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The mediating role of fertility pressure in the relationship between policy communication and fertility intentions: evidence from China

Yifan Zhang
Ural Federal University, Yekaterinburg, Russian Federation

Abstract

Background. Declining fertility and population ageing represent a serious challenge for major world economies. Despite substantial investment in family policy, fertility continues to fall, indicating that existing theories of how policy affects reproductive decisions remain incomplete. Most policy-evaluation methods focus on the direct link between measures and behavior, ignoring the complex psychological and socio-economic processes underlying the decision to have a child.

Purpose. To identify and quantify the mediating role of fertility pressure in the causal relationship between demographic policy communication and individual fertility intentions in China. The research tasks are: (1) to measure the direct effect of policy communication; (2) to estimate the indirect effect through fertility pressure; (3) to assess the economic significance of both effects for family-policy improvement.

Materials and methods. Between June 2024 and April 2025, 475 valid questionnaires were collected from respondents across different regions of China via an online platform. Structural equation modelling (SPSS 29), Baron and Kenny's stepwise regression, and bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals (5000 iterations) were applied to test the mediating effect.

Results. The findings reveal that demographic policy communication has a "double-edged sword" effect on fertility intentions: a significantly negative direct effect ($\beta = -1.6297$; $p < 0.001$) and a significantly positive indirect effect mediated by fertility pressure ($\beta = 0.8251$; $p < 0.001$). Current policy promotion unintentionally amplifies the perceived costs of childbearing, yet effective pressure reduction does foster fertility intentions. To enhance the economic effectiveness of demographic policy, emphasis should shift from mere information delivery to substantive support.

Keywords: fertility policy; policy communication; fertility pressure; fertility intentions; mediation analysis; population economics; China; demographic transition

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Опосредующая роль репродуктивного давления во взаимосвязи между коммуникацией демографической политики и репродуктивными намерениями: на примере Китая

Yifan Zhang

Уральский федеральный университет, Екатеринбург, Российская Федерация

Аннотация

Обоснование. Снижение рождаемости и старение населения представляют собой серьёзный вызов для крупных экономик мира. Несмотря на значительные инвестиции в семейную политику, рождаемость продолжает снижаться, что свидетельствует о неполноте существующих теорий влияния политики на репродуктивные решения. Большинство методов оценки политики сосредоточено на прямой связи между мерами и поведением, игнорируя сложные психологические и социально-экономические процессы, лежащие в основе принятия решения о рождении ребёнка.

Цель исследования. Выявить и количественно оценить опосредующую роль репродуктивного давления в причинно-следственной связи между коммуникацией демографической политики и репродуктивными намерениями индивида в контексте Китая. Задачи: (1) измерить прямой эффект коммуникации политики; (2) оценить косвенный эффект через репродуктивное давление; (3) определить экономическую значимость обоих эффектов для совершенствования семейно-экономической политики.

Материалы и методы. С июня 2024 г. по апрель 2025 г. на платформе онлайн-анкетирования было собрано 475 действительных анкет от респондентов из различных регионов Китая. Для проверки опосредующего эффекта применены структурное моделирование (SPSS 29), пошаговый регрессионный анализ по методу Бэрона и Кенни и построение доверительных интервалов методом бутстрэпа (5000 итераций).

Результаты. Установлено, что коммуникация демографической политики оказывает на репродуктивные намерения эффект «обоюдоострого меча». Прямой эффект значимо отрицателен ($\beta = -1{,}6297$; $p < 0{,}001$), а косвенный эффект через снижение репродуктивного давления – значимо положителен ($\beta = 0{,}8251$; $p <$

0,001). Это свидетельствует, что существующие способы продвижения политики непреднамеренно усиливают восприятие издержек деторождения, однако при эффективном снижении давления информационная политика способствует росту репродуктивных намерений. Для повышения экономической эффективности демографической политики необходимо смещение акцента с простого информирования на содержательную поддержку и снижение психологического давления.

Ключевые слова: демографическая политика; коммуникация политики; репродуктивное давление; репродуктивные намерения; анализ опосредующего эффекта; экономика народонаселения; Китай; демографический переход

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Introduction

At present, major economies are all confronted with the challenge of population decline, mainly characterized by the decline in fertility rates and the aging of the social population. The emergence of this phenomenon has led various countries to introduce various family or fertility policies to intervene, aiming to encourage society to carry out population reproduction [8]. However, from the data, despite the fact that all countries have made significant investments in stimulating fertility, the problem of the fertility predicament has not improved, and the fertility rate still shows a downward trend. Does this mean that there are some problems with the existing inferences about the impact of fertility policies on individual fertility decisions, thus rendering it invalid?

As the current assessment methods for fertility policies mainly focus on the direct relationship between policies and behaviors, they are generally mechanically understood as the incentive mechanisms provided by policies directly transforming into the improvement of people's fertility intentions and behaviors. However, from the current social situation, this linear relationship cannot effectively explain why people's willingness to have children has not increased with the incentives of policies. The reason for this outcome might be this perspective, which abstracts policy implementation and individual decision-making into a simple linear relationship while ignoring the complex psychological activities and social processes involved [23]. Especially, the decision to have a child is a long-term plan that is influenced by various factors, such as culture, personality, and personal perception. This means that the implementation of policies and

the changes in people's behaviors are also influenced by these psychological factors, but these factors have not yet received sufficient attention in research.

Therefore, this article incorporates psychological adjustment mechanisms and fertility pressure into policy communication to explore how they affect fertility intentions. Discuss from the perspective of policy implementation how policies affect behavior to make up for the deficiencies and omissions in the traditional perspective.

From the perspective of policy implementation, this paper provides a theoretical basis for the psychological impact path of policy influence, supplements the deficiencies of the traditional perspective, and discusses the mechanism of policy persuasion and its influence on psychology. Through the intermediary model framework, the impact of policies on people is divided into direct and indirect types, which is more detailed compared to traditional methods. This study identified the influencing pathways of policy communication and fertility stress and conducted empirical research [14].

Accordingly, the goal of this research is formulated as follows: to identify and empirically quantify the mediating role of fertility pressure in the causal relationship between fertility policy communication and individual fertility intentions. This general goal is decomposed into the following research tasks: (1) to measure the direct effect of fertility policy communication on fertility intentions; (2) to estimate the indirect effect transmitted through fertility pressure as a mediating variable; (3) to evaluate the relative magnitude of direct and indirect effects and their economic implications; and (4) to derive evidence-based recommendations for optimizing the cost-effectiveness of fertility-supporting economic policies in economies facing low-fertility challenges. The object of research is the decision-making process of individuals of childbearing age concerning fertility intentions. The subject of research is the economic and psychological mechanisms through which fertility policy communication, mediated by fertility pressure, influences fertility intentions within China's demographic-economic context.

Literature review

The direct relationship between fertility pressure and fertility intention

Taking fertility pressure as the core variable of fertility decision-making has been widely demonstrated in population, social psychology, and public policy. In the early stage, the perspective in this regard mainly focused on the inhibitory effect of economic pressure on fertility willingness. ; For instance, Becker proposed, based on the new family economics theory [7], that families would weigh the

quality or quantity of their children and tend to reduce the number of children they have when family resources are limited. This view was also confirmed in Kreyenfeld's research. Economic uncertainty and employment instability significantly reduced the fertility willingness of European women, which indicates that this argument can provide a good explanation for the social phenomenon of declining fertility rates in the current context of economic fluctuations [12]. However, the pressure of childbirth is far from being fully explained and covered by a single economic dimension. Recent research is systematically expanding the dimensions of reproductive stress. At the level of occupational stress, Mills et al. pointed out that the structural conflict between career development and parenting responsibilities is an important factor leading to the decline in fertility rates in developed countries, especially having a more significant impact on highly educated women [17]. With regard to conflicts in family roles, Cassidy & Sintrovani revealed that psychological stress stemming from multiple factors, based on surveys of women undergoing fertility treatment, which includes social expectations, personal anxiety, and the practical conflict between the desire to have children and real-life circumstances, significantly influences fertility intentions and treatment outcomes [9]. At the level of social norm pressure, the cross-cultural research by Frejka et al. (2010) further revealed the cultural particularity of the experience of reproductive stress. In collectivist societies, family obligations, intergenerational expectations, and social conformity pressure constitute a unique model of reproductive stress [10]. It is worth noting that currently, the academic community does not have a unified research view on the direction of the impact of stress on fertility intentions. Most researchers support the "inhibitory effect" hypothesis, which holds that the greater people's stress, the lower their willingness to have children [12; 17]. Some scholars have also proposed a possible "compensatory effect", that is, in some social and cultural contexts, the pressure of social norms may instead promote reproductive behavior. For instance, in the collectivist culture of East Asia, the expectations of families and society for "continuing the family line" may, to some extent, counteract the inhibitory effect of economic pressure [6; 10]. The emergence of differences in viewpoints indicates that there is a non-linear inhibitory relationship between fertility pressure and fertility intention. It may have been influenced by factors such as culture, policies, environment, and personal perception.

The impact of policy communication on fertility intentions

Policy communication, as a channel for information transmission between the government and citizens, holds an important position in fertility decision-mak-

ing. The research mainly focuses on the direct impact of policy implementation on the fertility rate. In the research conducted by Bongaarts & Watkins, it was demonstrated that if policies are well-designed, people will be willing to follow them, turning incentives and encouragement into tangible action [8]. However, modern research increasingly recognizes that the actual effect of policies largely depends on how the target group understands, perceives and receives the policies. Further, Niklas Luhmann's theory of institutional trust posits that an individual's level of trust in the government directly determines their willingness to respond to policy encouragements [15]. If the public believes the government will follow through on its promises, they are more likely to adjust their family planning decisions in response to policy signals. Meanwhile, G.B. Powell Jr.'s theory of government responsiveness emphasizes that the government's ability to respond timely to public needs and the level of transparency in its information are the two key factors in fostering public trust in policies [19]. From the perspective of the social contract theory [20], it is believed that there exists an implicit rights and obligations relationship between individuals and the state, and the effectiveness of policy communication largely depends on whether individuals believe that the government has fulfilled its social contract obligations.

In summary, the psychological mechanism by which policy communication affects fertility intentions can be analyzed from the following dimensions. First, policy transparency affects an individual's depth of information acquisition and understanding. For instance, the factors influencing the effectiveness of policy communication can be revealed from four dimensions: information acquisition channels, transparency, depth of understanding, and awareness level [23]. Second, policy trust affects an individual's judgment of the credibility of policy commitments. In the field of fertility policies, if individuals have doubts about the sustainability and stability of the policies, even if the policies themselves provide sufficient incentives, their actual effects will be greatly reduced. Thirdly, policy accessibility and perceived fairness influence individuals' subjective judgment on the scope of policy benefits. When individuals believe that fertility support policies are easily accessible and fairly distributed, their willingness to have children is more likely to be positively affected.

However, the effect of policy communication shows significant differences under different institutional backgrounds. European research shows that clear and consistent information about family support policies can effectively enhance policy adoption and reproductive intentions [21]. However, research in East Asia indicates that the policies themselves are too complex, regulations are constantly changing, and the public has little confidence that the policies will

remain stable in the long term; together, these factors significantly undermine the effectiveness of policy communication [18]. Lammich's research further confirmed that there are significant differences in the communication effects of the same policy in different cultural and regional contexts [13]. These findings suggest that the effectiveness of policy communication depends not only on the clarity of information but also on broader background factors, including institutional trust, cultural values and historical policy experience.

There is a blind spot in existing research when discussing the impact of policy communication on fertility intentions. Currently, most studies regard policy effects as input variables, that is, they assume that the impact of policies on the fertility of all individuals is consistent, while ignoring individual perception differences. However, in reality, there are significant differences among individuals in their perception, understanding and trust of the same policy, and these differences are often closely related to the state of pressure they are under. This brings up a key question: Will the pressure of having children change an individual's perception of policy communication and thereby indirectly affect their willingness to have children?

How does fertility pressure affect policy communication and perception

At present, the academic community still lacks a systematic exploration of the relationship between reproductive pressure and the perception of policy communication. According to the Stress and Coping Theory [14], when individuals are confronted with stress, they will initiate a series of cognitive evaluations to determine the threats they face and the available coping resources. Therefore, in the process of fertility decision-making, the government's fertility support policies can be regarded as an external coping resource. An individual's perception and evaluation of these policies will directly affect their fertility choices. So, how exactly does stress affect an individual's perception of policy communication? Theoretically, there are multiple paths through which stress exerts its influence.

Firstly, individuals under higher stress may be more sensitive to policy information because stress increases their demand for supportive resources. Meanwhile, social cognitive theory points out that self-efficacy and outcome expectations play important roles in regulating the impact of policies on behavior [3]; When an individual is under considerable pressure, their sense of self-efficacy may decline, and they may thus rely more on external policy signals to make reproductive decisions. Groups under the pressure of having children tend to be more cautious about the credibility of policy commitments. This might be because when individuals are under greater economic or occupational pressure, they naturally assess more carefully whether government policies can

truly alleviate their predicament, and may even develop doubts as a result. This makes the relationship between "pressure and institutional cognition" present a special complexity, often manifested as concerns about policy sustainability or distrust of policy intentions [4]. This sense of distrust also stems from past experiences – some unpleasant experiences in the implementation of previous policies will imperceptibly influence them, making them psychologically carry the burden of the past when evaluating the current policy content. Zhang's (2020) research further indicates that the fundamental cause of the difficulties encountered in the implementation of the current fertility policy is not insufficient financial support, but rather psychological barriers, such as anxiety over career development, anxiety about raising children, and inner conflicts brought about by social pressure [22].

Theoretical integration and research gap of the intermediary mechanism

The method of mediation analysis can help us figure out exactly how various factors indirectly affect reproductive behavior and is particularly practical in fertility research. Baron and Kenny's pioneering work in mediation analysis laid the conceptual and statistical foundation for indirect effects, a method that has been widely applied in the analysis of complex causal paths [5]. Many factors that were traditionally considered to have a direct impact on fertility actually function through psychological intermediaries. For instance, Kreyenfeld's research found that financial considerations not only directly influence the decision to have children due to financial constraints, but they can also cause stress and anxiety, which in turn affect people's willingness to have children [12]. And the research by Balbo et al. also found that social support indirectly influences fertility decisions through stress reduction and self-efficacy enhancement mechanisms [2].

However, the existing literature has significant deficiencies in the exploration of the mediation mechanism. First, most studies still remain at the level of "bivariate relationships", that is, they separately examine the pairwise relationships of "stress-willingness" or "policy-willingness", and lack research that incorporates "stress-policy communication-fertility willingness" into a unified path framework. Secondly, existing research places too much emphasis on the mediating role of economic factors, while paying insufficient attention to policy coordination – a variable that is actually quite important in practice. Thirdly, a large number of studies have been conducted in a single context, and there is limited understanding of how cultural factors moderate mediating relationships in non-Western environments.

At the theoretical level, several complementary theoretical frameworks can be summarized in the existing literature. Cognitive behavioral models (such as

the Theory of Planned Behavior) [1] hold that people's behavioral intentions are influenced by policy intentions and understanding, and both jointly shape people's behavioral intentions. The Stress and Coping Framework [14] points out that policy communication affects fertility decisions by influencing individuals' stress levels and resource levels (subsidies, etc.). Social cognitive theory [3] holds that self-efficacy and people's expectations of outcomes jointly regulate the impact of policies on behavior. These theories can construct a mediation path model of "fertility pressure → policy communication perception → fertility intention", which can more comprehensively explain the complex mechanism of fertility decision-making.

Specifically, the theoretical contributions of this study lie in the following aspects. Beyond the common bivariate correlation analysis in existing literature, a complete mediating mechanism model of "stress - policy communication - fertility intention" is constructed. Transform policy communication from an input variable into an endogenous perception variable, emphasizing the crucial role of individual perception differences in the transmission of policy effects.

Research design and methodology

Research framework and model specifications

This study uses a quantitative research design and utilizes a mediating effect model to explore the relationship between policy communication and fertility willingness. The study adopted a cross-sectional survey design and implemented path analysis through SPSS 29 software to explore the "soft impact path" of fertility policies.

Among them, the independent variable is policy communication. Policy communication, simply put, refers to how much an individual knows about the government's family planning policies – including what the policies specifically stipulate, where this information can be obtained, whether the information is sufficiently transparent, and how deeply the individual understands it. This measurement method employs the tested scale developed by Zhao et al., which can comprehensively assess the quality and effectiveness of policy communication, mainly from four key aspects [23]. Given that the Chinese government is increasingly emphasizing policy promotion and social guidance, the effectiveness of policy dissemination has become a key dimension for measuring the influence of policies.

The mediating variable is fertility pressure. This variable reflects the various pressures that an individual experiences during the process of making reproductive decisions. This measurement framework integrates elements from

Gyenwali et al., Cassidy & Sintrovani, and Miller [9; 11; 16]. This scale covers three main dimensions, namely social and cultural pressure, reflecting society's expectations for fertility and cultural norms; Emotion/Internal Stress, measuring psychological stress and personal anxiety related to fertility; As well as practical conflict pressure, assess the actual problems of resource allocation and life planning conflicts.

Fertility intention is the dependent variable. This outcome variable assesses an individual's current and future fertility plans and tendencies, and it is a key indicator for measuring whether fertility policies ultimately "translate into reproductive behaviors". The measurement dimensions referred to the scale verified by Gyenwali et al. to assess an individual's subjective fertility tendency and behavioral readiness [11]. This scale covers three dimensions, namely fertility value, which examines the importance and benefits of fertility; Preparation and planning, assessment of actual preparation and time arrangement; And emotional attitudes, measuring the emotional orientation towards parenthood.

Data collection and sampling

The data of this survey was collected through "Wenjuanxing", which is a very reliable Chinese online survey platform with a wide user base. The data collection period lasted from June 2024 to April 2025, ensuring the universality of the data and taking into account possible seasonal differences in fertility attitudes. By extending the collection period, it is possible to cover different types of people and different regions. A total of 475 valid questionnaires were received in the end. The sampling method used is stratified random sampling, aiming to ensure that people of different ages, genders, regions and other key characteristics can all be reasonably represented. The survey subjects cover urban and rural areas in multiple provinces of China, spanning multiple geographical regions. The sample shows a balanced gender distribution, diverse age groups ranging from young adults to middle-aged people, diverse educational backgrounds covering from secondary education to postgraduate degrees, as well as multiple income levels reflecting China's economic stratification.

Control variables and model specifications

To ensure the stability and scientific validity of the estimation results, this study introduced several control variables to eliminate the confounding effects that may be caused by demographic factors that independently affect fertility intentions. The control variables include: the total score. Wenjuanxing (the software itself) provides a comprehensive score based on all the questions. Gender, encoded as a binary variable, is used to explain the differences in reproductive attitudes between men and women; Age, continuously measured to reflect the

influence of life stages on reproductive intent; Education is divided into multiple levels to reflect socio-economic status and knowledge differences. And income measured by personal income levels to control the impact of the economy on fertility decisions.

Statistical analysis strategy

This study employs a structural equation model to examine the relationship among policy communication, fertility pressure and fertility intention, including direct effects and mediating effects.

Among them, the test of the mediating effect refers to the stepwise regression method proposed by Baron and Kenny [5]. First, examine the regression of policy communication on fertility pressure (Path a); Second, examine the regression of policy communication and fertility pressure on fertility intentions simultaneously (paths b and c'); Third, examine the regression of the total effect of policy communication on fertility intention (Path c). On this basis, the Bootstrap method with bias correction (repeated sampling 5,000 times) was adopted to construct the confidence interval of the indirect effect. The model estimation adopts the maximum likelihood method. The model fitting situation is comprehensively evaluated through indicators such as R^2, F statistics, and standardized regression coefficients.

Discussion

Main findings and statistical evidence

Empirical results show that there is a complex mediating mechanism between policy communication and fertility intentions, and both direct and indirect effects jointly influence an individual's fertility decisions. Judging from the model performance (see Tables 1 and 2), the explanatory power of each regression equation is relatively strong, and the estimation results are robust and reliable.

Table 1.

Results of the Mediation Effect Model

Outcome Variable	Predictor Variable & Control Variable	*R*	R^2	*F*	Standardized Coefficients	*t*
Fertility Pressure		0.7914	0.6263	130.7205***		
	Policy Communication				-0.8008	-17.6255***
	Total Score				0.0968	27.2317***

	Gender				0.058	1.018
	Age				-0.0815	-2.3487*
	Education				-0.0062	-0.2019
	Income				0.0165	0.6063
Fertility Willingness		0.9996	0.9992	86996.3078***		
	Policy Communication				-1.6297	-613.459***
	Fertility Pressure				-1.0303	-491.706***
	Total Score				0.1948	751.474***
	Gender				-0.0013	-0.4932
	Age				-0.0001	-0.0403
	Education				0.0014	1.0404
	Income				-0.0006	-0.5047
Fertility Willingness (Direct)		0.7762	0.6025	118.2353***		
	Policy Communication				-0.8046	-17.1719***
	Total Score				0.095	25.8957***
	Gender				-0.0611	-1.0387
	Age				0.0839	2.3446*
	Education				0.0078	0.2475
	Income				-0.0176	-0.6279

*Note: * indicates p<0.05, ** indicates p<0.01, *** indicates p<0.001.*

In the part of the model fit, the results are quite satisfactory. The R^2 value for the regression equation of policy communication on fertility pressure is 0.6263, indicating that policy communication accounts for approximately 62.63% of the variation in fertility pressure. When both policy communication and fertility pressure are included in the regression equation, the explanatory power for fertility intention is extremely high (R^2 = 0.9992), suggesting that these two variables are the key factors influencing fertility intention. The R^2 value for the regression equation of policy communication on fertility intention (direct effect) is 0.6025, which is also considered a high level in social science research.

Table 2.

Total Effect, Direct Effect and Indirect Effect

Effect Type	Effect Size	Standard Error	*LLCI*	*ULCI*	Relative Effect Size
Total Effect	-0.8046	0.0469	-0.8967	-0.7125	
Direct Effect	-1.6297	0.0027	-1.6349	-1.6245	66.39%
Indirect Effect	0.8251	0.0474	0.7316	0.9198	33.61%

The paradoxical nature of the policy communication effect

There is an opposing relationship between the direct and indirect impacts of policy communication on fertility intentions. On the one hand, policy communication has a significant direct negative impact on fertility intention (β=-1.6297, p<0.001), accounting for 66.39% of the total effect. Meanwhile, policy communication has an indirect positive impact on fertility intentions by reducing fertility pressure (β=0.8251, p<0.001), accounting for 33.61% of the total effect. But interestingly, this result is exactly the opposite of the direct effect mentioned earlier, indicating that policy communication is actually a "double-edged sword" when it comes to having children or not.

Generally speaking, strengthening policy promotion should help the public better understand and utilize policies, thereby enhancing their willingness to have children. However, the research results show that the negative direct effects are contrary to traditional expectations. There might be three reasons for this. First of all, while policy promotion and dissemination enhance public awareness of policies, they also, to a certain extent, enable people to more clearly see the shortcomings of existing policies and the problems existing in their implementation. The deeper people's understanding of the fertility policy is, the more likely they are to notice the gap between the policy commitment and its actual implementation, and thus develop a certain degree of doubt about the policy's effectiveness. On the other hand, the way and method of policy dissemination may, in an intangible way, magnify the complexity and cost of childbirth. For instance, the information disseminated by policies only focuses on introducing application conditions, processing procedures and restrictive conditions. This, instead, makes people feel more thresholds and uncertainties, thereby weakening their enthusiasm for having children. Furthermore, the promotion of policies may, to some extent, prompt people to weigh the costs and benefits of having children more deeply. When people become increasingly aware of the multiple realistic pressures of raising children, their willingness to have children will instead be weakened.

Fertility pressure as a mediating mechanism

The results of the mediation analysis indicate that fertility pressure is a very important path through which policy communication influences fertility intentions. Policy communication has a significant negative impact on fertility pressure (β=-0.8008, p<0.001), that is to say, the more thorough and clear the policy communication is, the less fertility pressure people feel. This indicates that policy promotion can, to a certain extent, alleviate the psychological burden brought about by childbirth by helping the public understand the available support and reducing their sense of uncertainty about policies.

The relationship between fertility stress and fertility intention is expected by people, that is, the greater the stress, the lower the fertility intention (β=-1.0303, p<0.001).

The indirect effect is 0.8251, reflecting the positive promoting effect of policy communication on fertility intentions by reducing fertility pressure. This path indicates that if policy dissemination can effectively respond to the public's psychological concerns and alleviate the stress and feelings related to fertility, it is possible to enhance the willingness to have children. In terms of the proportion of effects, the indirect effect accounts for 33.61% of the total effect, indicating that although this mechanism is important, it is not the dominant factor.

Theoretical enlightenment and conceptual contribution

These findings have contributed to the fields of fertility research and policy implementation research. Firstly, this study expands the relevant theories of policy communication, that is, it finds that policy communication functions simultaneously through both direct and indirect paths, and the directions of their effects are opposite. This indicates that the influence mechanism of policy communication is far more complex than expected and requires a more detailed theoretical framework for explanation. Furthermore, this study provides empirical support from the policy context for the theory of reproductive stress. Research has found that stress plays a significant transmitting role in the process of policy influencing fertility decisions. This implies that merely understanding fertility behavior from the perspective of economic rationality is not complete enough; it is also necessary to pay attention to the psychological mechanisms behind it. More importantly, the research results show that "understanding policies" and "feeling policy support" are two different psychological processes, and the influence of these two processes on reproductive behavior may even be contradictory. That is to say, merely enhancing the breadth and awareness of policy dissemination may not achieve the expected results. It is also necessary to make more refined designs in the content and methods of information transmission, so that the public can truly feel supported while understanding the policies.

Practical implications for policy design and implementation

The findings of this study have certain practical reference value for the design of fertility policies in China and other countries and regions facing similar demographic transition challenges. The fact that policy communication simultaneously generates both positive and negative effects suggests that the current methods of policy promotion need to be reflected upon and adjusted. First of all, for the government, the most important thing is that policy promotion should

not remain at the level of information notification, but rather convey messages and signals of support and guarantee. For instance, the current focus of policy dissemination should be shifted from introducing application conditions, procedures and restrictions to showcasing the actual effects of the policies (such as specific beneficiary cases and their genuine feedback), so that the public can feel the real assistance brought by the policies, rather than making them empty and exaggerated. Furthermore, the research results indicate that alleviating the pressure of childbirth is an important way for policies to play a positive role. Therefore, when promoting the fertility policy, it is necessary to take into account the psychological support provided by the government, such as offering psychological counseling services and establishing mutual assistance and communication platforms, to help groups with the intention of having children reduce their psychological burden. It is undeniable that policy communication and fertility pressure are the key factors influencing the current fertility intentions of Chinese residents. This means that targeted policy improvements around these two aspects are expected to enhance the willingness to have children, and this should be the key direction for policy optimization.

Limitations and methodological considerations

It is undeniable that although this study identified the relationship between policy communication and fertility intentions, there are still limitations. Firstly, the cross-sectional study design limits the ability of causal inference. If subsequent research can adopt a longitudinal design, this will provide stronger evidence for the causal relationship of the study and the examination of dynamic processes over time. Secondly, measurement methods that rely on self-reports may lead to biases in social expectations and subjective interpretations. Future research may be able to combine the objective measurement and subjective assessment of policy promotion and actual behavioral results for study. Furthermore, this study is limited to the Chinese context and online survey participants, which may restrict its promotion to people from other cultural backgrounds or those with limited online exposure.

In terms of methods, future research can incorporate qualitative studies such as in-depth interviews and focus groups, which will help government policymakers gain a more specific understanding of which aspects of policy promotion are offensive and which are reassuring, thereby providing factual basis for improving policy promotion strategies. In addition, future research can also directly test the effectiveness of different communication methods (such as different information frameworks and different support integration strategies) in actual scenarios through experiments.

Conclusion

This study analyzed through the mediating effect model how communication of fertility policies influences individuals' fertility intentions by taking fertility pressure as a factor. The research results reveal a seemingly contradictory but worthy social issue, that is, policy communication has both positive and negative impacts on fertility intentions.

The main empirical evidence indicates that policy communication has a direct negative impact on fertility intention (β=-1.6297), but it has an indirect positive effect on fertility intention by alleviating fertility pressure (β=0.8251). That is to say, while the current policy promotion is enhancing people's understanding of the policies, it may unintentionally magnify the difficulties and costs of having and raising children, making people even less willing to have children. However, when policy information effectively alleviates people's fertility pressure, policy dissemination can indeed promote the willingness to have children. This discovery breaks the traditional notion that "as long as the publicity efforts are intensified, the fertility rate can be raised", which also indirectly indicates that the way and content of publicity are more important than the intensity. Although fertility pressure is an important way for policy communication to influence fertility intentions, it is not the only way (indirect effects account for 33.61% of the total effects).

Based on the above research findings, the way of promoting the fertility policy needs a fundamental adjustment. The author believes that when the government disseminates policies, it should emphasize less on "you should have children" (such as the current emphasis on raising children for old age support), and more on "how we can help you" (such as the display of maternity benefits). List fewer policy provisions and convey more practical support and positive expectations. At the same time, mental health services should be incorporated into the fertility support system. Government officials and policymakers need to recognize that raising the fertility rate depends not only on good policies but also on good communication. This requires not only reducing psychological burdens but also making people truly feel that the government is supporting their fertility.

Ultimately, an effective fertility policy is not only about being "well-designed and well-invested", but also about truly understanding the pressure and anxiety people face when making fertility decisions. Today, when the world is generally confronted with the challenge of low fertility rates, understanding these mechanisms is crucial for formulating practical and effective population policies.

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DATA ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Yifan Zhang, PhD student, School of Public Administration and Entrepreneurship
Ural Federal University
19, Mira Str., Yekaterinburg, 620062, Russian Federation
nihanaksubj3z2x@gmail.com
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0007-8839-5156

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