

The Influence of Child-friendly Policies on Young People's Views on Marriage and Childbearing

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Abstract. In the context of low fertility rate, young people's views on marriage and childbearing are one of the key topics of research in China, however, there is still a research gap between child-friendly policies and views on marriage and childbearing among many influencing factors. Therefore, the research theme is the influence of child-friendly policies on the marriage and childbearing views of the young people aged 18 to 35. Through unstructured interviews with 32 respondents aged 18 to 35, this paper analyzes the reasons for the aversion to children among the young people and its impact on their views on marriage and childbearing based on the theory of Networked Agenda Setting, and proposes the shortcomings and improvement measures of child-friendly policies. The article concludes that child-friendly policies should be improved to create a "child-friendly" social atmosphere, which is conducive to the formation of correct views on marriage and childbearing among the young people.

Keywords: Child-friendly policies; child aversion; marriage and childbearing views.

1. Introduction

The international level of population replacement is 2.1, according to the World Population Prospects 2022, the world's average total fertility rate dropped from 4.86 to 2.32 from 1950 to 2021, and is constantly approaching the prescribed standard. In China, from the 1970s and 1980s, since the formation and development of family planning policy, the country has experienced the transformation of "late marriage", "late childbearing", "fewer birth", "better birth" to two-child fertility policy for couples where either the husband or the wife is from the a single-child family and universal two-child policy, and ushered in the introduction of the three-child policy in 2021. However, official statistics from China's National Bureau of Statistics show that the birth rate in 2017 was 12.64 percent, which was lower than the previous year's rate that was 13.57 percent. And the birth rate in 2022 is 6.77 percent which was 0.75 percent lower than the rate in 2021. The driving force of low fertility in our country has shifted to individual and social economic environmental factors and no longer comes from the will of the government [1]. The concept of young people's fertility is particularly important for the implementation and enforcement of today's fertility policies and the alleviation of population aging. However, when "naught kids make trouble on high-speed rail, their parents are more at fault", "985 doctor mother forced to cry while tutoring her daughter's homework" and other news that deepen the negative impression of children continue to occupy the hot list, the tendency of child loathing will become more and more obvious, and the fear of marriage and childbearing is breeding and spreading in the young people. In this context, in 2021, the Fourteenth Five-Year Plan for the National Economic and Social Development of China and the Outline of 2035 Vision Goals proposed to deeply implement the outline for children's development, optimize the environment for children's development, and effectively protect children's rights to survival, development, protection and participation. In the same year, the National Development and Reform Commission, in conjunction with 22 departments, issued the Guiding Opinions on Promoting the Construction of Child-Friendly Cities, clearly defining the concept of child-friendliness, promoting the healthy physical and mental growth of children through the construction of child-friendly cities, promoting the integration of high-quality development of children's undertakings into the overall economic and social development, and making child-friendliness a common concept, action, responsibility and cause of the whole

society. According to the statistical monitoring report of the 2022 China Children's Development Programme (2021-2030) released by the National Bureau of Statistics in 2023, the overall implementation is generally progressing smoothly, and the cause of children's development is thriving. The current situation of low fertility population is an indisputable fact of China. This paper focuses on analysing the impact of the current policy of promoting child development and creating a "child-friendly" social atmosphere on the fear of marriage and childbearing of young people aged 18 to 35.

2. Literature Review

Child-friendliness refers to the provision of appropriate conditions, environments and services for the growth and development of children, and effectively safeguards children's rights to survival, development, protection and participation. Existing studies on "child-friendliness" are mostly about the construction planning and relevant experiences of child-friendly cities, neighbourhoods, streets, parks and other spaces. In addition, some scholars explore the development of "child-friendliness" from professional perspectives such as psychology, law, education and so on [2-4]. On this basis, Li Jing and Ling Lu explored the era value of child-friendliness from a multi-dimensional perspective [5]. In contrast to child-friendliness, the few studies of "child aversion" also deserve our attention. From the existing literature, it can be noted that some scholars do not agree with the concept of "child aversion", Zhang Hongwei and Hou Qi believe that this designation is suspected of overgeneralisation or labelling [6]. Similarly, Zheng Suhua and Yang Qianyue argue that although child aversion is linked to an ancient view of children, it is not a global trend which is widespread at the moment, or only a phenomenon that occurs in some particular countries or regions [7]. Both sides emphasise the abandonment of adult-centrism, with the former hoping to empathise and listen to children's needs in a multi-dimensional way and the latter focusing on public participation and construction of a child-friendly social environment. From the perspective of professional disciplines, some scholars have reflected on child aversion from the perspective of pedagogy and analyzed whether children enjoy the right to playfulness from the perspective of law based on typical judicial cases at home and abroad [8,9]. South Korean scholars Oh Soo-kyung, Yang Eun-pyo, Kim Seo-hyun, and Jeong Ik-jung took the specific phenomenon of "no kids zones" as the starting point of their research, and discussed the possibility that the continuous spread of "no kids zones" may increase discrimination against children in South Korean society [10]. Some foreign scholars have also questioned the existing construction of children and the city, criticising the potential of the "power-based" agenda to improve outcomes for children [11].

Whether it is "child-friendliness" or "child aversion", the existing research mostly analyses the problem itself from a single and focused perspective. The research on "child-friendliness" focuses on the construction of child-friendly cities, communities and schools, but neglects the importance of forming a "child-friendly" social atmosphere and common ideas as well as the path of implementation. Scholars analysing "child aversion" mostly pay more attention to analysing the phenomenon of child aversion and safeguarding children's rights, but do not link it to the current situation of low fertility and young people's fear of marriage and childbearing. The contribution of this paper lies in analysing the causes of child aversion in the 18-35 age group on the basis of the theory of Network Agenda Setting, and exploring the influence of child-friendly policies on this group's fear of marriage and childbearing.

3. Current Situation of Children's Development Environment

3.1. The Emergence of a Societal "Child Aversion" Tendency

Since ancient times, it has been a traditional Chinese virtue to respect the elderly and love the young, and having lots of grandchildren is a symbol of family prosperity. However, today's social situation is changing quietly. Under the social environment of a persistently low fertility rate, the original social atmosphere of "loving the young" is gradually changing to child aversion. In the process of the

research, the author conducted unstructured interviews with 32 respondents between the ages of 18 and 35. When answering the question of their first impression of children, only 3 respondents answered positively, 19 respondents answered in a more dialectical manner, with both positive and negative impressions, and 10 respondents gave extremely negative answers. In addition to the answers of the respondents, we can also find a growing trend of child aversion on the Internet. Under certain pet videos, there are some comments such as “kitten makes a sound: heavenly music; child makes a sound: Rebellion of an Lunshan and Shi Siming”. Videos about children’s noise on high-speed trains and planes are always echoed by thousands of people. Why are more and more people's impressions of children gradually changing from “innocent” to “noisy and disorderly”, and how does this affect the concept of marriage and childbearing among young people? This requires us to look into the causes and reflect on the crux of the problem.

32 respondents gave answers as to why they formed certain specific impressions of children. After sorting out the answers, the author summarized two reasons: personal experience and internet influence. “I have experienced when children make noises on high speed trains and planes. I feel so noisy and wear headphones to listen to songs. I wanted to remind those parents, I struggled for a long time but still did not dare to go on.” A certain respondent in the interview expressed his helplessness, others had similar experiences. However, upon further questioning, the author found that most of the interviewees were more annoyed by the parents’ inaction when children were making a fuss. In fact, the phenomenon of noisy children is not new in recent years, in the 80’s and 90’s on the green train, children shouting, chasing and playing in the aisle is very common, but a few decades ago in China, the public culture occupies the mainstream, individual consciousness is not obvious, and there is rarely the concept and feeling of “being disturbed” .

With the development of economy, the gradual refinement of the social division of labour has divided the society from a large whole into many interconnected small individuals, each individual has its own duties and thus has its own characteristics, which will promote the development of the individual culture. Meanwhile, the accumulation of wealth provides conditions for each individual to display his or her personality, but in order to ensure that each individual has the space to show their individuality, there should be some generally accepted rules to protect the order and a sense of boundary without disturbing each other becomes one of the social rules for individuals to abide by. The sense of boundary without disturbing each other becomes one of the social rules for individuals to abide by. Of course, the youth group has a certain degree of inclusiveness towards children, people understand that children are young and immature, and may have difficulty in controlling themselves or ignorance of the situation, which is why most people will choose to be patient or kindly remind them of this, rather than being dissatisfied and blaming them once when they encounter such a situation. However, what leads to the emergence of child aversion and even promotes the widespread phenomenon of child aversion is actually the inaction of parents, because people will tacitly assume that parents, as adults, are aware of the rules of society, and parental disregard is a signal of indifference to the rules, which is a challenge to order.

In addition to personal experience, the influence of the Internet in the new media era has fuelled the spread of “child loathing”. “Child aversion is quite popular, and there is a cocoon of information when watching videos. I always brushing such videos that make me hate children, this emotion will deepen and solidify, becoming more and more extreme.” The problems the interviewees talked about are the same ones that the author has noticed. Scholars such as Guo Lei and McCombs have proposed the theory of Network Agenda Setting, which holds that it is not just a single issue or attribute that influences the public, but rather a cognitive network composed of many issues [12]. When young people are building their own cognitive networks about children, if all kinds of media constantly co-occur with “children” and various negative words, it will give people the illusion that they are related to each other, and people will naturally associate children with negative emotions, thus shaping a biased cognitive network about children. It is worth noting that in today’s social environment of low fertility intention, the discussion of events or news that attracts child aversion among young people is always related to the issue of “whether to be born or not”, and those who originally have low

fertility intention will use such news to constantly publicize the correctness of “unmarried infertility”. Those who originally do not reject the idea of having children will also have fertility anxiety. Nowadays, the social environment that is not tolerant not only affects the physical and mental development of children, but also affects the concept of marriage and childbearing of young people, so it is extremely important to promote the construction and development of child-friendly environment from a policy perspective.

3.2. Insufficient Child-friendly Policies

According to the Fifth and Sixth Combined Report of China on the Implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, it can be seen that China attaches great importance to the development of children, constantly improving laws to protect children’s rights, and at the same time joining forces with various departments to promote the development of the children’s cause. The Ministry of Civil Affairs has formulated “Guide to the Theoretical Research Topics of Civil Policy in 2024”, which includes five topics related to children’s welfare and the assistance and protection of minors: Research on rehabilitation services for disabled children, research on policies to support the adoption of orphaned children by domestic families, research on the high-quality development of assistance and protection organisations for minors, research on the construction of family support system for children in difficult circumstances, and research on policies to care for and protect migrant children. These topics reflect the country’s concern and emphasis on issues related to children. However, although the 14th Five-Year Plan proposes to optimise the environment for children's development, existing policies focus more on whether current urban planning and construction are convenient for children, whether financial support is provided to specific groups of children, and whether children’s welfare is perfect. These policies have clear objectives and are highly targeted. Although they achieve precise help for children, they also mean that only children are affected by the policies, which is not helpful to the construction of a child-friendly social atmosphere. Moreover, although the relevant policies are abundant, due to various subjective and objective factors such as lack of publicity, there are certain information barriers between the government and the public, which may lead to some child-friendly policies not being known by the public. Only one person among the interviewees interviewed by the author has understanding of the child-friendly policies. For young people, child-friendly policies have little to do with their own interests, and if they are not engaged in child-related work or research-related fields, they know little about such policies, which affects the construction and development of a child-friendly society.

4. The Role of Child-friendly Policies on the Concept of Marriage and Childbearing

4.1. The Impact of Child-friendly Policies on Young People’s Views on Marriage and Childbearing

In today’s era, the continuous increase of childbearing cost is one of the most important factors affecting the fertility rate. In addition to the direct rearing costs, some indirect rearing costs also cause the fear of breeding psychology, and among them, the fertility anxiety caused by the increasingly unfriendly social environment has a great impact on the concept of marriage and childbearing of young people. The social atmosphere of “child-loathing” not only affects children’s own survival and development environment, but also negatively affects people related to children such as parents and teachers, because any behaviour of children that does not meet the expectations of society may become a harsh criticism of parents, teachers and other people. In the long run, once the harsh social environment is formed, children’s boredom may even be relocated to other countries. In the long run, once a harsh social environment is formed, the boredom with children may even be transferred to anyone, and the concept of seeking common ground while reserving differences will no longer exist. Therefore, it is necessary to pay attention to the phenomenon of child aversion at the policy level. A child-friendly policy will permeate all aspects of social life, and when more children’s recreational

facilities appear in all corners of the city, it will help young people to be aware of children and to develop an awareness that children and adults share public space, as well as help to create an environment that is conducive to the development of children. Child-friendly policies are designed to make the concept of child-friendliness a social consensus, which will help to correct the biases in the young people's cognitive networks about children, reduce their rejection of children, and lessen the impact of child aversion on their desire to have children.

4.2. Suggestions for Improvement of Child-friendly Policies

“The news media may not be successful at telling people what to think, but they are remarkably successful at telling people what to think [13].” In today's new media era, even “what to think” can be influenced by various social media, as the news media determines which stories are presented to the public and how the public forms connections between topics [14]. People's emotions are easily swayed by the Internet. Therefore, good social governance requires attention to social-emotional governance, maximising positive social emotions in the governance process, and achieving social cohesion based on social emotions [15]. Therefore, it is very necessary to screen and review the content of network communication. In order to create a child-friendly online environment, relevant policies should establish a comprehensive content review mechanism for social media and online platforms, prohibit the dissemination of content that damages the image of children, and reduce negative content about children. Excessive occurrence of the same type of content should be avoided to prevent the deepening of negative impression on children, which will cause the extreme emotions of young people. More positive content about children should be promoted to channel the child aversion on the Internet, in order to reduce the fear of marriage and childbearing among youth groups caused by child aversion and guide them to develop a positive view of marriage and childbearing.

In addition to policy regulation of the network, it is also necessary to make certain norms and guidance for some child aversion phenomena in society. For example, in South Korea, where there will be only 235,039,000 births in 2023, as of August 2023, there are about 500 no kids zones across the country, a significant increase from 376 in 2018 [6]. The popularity of “no kids zones” in various public places is fuelling the child aversion among young people in Korea. The phenomenon of no kids zones in South Korea deserves our attention, and although the establishment of no kids zones is still a rare phenomenon in China, the heated debate about no kids carriages and other topics is a signal. Both no kids zones and no kids carriages are a violation of children's rights and inadvertently reinforce adult-centrism. Child-friendly policies should explicitly oppose similar initiatives that are detrimental to children's development, curbing the spread of “child-loathing” ideas at the policy level and providing a solid ideological foundation for a correct view of marriage and childbearing for young people.

5. Conclusion

The liberalisation of the fertility policy provides the policy conditions for easing the current population problems, but it is only by working together with the positive outlook on marriage and childbearing that the problems of low birth rates and population aging can be truly solved. In the social background of low fertility rate, the spread of child aversion affects young people's views on marriage and childbearing, which is not conducive to raising the fertility rate, and it is of great significance to create a child-friendly social atmosphere. It is important to clarify the reasons for the social tendency of child aversion, alleviating child aversion and reducing the phenomenon at the policy level on the basis of continuous improvement of existing child-friendly policies, which is not only beneficial to the development of contemporary children but also to the positive shaping of the concept of marriage and childbearing of young people.

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