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The Effect of Childbearing on the Subjective Well-being of the Elderly and Its Psychological Mechanisms

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Abstract

From the perspective of psychological development, childbearing is an essential or substitutive compensatory experience in life. The sense of hope and permanence that we can derive from our adult children, or from other substitutes, as we grow older is not only a matter of individual physical and mental health and well-being, but also of the success of our country's ageing strategy. In this paper, three aspects of the positive, negative, and uncertain impacts of childbearing on the subjective well-being of older adults and their psychological mechanisms are examined from a psychological perspective. Current research is mostly on changes in the subjective well-being of older people after having children, and in the future it could be studied how young people choose to have offspring in the present in order to enhance their well-being in old age, thus increasing the birth rate.

Keywords

Fertility, Subjective well-being of elderly people, Intergenerational support, to feel attachment to someone, Death anxiety

1. Introduction

According to the 2021 National Bulletin on the Development of Aging Undertakings, by the end of 2021, China's elderly population aged 60 and above reached 267 million, accounting for 18.9% of the total population. Around 2035, the elderly population aged 60 and above will exceed 400 million, accounting for more than 30% of the total population, entering the stage of severe aging. With the increase of age, the physical function of the elderly declines, and psychological problems gradually become prominent, which affects the quality of life and subjective well-being of the elderly. Human subjective well-being (SWB) is a positive psychological quality that is closely related to people's physical and mental health. SWB includes two dimensions: cognitive and emotional, the cognitive dimension is life satisfaction, which refers to an individual's judgment on whether the quality of life meets his or her own requirements, which is usually quantified as satisfaction; The affective dimension

is the attribute of an individual's evaluation of his or her own emotional aspect, which is divided into positive and negative emotions. A high subjective sense of well-being will make the elderly live a healthier and longer life.

Previous studies have shown that parental support is an important influencing factor on the subjective well-being of older adults. Does having children at a young age affect their subjective well-being in later life? This article summarizes three different effects of childbirth on the subjective well-being of the elderly and their psychological mechanisms.

2. The Positive Impact of Childbirth on the Subjective Well-being of the Elderly

2.1 Manifestations of Positive Impact

2.1.1 Obtain intergenerational Support from Children

Intergenerational support between the elderly and their adult children is an important component of the social support network for the elderly, which has a protective effect on their physical and mental health, and is usually significantly related to their subjective well-being. Intergenerational support between adult children and the elderly includes three types: emotional, material, and service. Older people can receive material support, emotional comfort, and daily care from their adult children and grandchildren, reducing loneliness and isolation, lowering the risk of impaired self-care ability, and thus improving their subjective well-being. Moreover, the more support they receive from their children, the stronger their subjective well-being.

The harmonious relationship between children and parents can be expressed as intergenerational harmony. Intergenerational harmony refers to the harmonious relationship between children and parents, including equality of personality and rights, as well as mutual material and spiritual assistance. Research has shown that intergenerational harmony is positively correlated with the subjective well-being of elderly people in rural areas.

However, research has shown that too little or too much child support is not beneficial for the subjective well-being of elderly people, as frequent child support can exacerbate depression in female elderly people, while male elderly people are more inclined to provide child support. If they accept child support, it can actually be detrimental to their mental health.

2.1.2 Relieve Death Anxiety in the Elderly

Studies have shown that death anxiety in elderly patients with chronic diseases is negatively correlated with subjective well-being. In a study of the relationship between death anxiety and subjective well-being of people who experienced the Tangshan earthquake 40 years later, it was found that death anxiety and subjective well-being were negatively correlated. Several studies have found that death anxiety negatively predicts subjective well-being.

For humans, reproduction is a means of defending the ultimate concern for life in the face of death. Having offspring extends one's sense of self meaning and allows them to face death more calmly. Research has found that intimate interpersonal relationships are also a psychological defense

mechanism to improve death anxiety. Interviews with cancer patients aged 60 and above revealed that increasing family communication allows the elderly to gain a greater sense of life continuity, meaning, self-awareness, identification, and connection. Chinese people have a unique fertility culture. For example, they attach importance to the continuity of children. Children are an important link to maintain the family relationship between men and women. Older parents need their children to support them in their old age. Having children accompanying elderly cancer patients will reduce the accessibility of suicidal thoughts and alleviate their death anxiety, which can help improve the quality of life for patients.

How do children reduce death anxiety in the elderly? Yaolin Pei's (2022) study found that due to the lower socioeconomic status of elderly people in rural China, they mainly rely on their children for economic support. Children providing economic support to the elderly can enhance their self-esteem and sense of security. High self-esteem can help them better accept the process of natural aging. When they feel safe, they may worry less about future uncertainty and reduce the elderly's death anxiety.

2.1.3 Attachment to Adult Children

As physical function declines, social status decreases, and cognitive function declines, elderly people will turn to their adult children for help and support. Attachment, as one of the main influencing factors of subjective well-being, can to some extent predict the level of subjective well-being in elderly people. The attachment of the elderly refers to the emotional dependence between the elderly and their main attachment objects (usually spouses, children). The attachment objects of the elderly exhibit diverse characteristics, among which the attachment to adult children is particularly important. A study of 80 elderly people aged 60-69 in Indiana, USA found that adult children are the main attachment objects for the elderly. The attachment of elderly people to their adult children may seek their support and perceive it, which in turn has a positive impact on their subjective well-being.

Overall, elderly people with secure attachments experience more subjective well-being than those without secure attachments. On the one hand, elderly people with high attachment avoidance may tend to seek less support from their children, resulting in relatively high levels of loneliness and reduced subjective well-being. On the other hand, elderly people with higher levels of attachment anxiety may experience lower subjective well-being due to their unfulfilled desire to seek closeness from their children and feel abandoned by their attachment partners.

2.2 Psychological Mechanisms of Positive Influence

2.2.1 Obtaining Intergenerational Support from Children - Group Cooperation Theory

There are three theories commonly used in Western society to explain family support for the elderly: the first is the power and negotiation model, which holds that in patriarchal families, the elders hold the power to control property and therefore can receive support from their children or other family members. The second theory is social exchange, which holds that support between family members is often mutually beneficial. The third theory is the corporate group model, which holds that family members should maximize their personal interests and be controlled and effectively allocated family

resources by a just family member (usually an elder) to achieve Pareto optimality. The fourth is the theory of intergenerational solidarity, whose core is solidarity and cohesion. This theory holds that intergenerational solidarity includes relational solidarity, emotional solidarity, cohesive solidarity, functional solidarity, normative solidarity, and structural solidarity.

Chinese scholars believe that the first two theories mentioned above are not suitable for intergenerational support in Chinese families. Many scholars believe that the cooperative group theory can better explain intergenerational support behavior in Chinese families. In Chinese families, the elderly provide services to their children without expecting anything in return, and the responsibility of children taking care of the elderly is divided according to the principle of optimal resource allocation and mutual benefit. They will use the lowest cost to meet their parents' needs for intergenerational support, thus achieving the maximization of personal and family overall welfare.

In addition, the theory of intergenerational solidarity describes intergenerational relationships from three aspects: attitude, emotion, and behavior. It divides family intergenerational relationships into five types and believes that family members are strong in unity and cohesion. The research on intergenerational solidarity theory has found that the types of intergenerational relationships between adult children and elderly parents in China are mainly divided into close, caring, and distant types, among which the close type is the main mode of intergenerational relationships in Chinese families.

2.2.2 Reducing Fear of Death - Fear Management Theory

The human understanding of the inevitability of death is often accompanied by anxiety and fear. Terror management theory (TMT) holds that the ultimate goal of fear management is to transcend death. When faced with death reminders, people have two different defenses: proximal defense mechanisms and distal defense mechanisms. Among them, proximal defense acts on the conscious level, while distal defense acts on the unconscious level. Breeding offspring through reproduction is considered both a distal and proximal defense mechanism. When people have the idea of self extinction, they naturally think of passing on their genes and cultural worldview to future generations through reproduction, enhancing self-esteem to transcend death.

2.2.3 Attachment to Adult Children - Social Emotional Choice Theory

As they age, older adults become more acutely aware of the limitations of time, which makes them more inclined to socialize with people they have closer relationships with, while their interactions with general acquaintances gradually weaken. These intimate relationships refer to spouses, children, and grandchildren, which is known as the Social Emotional Selectivity Theory (SST). Older people can obtain more positive emotional feedback by reducing secondary external interactions and increasing close contact with family members. This maximizes positive emotions and minimizes negative emotions, reflecting the concept of "compensation".

3. The Negative Impact of Childbirth on the Subjective Well-being of the Elderly

3.1 Manifestations of Negative Effects

3.1.1 Physical Function Loss

Raising children not only requires parents to expend a lot of time, energy, and money, reducing their life satisfaction, but also brings about the loss of physical function when they are young, which may lead to some chronic diseases. Personal physical function and economic status have a greater impact on the subjective well-being of the elderly than intergenerational family relationships.

The number of children born also has an impact on the physical health of parents. Having too few or too many children is not conducive to their physical health. Elderly women without children and those who have given birth to four or more children have poorer cognitive function. Older men and women who give birth early and have shorter birth intervals have poorer physical health, while elderly parents who give birth four or more times have depression, cognitive and circulatory system indicators lower than baseline. Repetitive reproduction (in females) may have potential biological effects through metabolism and lipid profiles, or through lifestyle factors (in both males and females). In the study by Debbie et al. (2003), it was found that there is a relationship between parity and obesity indicators (BMI and waist to hip ratio) in males and females aged 60-79. The association between the number of children and coronary heart disease shows a similar "J" shape for both males and females, with the lowest incidence rate for having two children and a linear increase in incidence rate for having two or more children as the number of children increases.

Many studies have shown a positive correlation between physical health and subjective well-being. For both ordinary people and chronic disease patients, those with better physical health have higher life satisfaction. Good subjective and objective physical health can significantly improve the positive emotions of the elderly, thereby affecting their subjective well-being.

3.1.2 Intergenerational Conflicts Are Detrimental to Physical and Mental Health

Studies have found that more than 50% of middle-aged and elderly parents are ambivalent about their adult children. The elderly and their adult children live together, and conflicts often occur due to different personal habits and lifestyles, resulting in a decrease in the physical or psychological well-being of the elderly. Hiroko Akiyama (2003) found that negative interactions with parents increased in old age. Due to the increase in life expectancy, many elderly parents even have to care for older parents, which often causes them feelings of guilt, frustration, and annoyance. A study of depression and its influencing factors among empty nesters in China found that empty nesters with poor relationships with their children had higher rates of depression.

The gender difference in conflict intensity among children seems to persist into adulthood. Families with daughters report more intergenerational conflicts than families with sons, which may be due to parents having more contact with their daughters and the stronger emotional relationship between parents and daughters.

3.2 Psychological Mechanisms of Negative Effects

3.2.1 Children's Economic Theory and Cost Hypothesis

A classic theory explaining reproductive behavior from an economic perspective is Becker's (1960) Economic Theory of Fertility (ETF), which suggests that people weigh the costs (time and money invested in raising children) and benefits (labor contribution and pension security of children) before making reproductive decisions.

Hansen (2012) proposed the cost of children hypothesis, which suggests that parents' long-term exposure to various stressors associated with raising children offsets the emotional rewards that children bring to their parents. Chinese scholars have also proposed that the process of raising children requires psychological and emotional expenses as well as physical exertion from parents.

Liu Xiao (2017) proposed the latest theoretical model of reproductive values based on two aspects: the cost of childbirth and the benefits it brings. The cost of childbirth is the negative value of childbirth, including the economic burden, time and energy consumption caused by parents giving birth to children, as well as emotional pressure such as anxiety caused by raising children.

3.2.2 Intergenerational Conflict-Emotional Theory of Intergenerational Conflict

The theory of intergenerational conflicting emotions holds that parents and adult children have attitudes and emotional contradictions towards each other or their relationships with each other, that is, the coexistence of negative and positive emotions, mainly referring to subjective and obvious contradictions in cognition, emotion, and motivation. However, intergenerational conflicts and fear of intimacy are negatively correlated with subjective well-being.

The intergenerational conflict between parents and adult children is a dynamic and evolving process that needs to be analyzed from the perspective of life course. Coser (1966) pointed out that intergenerational conflicts are particularly strong during the transition of status and identity between parents and adult children. There is research confirming that intergenerational conflicts increase before and after adult children become family caregivers.

4. The Uncertain Impact of Childbirth on the Subjective Well-being of the Elderly

4.1 Manifestation of Uncertain Impact

4.1.1 Subjective Well-being Is Determined by Genetics

The psychological processing of subjective well-being is a highly integrated system consisting of a primary genetic system and a secondary buffering system. Among them, the primary genetic system is determined by genetic genes and is relatively stable. In order to maintain the stability of the internal environment, individuals tend to keep their subjective well-being within a small and variable range. Even if they encounter major life changes such as marriage, childbirth, or widowhood, it will only bring short-term emotional fluctuations to the individual. The individual will self regulate to a relatively stable level of subjective well-being.

Hansen (2009) found that fertility had no significant effect on parents' emotional well-being, such as

positive and negative emotions, depression, and loneliness, indicating that parent-child relationship had no effect on psychological distress. The cause of depression and loneliness in the elderly is the loss of physical health and social relationships. The explanation for this result is that about half of the variance in the measure of subjective well-being appears to be explained by genes, and about 10%-15% of the variance is explained by objective conditions.

4.1.2 Subjective Well-being Is Formed through Comparison

Festinger (1954) believed that subjective well-being arises from an individual's overall evaluation of their quality of life based on self defined criteria, but this evaluation does not have objective standards. When these objective standards are not timely, people will compare themselves to others. The ways of individual comparison can be social comparison or temporal comparison. Social comparison is the process of comparing one's abilities, feelings, current situation, and perspectives with others, while time comparison refers to the comparison of one's own qualities at different time periods. Time comparison can be seen as a supplement to self comparison. Both social comparison and temporal comparison can lead to upward and downward comparisons.

Chen Xin et al. (2020) believe that subjective well-being is a comparative concept, and the key lies in comparison. Social comparison and temporal comparison have a significant positive impact on the subjective well-being of the elderly. The subjective well-being of elderly people in downward comparisons is higher than that in upward comparisons, and it has a greater impact on rural elderly people. Elderly people with multiple children have a stronger subjective well-being in time comparisons.

4.2 *Psychological Mechanisms of Uncertain Influence*

4.2.1 Setpoint Theory

The Set point Theory holds that individual differences are genetically determined and strongly affect the subjective well-being level of each individual. This theory suggests that adults have a relatively stable level of subjective well-being, which is determined by personality traits and early genetic factors and is not easily changed. Even in the face of major life events, there is only a brief "deviation" before returning to the right track. Supporters of this theory believe that there is a dynamic balance between personality, life events, and subjective well-being.

Later scholars put forward completely different views. Headey (2010) suggests that subjective well-being can be altered through intervention, and personality traits are not fixed.

4.2.2 Comparative Theory

Festinger first proposed the concept of "social comparison theory" (SCT) in 1954, which refers to comparing oneself with similar others. Subsequently, Albert proposed the theory of temporal comparison (TCT) based on this, which suggests that a person's subjective well-being is formed by comparing themselves with their past and future selves. Unlike social comparison theory, which emphasizes individuals obtaining accurate self definitions at specific times, time comparison theory emphasizes the importance of establishing identity over time. Social comparison and temporal

comparison together constitute the pathway for individual comparison, and temporal comparison is more helpful in further understanding oneself.

From a comparative strategy perspective, research has found that older adults with lower levels of control achieve higher subjective well-being through downward social comparison (i.e., comparing themselves to people who are worse in all aspects or to their worse selves in the past). The cognitive evaluation process of elderly people plays an important role in their subjective well-being. From a personality perspective, people with low self-esteem, high depression, and high autonomy tend to prefer comparing themselves to others.

5. Conclusion

The empirical research on the impact of fertility on the subjective well-being of the elderly, supported by psychological theories, needs to be continuously enriched. In terms of demographic information, variables such as personality traits of the elderly, marital status of the elderly and adult children, education level, social and family economic status, gender structure of children, gender order, family structure, and whether elderly parents live with adult children can also be included for analysis; In terms of objective conditions, the role of living environment, community services, etc. in the relationship between fertility and subjective well-being of the elderly can be analyzed; In the unique cultural context of our country, the impact of filial piety and intergenerational education on the relationship between fertility and subjective well-being of the elderly should also be considered.

In the future, we can consider analyzing the impact of childbirth on the subjective well-being of the elderly from the perspective of self continuity. More actively envisioning the potential positive impact of future self on fertility intentions; The closer the connection between the future self and the present self, the stronger the subjective well-being in old age.

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