

Research Review on College Students' Fertility Intentions

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Abstract: Since the expansion of college admissions in 1999, the number of university students has continued to rise. They have become the main force of future fertility and the focus of fertility intention research. Currently, there are relatively few studies on the fertility intentions of university students, with similar themes, a broad range of research subjects, and a single research method. These studies mainly cover the number of children, gender preferences, timing, purposes, quality, and influencing factors of fertility. Existing research has shortcomings such as the "meta-hypothesis" issue, lack of retrospective analysis, and an overemphasis on current status studies. Future research should avoid these problems, introduce multidisciplinary approaches, enrich the content, and strengthen international comparative studies.

Keywords: Fertility intentions; College students; Research review

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1. Introduction

With the aggravation of population aging, the shortage of labor supply, the shrinking of family size and other problems emerging, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council have adjusted the family planning policy in line with the times and the situation. They successively introduced the "two-child policy for couples where either the husband or the wife is from a single-child family" in 2013, the "universal two-child policy" in 2015, and the "three-child policy" in 2021. However, even in the context of the liberalization of the family planning policy, the birth rate has not witnessed a breakthrough growth, and the low willingness to have children has become a basic fact in the development of China's population^[1].

Meanwhile, since the expansion of college entrance examination enrollment in 1999, the number of people in China receiving higher education has been continuously rising. As of 2023, the number of college students in China has exceeded 44.3 million. The huge population base, rich scientific and cultural knowledge, and advanced ideas are precious assets for college students to strive to become the "successors" of future social development. Moreover, college students are in the prime age of childbearing, and their willingness to have children is not only an important factor in population development but also a "weathervane" for the trend of China's fertility rate in the future.

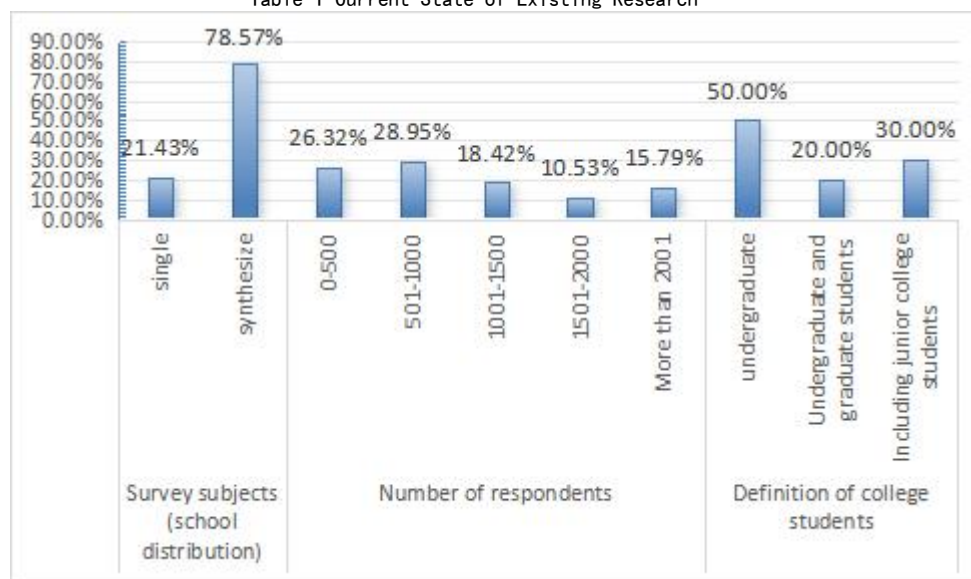
Therefore, the author believes that researching the willingness to have children among college students has positive guiding significance for the implementation of China's family planning policies. This paper combs through the relevant studies on the willingness to have children among college students in recent years, summarizes the characteristics of the existing studies on the willingness to have children among college students, reflects on their shortcomings, and provides references for future studies on the willingness to have children among college students.

2. The Basic Situation of the Research on the Willingness to Have Children among College Students

The author retrieved a total of 50 articles (excluding master's and doctoral dissertations) on the willingness to have children among college students from 2007 to 2024 by using "the willingness to have children among college students" and "childbearing of college students" as keywords on CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure), Pishu.com, and Duxiu.com. This paper focuses on the willingness to have children among college students and does not include the discussion of related contents such as the awareness of childbearing responsibilities and the medical expenses of childbearing. Therefore, in terms of the retrieved literature, it does not cover all relevant studies.

In terms of the number of existing literature, there were not many studies on the willingness to have children among college students before 2015, and the number of literature basically remained at about 3 pieces per year. Since 2015, there has been an increasing trend, but overall, the research in this aspect has been lukewarm.

Table 1 Current State of Existing Research



As can be seen from Figure 1, most of the college student groups in the existing studies are distributed in different schools, and only a small part is based on college students from the same school. In terms of the number of research objects, most of the research objects are between 501 and 1,000 people. Regarding the definition of college students, half of the studies only target undergraduate students on campus, 30% of the studies include junior college students in the scope of college students, and 20% also include the postgraduate group.

3. Overview of the Main Contents of Research on College Students' Fertility Intentions

Fertility intention is a dynamically changing conceptual system that varies with changes in the objects, methods, and timing of scholars' measurements. Yao Congrong, Wu Fan, and others argue that "fertility intention refers to people's attitudes and views on fertility behavior, including four aspects: quantity, gender, timing, and motivation, namely the desired number of children, desired gender of children, birth spacing, and purpose of fertility" [2]. However, Wang Yinhao and Liu Jufen, when studying the differences in fertility intentions between only children and non-only children among college students in Beijing, did not include the purpose of fertility in fertility intention, believing that fertility intention only includes the desired number of children, gender, and age [3]. Kang Rui and Lv Xuejing, when studying the relationship between fertility intention and women's employment, define fertility intention as the choices and views of women and their families regarding fertility behavior [4]. Although scholars hold different views on the specific connotation of fertility intention, from the perspective of this study, existing research on college students' fertility intention mainly includes the following aspects:

(1) College Students' Desired Number of Children

The desired number of children refers to the ideal number of children for college students. The average desired number of children reflects the level of college students' fertility intention to some extent, including whether to have children and how many. Domestic scholars have counted the desired number of children among college students against different fertility policies. Under the one-child policy, the ideal number of children for college students was 1-2 [5]. Under the universal two-child policy, Shi Tao and Liu Dexin, through data calculations based on a sample of 2,542 college students in eastern regions, found that the average desired number of children among the sampled students was only 1.65 [1]. Hao Hongying, after conducting a sample survey of some college students from five universities in Inner Mongolia, found that having two children was the preferred choice for the ideal number of children, with an average ideal number of 1.88 [6]. Under the three-child policy, a sample survey on fertility intentions among some college students in Guangxi by Pan Yu and Ke Zengjin showed that the average desired number of children among college students was 1.89 [7]. These data indicate that although China's fertility policy has been constantly adjusted, it has not had a significant impact on the average desired number of children among college students, which is still far from the goal of "implementing a policy allowing a couple to have three children" outlined in the "Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council on Optimizing Fertility Policies to Promote Long-term Balanced Population Development" issued by the CPC Central

Committee in 2021.

Regarding research on the number of fertility intentions, Li Ting et al. believe that the ideal number of children is not equal to the desired number of children, so the ideal number of children cannot be simply understood as the desired number of children. Generally, the latter is lower than the former, reflecting college students' perception of fertility resistance from this distinction^[8].

(2) College Students' Gender Preference

In feudal society, strong labor force output became an important asset for families to support and continue, and males, with their physically strong constitution, became the mainstay of families and society, occupying a dominant position in society. This led to the birth of the idea of "male preference over female." For a long time, the traditional idea of "raising sons to continue the family line" dominated people's preference for the gender of their children. With socioeconomic development, the education and ideas received by college students have also continued to progress, and traditional ideas of male preference and male superiority have been abandoned^[9]. The desired gender of children has become more rational and mature, and gender equality has become a consensus among college students. There is no significant gender preference in the ideal gender composition of children, regardless of whether there are family planning policies^[10]. Results from a survey on the current status of fertility views among college students at Jishou University by Hou Demiao and Deng Sheng et al. showed that more than half of college students did not care about the gender of their children. Among the expected combinations for having two children, the highest proportion chose one boy and one girl, indicating that as a highly educated group, college students' traditional idea of male preference has gradually weakened^[11]. Based on the results of more than 30,000 questionnaires, Mao Zhuoyan and Ji Simin also verified this viewpoint, with an even higher tendency to prefer girls^[12]. Yu Zhiqiang and Zhang Linyan also captured the tendency of some college students to prefer girls. Through interviews with college students in some economically relatively developed areas in the north, they summarized the reasons for this phenomenon, namely the identification with female identity and family heritage, the experience of emotional resonance and family happiness, the avoidance of economic burdens, and support from daughters in old age^[13].

(3) College Students' Desired Fertility Timing

Domestic scholars' research on college students' desired fertility timing is mainly divided into two parts: the desired timing for the first child and the birth spacing. In general, college students tend to have later fertility timing, showing characteristics of late marriage and late childbirth^[14]. College students tend to have their first child between 26 and 30 years old^[15], with a spacing of approximately 1 to 5 years. There are significant differences between male and female college students in choosing the age for childbirth. Based on the analysis of data from two surveys, Ke Zengjin found that compared to female students, a higher proportion of male students choose to have children within one to three years after marriage. Female students are more likely to choose not to have children^[16]. Additionally, personal expected highest educational attainment also affects the age of childbirth^[17].

College Students' Fertility Purposes and Expected Fertility Quality, and Other Fertility Values

College students are a group that embraces new ideas and cultures. In choosing the purpose of fertility, the influence of traditional fertility ideas such as raising sons to support oneself in old age, increasing family labor force, and continuing the family line has gradually weakened. Instead, they consider values that prioritize their own interests. The survey results of Li Yanxia, Ma Yueming, and An Dongmei all show that, when choosing the purpose of fertility, "pursuing a complete life" ranks first among college students, followed by liking children^{[15][18]}. Zhu Hongcui and Liu Bing's survey on the willingness to have a second child also showed that among college students willing to have a second child, more than 70% have the motivation to have another child out of love for their children^[20]. This indicates that the utilitarian nature of college students' fertility motives has weakened, and they are no longer having children just for the sake of having them.

Regarding expected fertility quality, Li Qingqin's survey results on which aspect college students hope their children will excel in show that the healthy growth of children is the most expected thing for parents. "Health is the foundation of revolution" remains a consensus among college students. In terms of cultural quality, college students have high expectations for their children. However, most college students are more tolerant and understanding of their future children's career expectations, focusing on improving their children's self-ability and not interfering too much in their choices. This reflects the influence of society's talent concept on college students' career outlook and children-raising philosophy, as well as society's demand for diversified talents. High education is no longer the only path to happiness, and

children's free-lance choices are more aligned with society's needs ^[11].

Factors Influencing College Students' Fertility Intentions

The factors influencing college students' fertility intentions are numerous. In China, five thousand years of history have shaped the fertility concepts of traditional Chinese people, influencing generations of Chinese. The vast territory has nurtured fertility concepts containing different national cultures. The open and win-win mindset of a great power guides college students in the new era to embrace more rational and scientific fertility concepts. Additionally, economics, employment, family, and other factors also influence college students' fertility intentions. From existing research, factors influencing college students' fertility intentions are mainly divided into three categories.

The first category analyzes demographic information, namely the impact of factors such as college students' gender, major, whether they are only children, household registration type, and family economic conditions on their fertility intentions. Yang Guifang and Pan Yun used the analysis method of one-way ANOVA to examine gender differences in college students' fertility values and found that male college students scored significantly higher than female college students on factors related to the number, timing, and quality of fertility. Deng Zijuan, Zhu Hongcui, and others later verified this conclusion in their research on college students' fertility values, believing that overall, male students have higher fertility intentions than female students, and there are also significant gender differences in fertility purposes. Female students are more likely to break free from the shackles of traditional thinking, considering not only economic factors but also their future career development, physical condition, etc. Male students are more traditional in their thinking and more susceptible to the influence of national policies ^{[19][20]}. In addition to gender differences, some scholars have compared the fertility intentions of college students from rural and non-rural areas. Liu Zhipeng et al. believe that traditional fertility concepts still have a certain impact on the fertility decisions and behaviors of college students who grew up in rural areas, making those from rural areas have a higher preference for boys than those from urban areas ^[21]. Furthermore, regarding family

First Category: Analysis from Demographic Information. This category analyzes the impact of factors such as gender, major, whether the student is an only child, household registration type, and family economic conditions on the fertility willingness of university students. Yang Guifang and Pan Yun used one-way ANOVA to examine the differences in fertility values between male and female students, finding that male students scored significantly higher than female students in terms of the number, timing, and quality of children. Deng Zijuan, Zhu Hongcui, and others later verified this conclusion in their research on the fertility values of university students, believing that, overall, male students have higher fertility willingness than female students, and there are obvious gender differences in fertility purposes. This is because female students are more likely to break free from traditional thinking. They not only consider economic factors but also focus on their future career development, physical health, etc., while male students tend to have more traditional thoughts and are more influenced by national policies ^{[9][20]}. In addition to gender differences, some scholars have compared the fertility willingness of university students from rural and non-rural areas. Liu Zhipeng and others believe that traditional fertility concepts still influence the fertility decisions and behaviors of university students who grew up in rural areas, making them more likely to prefer boys compared to students from urban areas ^[21]. Moreover, regarding family fertility concepts, female university students with urban household registration have a lower level of recognition compared to those with agricultural household registration ^[22].

Since the implementation of the "only child" policy in 2013, the differences in fertility willingness between only children and non-only children have attracted the attention of researchers. Before the two-child policy was implemented, Wang Yuxin and Lu Tongqing believed that the willingness of university students to have children increased with the number of siblings, as families with more siblings usually lived in economically underdeveloped areas and were more influenced by traditional thinking ^[23]. After the implementation of the two-child policy, Huang Yali and Zhao Ju's research focused on university students at Hubei University and found that only children had a higher willingness to have children compared to non-only children. This was because the loneliness during childhood led only children to hope that their children would have more siblings to accompany them as they grew up ^[24]. From the conclusions of the above research, it can be seen that although the fertility willingness of university students changes with different demographic characteristics, it does not mean that fertility willingness changes linearly under the influence of demographic information, as it is also affected by various other factors.

Second Category: Analysis from the Policy Perspective. Scholars generally believe that fertility policies do not have a

significant impact on increasing university students' fertility willingness. Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, the country's fertility policy has gone through four stages: encouraging fertility, advocating family planning, strictly controlling fertility, and gradually relaxing fertility. In the first three stages, China's population grew explosively, until the population growth slowed down and continued after the third stage. In response to the continuous decline in birth rates, China has been relaxing its fertility policies, but the effects have not been significant. Dai Jinmei and others, starting from university students' attitudes towards the comprehensive two-child policy, their level of understanding, and the expected implementation situation, found that the vast majority of university students supported the policy and had a relatively comprehensive understanding of it. However, only about 30% of university students explicitly stated they would have a second child, while more than half were still in a wait-and-see state^[25]. Ma Yueming and An Dongmei, comparing the differences in the average number of children born under the constraints of family planning policies, found that fertility policies have some impact on the fertility willingness of university students, but not significantly^[19]. Liu Sixing and Zhu Hongrui's research on university students in Hainan Province after the introduction of the three-child policy also showed that the implementation of the three-child policy did not cause a significant change in university students' fertility willingness^[26].

The relaxation of fertility policies has not had a significant impact on increasing fertility willingness, but this does not mean that the importance of policies is diminishing. Instead, further improvements are needed. Liang Wei and Hong Pingping analyzed that while relaxing fertility policies, it is crucial to protect women's rights related to fertility and provide better support policies for childbirth in order to promote healthy development of fertility^[27]. Additionally, this also reminds us that changing concepts is not something that can be achieved quickly. In addition to policy promotion and economic development, localized policy measures are also key^[28].

Third Category: Analysis from the Economic and Employment Perspective. It has long been a consensus in various fields that economic conditions dominate, and university students' fertility willingness is no exception. The economic foundation determines the superstructure, and good economic conditions provide university students with the confidence and assurance to decide on their fertility willingness. Shi Tao and others' research showed that "a good economic foundation" can increase the likelihood of university students having two children by 2.11 times^[1]. Since university students are people who receive higher education, the traditional fertility concept of "as long as you don't starve to death" has disappeared in the university student population. They pursue higher fertility quality rather than more children. While considering economic conditions, the cost of childbirth is also an important factor that university students must consider. Zhang Zhengguang believes that childbirth costs include both direct and indirect costs. Direct costs refer to the direct expenses incurred during child-rearing, including living, education, medical care, marriage, etc. Indirect costs refer to indirect expenses that cannot be clearly measured, including lost work opportunities, time, and energy consumption^[29]. According to relevant data, the direct cost of raising a child until the age of 17 in China is about 485,000 yuan, and if extended to college graduation, the cost is about 627,000 yuan. Such expensive childbirth costs make university students' attitude towards having children more cautious. Furthermore, the cost of elderly care has also increased the economic pressure on university students. The 30-year one-child policy has led to the formation of a unique "421" model in many Chinese families, where one couple has to support four elderly people and one child^[16]. With the optimization of fertility policies, to meet the policy's expectations, a couple would need to raise more children, increasing the pressure of both elderly care and child-rearing. This leads many only-child university students to prefer having fewer or no children.

From the employment perspective, "graduation equals unemployment" is a joke about the future employment situation that countless university students make, as well as the true portrayal of many university graduates. According to the "2023 National Statistical Bulletin," the number of university graduates in China has been rising in recent years, and in 2023, the number of university graduates (undergraduate + junior college) reached a historical peak, exceeding 10 million. These data reflect the current severe employment situation in China. Since the expansion of college admissions, university students in economically underdeveloped and already saturated employment areas face even greater difficulties in finding jobs. For example, in some poor areas in the northwest, rural students who failed to find an ideal job after graduation are forced to turn to low-income industries, where little is left after daily expenses^[30]. With personal survival already difficult, how can they think about having children?

In addition to the three major factors mentioned above, some scholars believe that the collision and integration of

multiple values also play a significant role in shaping the fertility willingness of university students. In the book *New Observations on Fertility Willingness among Ethnic Minorities*, it shows that the fertility willingness of female university students from the Tibetan ethnic group in Beijing is much lower than that of their parents' generation. Their fertility willingness is the result of the collision between traditional Tibetan values and modern urban emerging values[31].

4. Evaluation of Existing Research

4.1. Characteristics of Existing Research

(1) Limited Research Quantity. According to collected data, several related papers have been published annually since 2007, but the topic has remained lukewarm, and the fertility intentions of college students have not garnered significant academic attention.

(2) Consistent Research Themes. Existing research focuses on the number, timing, purposes, and quality of children that college students wish to have, as well as factors influencing their fertility intentions. The research framework basically involves collecting questionnaires on college students' basic personal information (including gender, age, whether they are only children, household registration type, family income, major, romantic experience, etc.), preferred timing and number of children, gender preference, motives, etc. Based on data analysis, the reasons behind specific fertility intentions are then explained in terms of personal factors, policies, economics, employment, etc.

(3) Nationwide Research Subjects. Existing research targets college students across China, from Northeast, Central China, and East China to Northwest, Southwest, and Southeast China. Scholars have conducted field research in these regions, resulting in a broad coverage of research subjects.

(4) Uniform Research Methods. Regarding research on college students' fertility intentions, scholars primarily use questionnaires and interviews for data collection, with questionnaires being the primary method supplemented by interviews. In data processing, SPSS statistical analysis methods are generally adopted to analyze the statistical significance of dependent and independent variables.

4.2. Shortcomings of Existing Research

(1) Issues with the "Meta-Assumption" in Research: Existing research has a preconceived "meta-assumption" issue. For example, when investigating college students' fertility intentions, there is a lack of consideration for their physical health. Questionnaire design assumes that respondents are in good physical health, without potential physical factors such as intellectual or appearance defects that may affect marriage and ultimately fertility intentions. Physical health is an important metric for determining fertility intentions and behaviors. College students with different physical conditions will consider different aspects regarding fertility intentions, leading to varied ultimate fertility intentions and behaviors. Similarly, regarding family income and the concept of family, existing assumptions believe that college students have a consistent understanding of the concept of family, but this may not be the case. Each individual's sense of family self-identity differs. For instance, if one lives with their grandparents, should family income include their grandparents' income? This cannot be conclusively determined.

(2) Lack of Retrospective or Longitudinal Methods: Most current research explores the fertility intentions of college students with different identities and backgrounds, comparing differences in fertility intentions among college students of different genders, majors, grades, whether they are only children, family economic status, household registration, etc., and summarizing factors influencing their fertility intentions. However, for the same college student, their ideas and beliefs will change over time, and major life events will cause fluctuations in their fertility intentions. The ultimate outcome is not the result of a single factor but the combined effect of multiple factors.

(3) Most Research Focuses on Current Status, Lacking Further Discussion on Enhancing Fertility Intentions: Existing research primarily focuses on what, how, and why aspects, namely what college students' fertility intentions are, how high or low these intentions are, and the influencing factors. It does not address how to enhance fertility intentions or whether existing measures to increase intentions are effective, which are more critical issues behind the phenomenon.

(4) Misuse of "Of the three unfilial deeds, not having posterity is the greatest." The original meaning of "posterity" in the saying "Of the three unfilial deeds, not having posterity is the greatest. Shun married without informing his parents, as he feared not having posterity" emphasizes respect for elders, rather than the popular concept of offspring. Most existing studies by scholars quote the first half of this saying, equating people's traditional belief in continuing the family line with

the idea of "Of the three unfilial deeds, not having posterity is the greatest," which is actually a misunderstanding of traditional Confucian thought.

5.Outlook for Future Research

(1) Research Hypotheses:In questionnaire design, researchers should consider the situation of research subjects comprehensively based on research objectives. Definitions of specific issues should also be clearly stated and not ambiguous. Researchers should use relevant theories and a critical eye to examine the questions posed to avoid "meta-assumptions."

(2) Research Methods:In research methods, different theoretical frameworks from sociology, economics, psychology, and other disciplines can be introduced to explore factors influencing college students' fertility intentions. For example, starting from social network theory, most existing research focuses on college students themselves and their families, with little research on their other social networks, the strength of connections, etc. These aspects can reflect factors influencing college students' fertility intentions from different perspectives and uncover more needs beyond employment and economics.

(3) Research Content:Regarding research content, first, future research needs to expand its scope, starting with how to enhance college students' fertility intentions and whether existing measures are effective. For example, regarding population balance education. With socioeconomic development, the terrifying population education from the family planning period is no longer suitable for modern society. In terms of course settings for college students, besides learning necessary professional knowledge and political ideology, they should also receive necessary population balance education to understand that fertility is not just a matter for a couple or a family. Therefore, it is crucial to research how population balance education should be incorporated into college curriculums, what the educational content should be, and whether it will affect college students' fertility intentions. Second, the impact of gender differences on college students' fertility intentions should be fully considered, with different questionnaires designed for different genders or with more focus on research on female college students' fertility intentions.

(4) International Comparative Research:Regarding fertility policies, China has always maintained a humble attitude in learning from policies of countries facing similar population issues. However, under the new historical background, new population issues such as low fertility rates and low fertility intentions have emerged, and these issues are not unique to China. Many countries worldwide face similar challenges. The college student population is the main force of future fertility. Researching the fertility intentions of international college students and learning from other countries' experiences are significant for enhancing college students' fertility intentions and reducing the gap between fertility intentions and actual fertility behaviors.

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