00%, social support factors account for 13.30%, and psychological experience factors account for 12.60%. The significant lead in the proportion of economic input and energy factors indicates that, for women of childbearing age with a “second child,” the factors influencing their fertility intentions are mainly concentrated on economic conditions and energy conditions. Based on this systematic analysis, a theoretical model of the factors influencing the fertility intentions of women of childbearing age with a “second child” is constructed.

2.2.3 First level coding

2.2.3.1 Core categories and support categories

Through systematic analysis, all primary codes can be categorized into dominant core categories and relatively minor “support categories.” Based on the proportion of nodes occupied by each code, economic input factors and energy factors, which account for 74.10% of all nodes, are classified as core categories due to their significant lead in proportion. Social support factors, accounting for 13.3% of all nodes, and psychological experience factors, accounting for 12.6% of all nodes, have smaller proportions and are classified as “support categories.” See Table 2 for details.

2.2.3.2 External factors and internal factors

Based on internal and external perspectives, the four primary codes can be divided into two groups: external factors, comprising economic input factors and social support factors, and internal factors, comprising energy factors and psychological experience factors. The impact of external factors is manifested in the following aspects: Firstly, contrary to the declining cost of living due to China’s rapid economic development, the cost of raising children has shown a continuous upward trend. For example, while basic living expenses like food are becoming less of a burden for the average family, the costs associated with children, such as childcare items, education

expenses, and dowries and housing for marriage, have significantly increased. These costs are rising at a pace that far outstrips wage growth, forcing women of childbearing age to carefully consider before deciding to have children.

Additionally, the rapid societal development in recent decades has led to a disconnect between the older generation and the deepening processes of urbanization and marketization. The atomization of society has continuously deconstructed the traditional “extended family” system, making it difficult for today’s new-generation parents to receive in-depth

guidance from experienced elders, as previous generations did [3]. Even when some assistance is available, the older generation’s childcare support often struggles to meet modern standards, failing to significantly alleviate the challenges faced by new parents.

These external factors, shaped by the changing times, are largely beyond the control of individuals. They contribute to a perception among women of childbearing age that having another child is very difficult, leading to anxiety and negative judgments about the feasibility of additional childbearing.

Table 1. General Information of Respondents (n=21)

Respondents	Age (years)	Native place	Education	Monthly household income	One child sex	Second child sex	Whether to consider having a third child
N1	35	Fuzhou, Jiangxi Province	Junior High School	<5000	Male	Male	No
N2	37	Fuzhou, Jiangxi Province	Undergraduate	<5000	Male	Male	No
N3	27	Ji’an, Jiangxi Province	High School	5000-10000	Female	Male	No
N4	29	Fuzhou, Jiangxi Province	Junior College	<5000	Female	Male	No
N5	34	Jingdezhen, Jiangxi Province	Undergraduate	5000-10000	Female	Male	No
N6	33	Jiujiang, Jiangxi Province	Undergraduate	10000-20000	Female	Male	No
N7	36	Fuzhou, Jiangxi Province	Junior High School	<5000	Male	Male	No
N8	36	Honghu, Hubei Province	Junior High School	5000-10000	Female	Female	No
N9	36	Lanzhou, Gansu Province	Undergraduate	<5000	Female	Female	No
N10	43	Nanchang, Jiangxi Province	High School	<5000	Male	Female	No
N11	30	Fuzhou, Jiangxi Province	Junior High School	>20000	Male	Male	No
N12	25	Wuyuan, Jiangxi Province	Junior High School	5000-10000	Male	Female	No
N13	31	Yichang, Hubei Province	Undergraduate	5000-10000	Male	Female	No
N14	38	Fuzhou, Jiangxi Province	Junior High School	<5000	Male	Male	No
N15	49	Qianjiang, Hubei Province	Junior High School	<5000	Female	Female	No
N16	48	Suizhou, Hubei Province	Junior High School	<5000	Female	Female	No
N17	52	Suizhou, Hubei Province	Junior High School	<5000	Female	Female	No
N18	39	Kunming,	Undergraduate	>20000	Male	Female	No

		Yunnan Province					
N19	40	Wuhan, Hubei Province	Junior College	5000-10000	Male	Female	No
N20	33	Nanchang, Jiangxi Province	Undergraduate	5000-10000	Male	Male	No
N21	44	Wuhan, Hubei Province	High School	<5000	Male	Female	No

Table 2. Node Code of Psychology and Influencing Factors of Women of Childbearing Age with “Second Child” under the Background of “Three Children” [n(%)]

First-level node	Secondary nodes	Tertiary nodes
Economic input [56(44.10)]	Education spending (11) Living expenses (22) Love and marriage expenses (3) Growth expenses (2) Income level (18)	High cost of education(8), high cost of educational materials(1), devaluation of degree(1), high cost of after-school tutoring(1), food(6), clothing(6), high prices(2), cost of living(3), mortgage payment(3), transportation costs(1), to save money to do their own things(1), marriage to buy a house(3), hobby training(2), economic pressure(14), low wages(2), limited economy(1), migrant work(1)
Energy [38(30.00)]	Excessive consumption of mental resources (18) Family work imbalance (7) Physical Fitness (9) Lack of personal space (4)	Lack of energy (16), feeling sleep deprived (2), being too busy building a business for more companionship (5) unable to juggle family and career (2), physically unable to bear another child (4), getting older (5), lack of time to myself (4)
Social support [17(13.30)]	Family support (8) Policy support (3) Regional customs (4) Parental abilities (2)	Having to provide for elders (1), elders unable to replace the functions of parents (5) husbands sharing too little (2), insufficient benefits of policies (2), insufficient implementation of policies (1), bride price (3), dowry (1) too low education to educate children (2)
Psychological experience [16(12.60)]	Concept of birth and Upbringing (8) Self-feeling (7) Policy perception (1)	Changes in attitudes pay more attention to the quality of parenting (4), traditional concepts (2), new views on fertility (1), pay more attention to the lack of mental health of children (1) feel very tired (4), have a lot of psychological pressure (2) dislike children (1), lack of policy perception (1)

Regarding energy factors and psychological experience factors, with the improvement of social productivity, the value that modern people can create within a unit of time has significantly increased. However, the amount of energy required for raising children has not decreased noticeably. This means that the time and energy that could otherwise be used to create substantial value are now consumed by the demands of child-rearing.

For example, in the past, women of childbearing age who were not engaged in raising children might not have had many other opportunities to utilize their time and energy elsewhere. Nowadays, if they free up the time and energy otherwise spent on child-rearing, these women could pursue other activities such as career advancement or developing hobbies. In short, the changes in times have implicitly

increased the negative impact of continued childbearing on women of childbearing age, adding to their negative psychological experiences from different levels, both internally and externally.

3. Model Analysis and Discussion

This study focuses on the four high-frequency nodes: economic input factors, energy factors, social support factors, and psychological experience factors.

3.1 Economic Investment Factors are the Most Important Core Factors Affecting the Fertility Psychology of Women of Childbearing Age with Two Children

The economic input factors include five nodes: educational expenses, living expenses, marriage and relationship expenses, growth

expenses, and income level, totaling 56 meaning nodes. Among these, educational expenses are the most significant factor highlighting respondents' concerns and anxieties. According to a survey by China Education Online, over 70% of parents believe that the main source of academic burden comes from extracurricular tutoring classes, and more than half of the parents feel that their children are overburdened, but they persist for the sake of academic advancement. This anxiety about education not only increases the academic burden on children but also places a financial strain on parents.

Secondly, the impact of living expenses is also prominent. It is not just about the rising cost of living; in the process of caring for children, the pursuit of safety and benefit in consumer products has led to a significant premium on children's products. Research by Sun shows that households with children are more willing to pay a premium for organic agricultural products [4]. At the same time, as children's mental health and overall development have become increasingly important with societal progress, this has added new child-rearing costs that did not exist in the past. To achieve the economic capability to raise children, some respondents have chosen to work outside their hometowns, resulting in their children becoming "left-behind children," which is detrimental to the children's development and family intimacy [5].

3.2 Energy Factors are Relatively Important Core Factors Affecting the Fertility Psychology of Women of Childbearing Age with Two Children

The energy factors include five nodes: excessive consumption of psychological resources, imbalance between family and work, physical fitness, and lack of personal space. Excessive consumption of psychological resources accounts for the highest proportion, encompassing insufficient energy and lack of sleep. Studies indicate that parenting style is a significant factor affecting the willingness to have a third child, and therefore, lack of time and energy is one of the main reasons for low family fertility intentions [6].

For women of childbearing age with two children ("second-child" mothers), raising two children is already challenging. Balancing work and caring for two children requires a

great deal of energy, leading to insufficient sleep. When focusing on work, they may lack time to accompany their children, while prioritizing family can affect their careers. Physical fitness also impacts the psychological state of "second-child" mothers considering a third child. As they age, poorer health and decreased energy reduce their willingness to have a third child. These mothers are often busy with both family and work, dedicating less time and energy to themselves, leading to a lack of personal space. The more children they have, the less personal space they will have.

3.3 The Impact of Social Support Factors on the Psychological Well-being of Women of Childbearing Age

The social support factors include four nodes: family support, policy relations, regional customs, and parental ability, totaling 17 meaning nodes. Among these, family support accounts for the highest proportion. The tertiary nodes under family support mainly include supporting elderly parents, the inability of elders to replace parental roles, and insufficient contribution from husbands. Studies have shown that spousal and elder support significantly affect the plans and ideal number of children for women of childbearing age, and economic support is a necessary condition for having children [7]. Family support can provide emotional security and reliance for women of childbearing age during their transition to the role of a parent. It promotes role balance and coordination, effectively reduces their anxiety and loneliness, and alleviates the stress caused by role conflicts, benefiting their mental health. Various forms of support from elders and spouses help alleviate the childbearing burden on women of childbearing age, thereby increasing their willingness to have children. Additionally, regional customs also significantly impact the psychology of "second-child" mothers. Betrothal gifts and dowries, as important components of marriage and childbirth culture, influence the fertility intentions of these women to some extent [8]. High betrothal gifts and dowries increase the financial burden on families, affect marital harmony, lead to excessive social expectations, and increase psychological pressure and anxiety regarding their children's future

development, thereby reducing their willingness to have more children.

3.4 The Impact of Psychological Experience Factors on the Psychological Well-being of Women of Childbearing Age with Two Children

The psychological experience's impact on the mindset of "second-child" mothers under the "three-child" policy is reflected in their child-rearing beliefs, self-perception, and policy awareness. Child-rearing beliefs include the shift in focus towards quality upbringing, traditional views, new child-rearing concepts, and an increased emphasis on children's mental health. The influence of these beliefs is significant, as China's long-standing population control policies have ingrained the concept of "fewer births, better births, happier lives" deeply in people's minds. The main demographic targeted by the current three-child policy has a stronger and deeper recognition of family planning and the idea of having fewer children [9]. Children's development is no longer limited to merely meeting their basic needs; for instance, the nurturing environment can influence a child's motor development [10]. Parents now pay attention not only to their children's physical growth but also to their mental health.

Self-perception includes feelings of exhaustion, high psychological pressure, and a lack of fondness for children. As societal ideologies shift from viewing childbirth as a woman's responsibility to seeing it as her right, women increasingly desire the energy to pursue their own interests. Additionally, the mother's self-perception during child-rearing is crucial; feeling tired or stressed can significantly reduce the willingness of "second-child" mothers to have more children. Policy awareness reflects the weak perception of policies, as many parents are not familiar with the specific details of these policies.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper integrates the influencing factors of the fertility intentions of "second-child" mothers of childbearing age into a three-tier structural model. The first tier includes four nodes: economic investment, energy, social support, and psychological experience. The second tier includes 16 nodes such as education expenditure, work-family imbalance,

family support, and child-rearing beliefs. The third tier consists of 40 nodes, including high education costs, expensive extracurricular tutoring, insufficient energy, the need to support elderly parents, and feelings of exhaustion.

The primary nodes represent the relatively macro-level influencing factors of the fertility intentions of "second-child" mothers and guide the subsequent nodes. The research results indicate that to ensure the fertility intentions of "second-child" mothers, focus should be placed on two core elements: economic investment factors and energy factors. It is essential to address the supportive categories of social support and psychological experience in a targeted manner. By discussing and analyzing the sub-nodes, the external and internal factors influencing the fertility intentions of "second-child" mothers can be further refined.

External factors include economic investment factors and social support factors. These factors are crucial for "second-child" mothers and require assistance and support from society and the government, including policy support. Internal factors mainly manifest in the personal energy factors and psychological experiences of "second-child" mothers. These factors need to be addressed from an individual perspective by alleviating the energy-related pressures on "second-child" mothers, enhancing their knowledge of child care, and emphasizing the importance of their mental health. These measures aim to ease the internal distress faced by "second-child" mothers regarding childbirth.

In summary, ensuring the fertility intentions of "second-child" mothers is theoretically influenced by the interaction of various factors. This requires joint efforts from the state, society, families, and individuals at all levels.

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