

Perspectives

Expectations of Improvement of Socioeconomic Status Throughout the Life Course as a Component for Promoting Fertility Intentions

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The 33rd World Population Day focuses on the theme, “A World of 8 Billion: Toward a Resilient Future for All — Harnessing Opportunities and Ensuring Rights and Choices for All.” As the global population approaches 8 billion, the United Nations urges individuals to consider the implications for the future. The life course paradigm emphasizes that past, present, and future experiences are interconnected and mutually reinforcing, with individuals’ expectations and confidence in the future being influenced by previous and current behaviors and serving as important determinants of current decision-making (1).

Within the context of an aging global population, childbearing represents the starting point and significant driver of a nation’s demographic development and structure. It is one of the most critical decisions in an individual’s life and involves long-term family planning. Fertility intentions, one of the key determinants of birth rates and demand for reproductive health services, are typically measured by the desired number of children (2). These intentions reflect sociocultural norms surrounding fertility and individuals’ perceptions of childbearing, often employed to summarize group differences in fertility conceptions and measure overall fertility levels.

Fertility intentions are influenced not only by individuals’ current situation and family circumstances but also by their life course experiences and expectations for the future life course (3). Socioeconomic status (SES) serves as a multifaceted index encompassing factors such as income, occupation, and education. Research has identified SES as one of the main factors affecting fertility (4). An individual’s family SES during childhood, their current SES, and expectations for future SES can all impact their fertility intentions.

THE IMPACT OF SES THROUGHOUT THE LIFE COURSE ON FERTILITY INTENTIONS

SES influences fertility intentions at various stages of an individual’s life course. During childhood, an individual’s family status can shape fertility intentions through factors such as marriage conceptions, childbearing practices, and other aspects (5–6). In adulthood, SES can directly affect an individual’s fertility intentions by determining their ability to raise children based on their education level, income, and occupation (7–8). Additionally, a stronger sense of gender equality within the family can promote fertility intentions (9). Concurrently, individuals’ expectations regarding their future status reflect the dependability of the socioeconomic “safety net” and influence their willingness to expand their family size (3). The following sections will further discuss these perspectives, and relevant conclusions are summarized in Figure 1.

Childhood SES

Childhood SES, or the SES of one’s family of origin, significantly influences fertility intentions as it serves as the initial environment in which an individual’s childbearing motivations are formed (10). On one hand, the childhood family’s SES directly affects an individual’s growth process, potentially impacting their development into adulthood. Fertility intentions are promoted through the accumulation of economic advantages (6,11); in other words, families with higher SES provide a favorable environment for growth and education, thereby enhancing individuals’ human and social capital. As a result, these individuals gain socioeconomic advantages in adulthood, allowing them to acquire more resources and demonstrate greater resilience when faced with reproductive tasks (12).

On the other hand, the SES of one’s family of origin

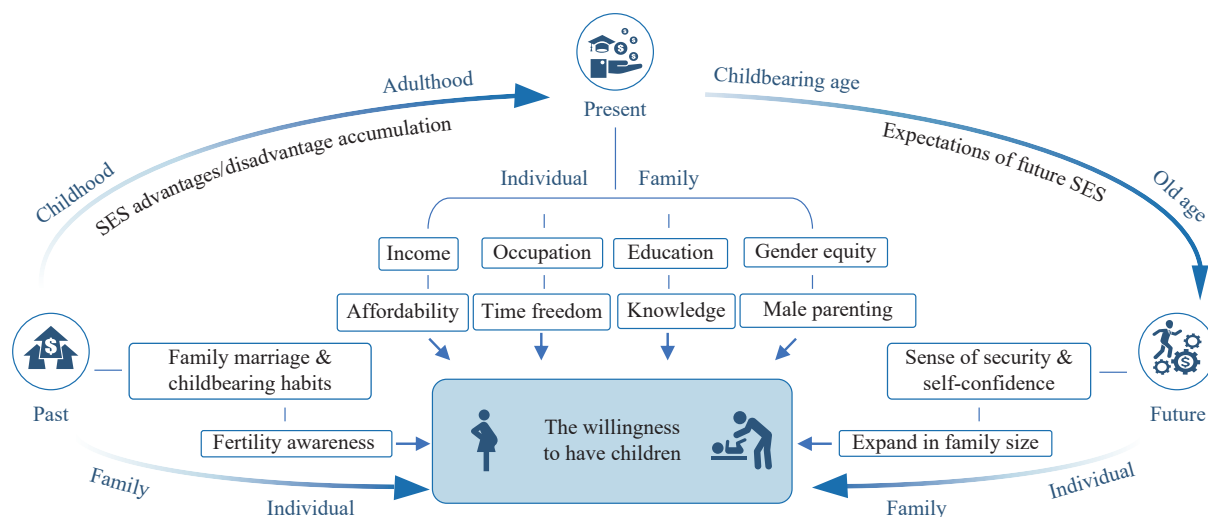


FIGURE 1. The conceptual framework of the association between socioeconomic status (SES) throughout the life course and fertility intentions.

is closely related to the family's conceptual environment, encompassing aspects such as marriage and childbearing attitudes, gender preferences, and consumption patterns. Such factors may influence individuals' fertility conceptions in adulthood through social learning and intergenerational transmission (13). Families with high SES convey their values to the next generation, thereby fostering higher-quality development for future generations (1).

Current SES

Current SES is a significant factor influencing an individual's intent to have children. A person's current SES directly and realistically impacts their willingness to engage in childbearing. Individuals with higher SES benefit from increased social welfare and economic security, both of which positively affect fertility decisions.

First, higher incomes contribute to greater economic stability and fertility affordability, providing sufficient resources to support childbearing (9,14–16). Furthermore, higher occupational positions offer increased flexibility in work schedules, facilitating the reconciliation of employment and fertility (17). Additionally, higher education levels promote a more scientific approach to child-rearing and parenting, directly enhancing the growth and educational environment for the subsequent generation (18–20). Moreover, families with higher SES typically exhibit a stronger sense of gender equality. As a result, men's increased participation in housework and childcare

reduces the burden on women, thereby increasing the family's inclination to have children (1).

Although some researchers argue that improved SES may potentially suppress fertility intentions (2), the overall perspective of social development suggests that better socioeconomic status remains the most direct contributor to individual fertility.

Future SES

The expectation of future SES serves as a long-term motivator for fertility. As a part of a long-term family plan, childbirth is inherently connected to the expectation of an improved quality of life in the future. Both childhood and current SES influence expectations of future SES, and those expectations also impact present fertility intentions and decisions. The anticipation of a higher SES in the future cultivates a heightened sense of security and self-confidence, encouraging families to grow in size, have more children, and nurture a larger and higher quality succeeding generation. This subjective dimension provides long-term motivation for fertility (21).

Individual expectations of the future not only influence current fertility decisions but also shape future family structures and old age. A family with an increasing SES undoubtedly contributes to the creation of a "resilient future."

DISCUSSION

As one of the most populous nations, China has

experienced rapid socioeconomic development over the past few decades. The role of SES in promoting fertility intentions demonstrates that during a period when China is actively addressing low fertility rates, national strategies such as economic growth and common prosperity align with population development goals to encourage higher fertility. Enhancing an individual's SES necessitates a life course perspective, acknowledging that past, present, and future experiences are interconnected and inseparable, as well as the relationship between parents and offspring (22). While it is impossible to alter one's childhood SES retrospectively, enhancing one's current SES establishes a foundation for the living conditions of future generations (1), promotes better health at birth, and contributes to a more resilient future (12–13).

Hence, a crucial aspect of public policies is enhancing social security and well-being, and facilitating smooth social mobility channels, enabling more individuals to attain higher living standards and socioeconomic status while fostering confidence in the future. This approach stimulates aspirations for an improved family life and comprehensive planning, subsequently leading to heightened fertility intentions and a more pervasive sense of happiness within society. This mutual reinforcement can assist China and other comparable settings in gradually elevating fertility levels while simultaneously advancing their socioeconomic development to address the challenges posed by an aging population.

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