

How Well Does Fertility Intention Predict Fertility Behavior? A Cast Study from China

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One of the major puzzles of understanding below replacement fertility is why fertility behavior in many parts of the world fails to measure up to fertility desire, as measured by the expressed desired number of children, or even fertility intention, measured by the stated plan to have a child. In this paper, we follow a cohort of reproductive aged women interviewed three years apart (2007 and 2010) in Jiangsu province, China, a locale with below replacement fertility for two decades. We examine the relationships among fertility desire, fertility intention and fertility behavior. We seek to uncover how fertility decision is made within the Chinese families and how socioeconomic factors come into play in their reproductive decisions. Such a study, based on the Chinese experience, hopes to contribute to the literature in explaining the emerging global low fertility regime.

Background

China has joined the global club of below-replacement countries for almost two decades. In fact, with its current TFR at about 1.5, it is one of the countries with the lowest fertility in the world. Yet, little is known about why and how fertility in China has declined to such a low level, except for its well-publicized one-child policy. In contrast to the commonly portrayed picture that a strict “one-child policy” is universally implemented in China, however, studies have shown that a significant number of Chinese couples do have the opportunity of having a second child if they meet the criteria stipulated by the policy.

While it is considered as a privilege to be able to have a second child in the context of China’s restrictive one-child policy, a large proportion of those who qualify forgo the opportunity, citing economic factors as main constraints. Relying on survey data collected in early 2009 in one of China’s economically most dynamic regions, we explored the underlying forces of China’s emerging low fertility within a context of a

globalizing economy that has quickly engulfed the Chinese landmass in the last three decades. We found that economic transformation in this part of China has brought about with it an increased sense of economic uncertainty. Young Chinese couples are now concerned about their own economic conditions and about the opportunities and risks their next generation might face as well. Combined, increased standards of living and economic uncertainty, a less traditional view on marriage and childbearing, and a sustained government birth control program featured by social mobilization, public propaganda campaign, and routine surveillance form the broad context of China's new reproductive regime. Economic conditions and concerns over economic cost stood out as the most important forces that affect fertility intention. Personal attitude towards marriage and childbearing showed that the traditional large family ideal was giving way to a small family norm with only one or two children. China's continuing strict birth control policy played a significant role but it was a role that was much less crucial compared with concerns with economic constraints.

In this paper, we return to respondents who informed us their fertility intention with observations of their fertility behavior in a three-year interval. The longitudinal design of our project allows us to study the links between fertility intention and behavior, and reasons for low fertility. As reported in our previous analysis, almost two-thirds of those who qualified to have two children reported having no intention to have a second child. Through our follow-up survey, we will have a better understanding of who forgo the opportunity of having a second child, and how socioeconomic factors come into play in their reproductive decisions. Result from such a study, we hope, can contribute to the growing body of literature of understanding the global low fertility regime.

Research Questions and Design

Our main research question is the consistency between expressed fertility intention and behavior in a three-year interval for both of those who are qualified to have two children and who are only qualified to have one child. Our research is based on an ongoing study of reproductive behavior and preferences in Jiangsu Province, China. Jiangsu's birth control policy allows couples to have two children if one of the marriage partners is a only child in rural areas or both marriage partners are only children in urban areas. With nearly three decades of the one-child policy, couples qualifying for having two children are now entering their marriage and childbearing age. These couples are our main study targets, along with a comparison group who are qualified to have only one child under the current regulation. We ask two important questions: First, why so many Chinese couples forgo the opportunity of having a second child and in particular, what are the roles of socioeconomic factors in people's reproductive decisions? Second, if the same opportunity is extended to everyone, how would they react to the change in policy? In other words, what would happen if China lifts its one-child policy? To what extent is the current low fertility affected by the implementation of the policy, and to what extent is it an outcome of the rapidly changing economic and social context of reproduction?

Our data are collected in six counties along the coast of Jiangsu province, with two counties each representing different levels of economy in this part of Jiangsu (south, middle, north, with the north part being the least developed among the three). In our baseline survey three years ago, we interviewed a total of 18,638 women aged 18-40 with standardized questionnaire from 49 communities (villages and urban neighborhoods) using a random cluster sample, and conducted more than 200 in-depth interviews. In this follow up survey, we return to the same respondents to learn about changes in their reproductive desire, intention, and behavior, and most valuably, to study the relationships between intention and behavior in a truly causal way. The follow up survey enables us to link the rich information we collected during the baseline survey on the social and demographic characteristics, fertility desire and intention, attitudes, to outcomes as shown in changes in attitudes, intentions, and/or behaviors. The youngest groups of our respondents (ages 20 to 29) are only at the beginning of their reproductive career, and both changes in policy and in the economy may have an influence on their reproductive intention and behaviors. Even those in the middle (ages 30 to 34) still have several years to change their minds before it is too late to have a second child. Results from our longitudinal studies should shed light on the underlying reasons for low fertility (in this case staying with only one child), and can be used as important input for policymakers in anticipation of a possible baby boom if the policy is relaxed nationwide. As with the baseline survey, in addition to survey with standardized questionnaire, we will also conduct in-depth interview.

Analysis

In our survey, we collect data on marriage and fertility history, including explicitly questions on general preferences of childbearing and specific questions about reproductive intention of having a second child. Respondents were asked directly reasons for not considering having two children. We group the reasons into three categories: economic conditions or costs, individual value orientation, and policy constraints. We first examine the relationship between people's socioeconomic, demographic, and familial background and the propensity of citing specific constraints as the main reason of forgoing to have a second child. We then examine in detail exactly what those constraints are, and how they interact with other social and demographic factors in Chinese women's fertility decision.

Our earlier examination of fertility intention, namely whether a woman expressed an intention to have a second child, showed that economic constraints clearly stood out as the most commonly cited reasons by our respondents for forgoing the opportunity of having a second child. Among those who qualified to have a second child but decided to forgo the opportunity, about 70 percent cited economic cost of childrearing, and 30 percent cited poverty. Similar proportions were observed among those who were only qualified to have one child under current regulation, and answered no to the hypothetical question of

going for a second child. Given the rapid economic development in China and fast pace of social change, it will be interesting to find out how the changes in family and socioeconomic circumstances affect people's fertility preference and behavior. Besides studying the general socioeconomic variables such as education, occupation, income, we also examine respondents' family composition and life experiences. More specifically, we examine the effects of education cost and social/family support in raising the first child on the people's reasoning of forgoing the opportunity of having a second child.

Based on a study designed specially to understand below-replacement fertility in China, this paper will allow us to study further reasons for low fertility, and the links between fertility intention and behavior. Moreover, this study will also provide a new perspective on the new global demographic regime of below replacement fertility.