

# ***Does Fertility Culture Matter in Reproductive Decision Making? A Case Study of a Chinese Multi-child Family***

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**Abstract:** This study delves into individual cases within multi-child families, building upon a literature review of sociocultural factors influencing reproductive decision-making. Although previous research has highlighted the significant influence of societal factors on reproductive choices, there is a knowledge gap regarding specific cases within multi-child families, necessitating a more in-depth investigation. The research question is framed as follows: "How do sociocultural factors interact in the reproductive decision-making of multi-child families, influencing family interactions and dynamics?" Using a case study approach, this paper employs a qualitative methodology by conducting semi-structured interviews to gather data. Grounded theory is applied for in-depth qualitative analysis. Findings reveal the pivotal role of sociocultural factors in internal family dynamics, supporting and extending previous research. Theoretical implications highlight a nuanced understanding of multi-child family dynamics, while practical implications underscore the need for tailored family support programs. This research contributes theoretical insights and practical guidance for addressing the unique needs of multi-child families in reproductive decision-making processes.

**Keywords:** Reproductive Choices, Culture Dynamics, Family Influences, Intergenerational Negotiation

## **1. Introduction**

The dynamics of reproductive decision-making within multi-child families constitute a complex and understudied area in family research. While existing literature acknowledges the influence of sociocultural factors such as culture, religion, legal frameworks, and peer groups, a critical knowledge gap persists regarding specific cases within multi-child families. This study aims to fill this void by delving into individual cases, building on previous findings to address the nuanced interplay of sociocultural factors.

The research question guiding this study is "How do sociocultural factors interact in the reproductive decision-making of multi-child families, influencing family interactions and dynamics?" Employing a case study approach and semi-structured interviews, qualitative data will be collected, allowing a closer examination of the perspectives within these families. The Grounded Theory method is chosen for its suitability in deriving meaningful insights from qualitative data.

This study not only reports findings but engages in a dialogue with existing research, contributing to a deeper understanding of sociocultural influences on reproductive decision-making. The categorized and themed findings will illuminate the complexities of multi-child family dynamics,

confirming the hypothesis that sociocultural factors play a significant role in shaping fertility decisions. Theoretical implications will enrich our comprehension, while practical implications underscore the need for tailored family support programs, challenging the assumption that a one-size-fits-all approach is sufficient for addressing the needs of multi-child families.

In the following pages, this research endeavors to shed light on the intricacies of multi-child family dynamics, emphasizing individual cases to provide theoretical and practical insights into the sociocultural influences shaping reproductive decisions within these families.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1. Sociocultural Factors in Reproductive Decision-making**

When it comes to the choices surrounding having children, sociocultural influences take center stage. Some studies delve into culture, perceiving it as a rigid, unchanging element that significantly impacts the perceived ideal number of children. [1-2] Conversely, other research views culture as a dynamic force enabling individuals to behave in certain ways.

This dynamic also extends to the family. Certain studies underscore the family as a foundational structure that inherently influences our reproductive choices. Conversely, there are investigations focusing on the intricate interactions within families, particularly highlighting power dynamics between spouses and the influential roles played by grandparents. Interestingly, these studies often view culture as a more stable and predefined entity rather than a fluid force guiding interactions.

The spectrum of social influences, including culture, religion, legal frameworks, and peer groups, significantly shapes decisions regarding reproduction. These multifaceted factors intertwine, impacting how individuals navigate their reproductive choices and determine family size. Studies such as those by underscore the considerable impact of cultural factors on shaping these decisions.

### **2.2. Intra-family Dynamics and Negotiation**

Amidst the realm of reproductive decision-making, intra-family dynamics and negotiation emerge as pivotal players. Some research emphasizes the interplay between culture and family dynamics. While culture is perceived as a bounded and stable entity, the family is seen as the backdrop against which interactions occur.

Within this family setting, negotiations and power dynamics between spouses, the influence wielded by grandparents, and the extent of communication among family members play critical roles.[3] This negotiation process within the family structure, even when culture is viewed as a relatively static element, significantly influences the decisions surrounding reproduction.

The intricate interplay between sociocultural factors and intra-family dynamics profoundly impacts reproductive decision-making. Understanding the nuanced relationship between these elements stands as a pivotal task for future research. Delving deeper into how these factors interact and jointly shape human reproductive choices will offer valuable insights into this complex aspect of human life.

In examining sociocultural factors in reproductive decision-making, various studies have presented culture both as a stable structural variable and as a dynamic, enabling force. However, there's a need to synthesize these views to elucidate how both static cultural norms and adaptable cultural capacities interplay in influencing reproductive choices. The negotiation process within families, encompassing power dynamics between spouses, the influence of grandparents, and intergenerational communication, emerges as a critical factor in decision-making.

While existing research extensively explores the impact of culture, religion, and family structures on reproductive decisions, more nuanced investigations are necessary. Future research should delve deeper into the negotiation processes within families, specifically elucidating the intricacies of

decision-making and considering how cultural norms, while sometimes rigid, also adapt to individual actions. Identifying these nuanced interactions and gaps will contribute significantly to a more comprehensive understanding of reproductive decision-making processes.

### **3. Methods**

#### **3.1. Case Study**

This research adopts a qualitative case study design to delve into the multi-child families. A case study approach is advantageous for its ability to provide a detailed, contextualized, and holistic understanding of a specific instance, making it well-suited for exploring the complexities inherent in the dynamics of multi-child families.[4] The chosen case represents a multi-child family, and this design allows for an in-depth examination of sociocultural factors and intra-family dynamics.

Basic demographic information, including family size, composition, and relevant background details, will be presented to offer a comprehensive context for the study.

#### **3.2. Data Collection**

Qualitative data is gathered through semi-structured interviews, a design informed by previous studies focusing on similar themes, such as. The interviews are structured to elicit detailed responses from participants, exploring their perspectives on sociocultural influences, intra-family dynamics, decision-making processes, and the perceived impact of these factors on the family. Drawing on [5], the interview consists of three major sections. The first section of questions focuses on the consultation and discussion of fertility decisions between the couple. The second section on fertility concept and cultural influence are carefully crafted to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter. The structuring of interview sections is based on common practices in qualitative research. [6-7]

The author arranged three interviews between January. The data collection procedure involves conducting semi-structured interviews with members of the selected multi-child family. These interviews are facilitated through Tencent Meeting, the most popular online meeting software which can record and transcribe meeting conversations. This transcription process ensures that all relevant information is documented accurately. Next, to streamline data management and facilitate subsequent analysis, the transcribed data is systematically organized within an Excel spreadsheet.

#### **3.3. Data Analysis**

The data analysis adheres to the Grounded Theory method, which systematically identifies themes and patterns in qualitative data.[8] Textual data in Chinese were initially analyzed and subsequently translated to English during the writing phase. The transcribed texts undergo rigorous coding and categorization to reveal key themes concerning sociocultural influences and intra-family dynamics in multi-child families, ensuring credibility and reliability. The iterative nature of Grounded Theory permits ongoing refinement until a comprehensive understanding is achieved.[9]

### **4. Findings**

In the context of contemporary family dynamics, navigating the delicate balance between tradition and modernity poses intricate challenges for individuals and couples. This study delves into the nuanced perspectives and decision-making processes of participants regarding family planning, particularly concerning the traditional value of large families in Chinese culture. Through in-depth interviews and open-ended coding of transcripts, this research uncovers rich insights into the complexities of familial decision-making. Central to this exploration is the juxtaposition between

traditional norms and evolving societal expectations, as participants grapple with the implications of family size on various facets of their lives. Anchored by poignant reflections and insightful narratives, the findings shed light on the intricate interplay between cultural heritage, personal values, and practical considerations in shaping contemporary approaches to family planning. Amongst the myriad themes that emerge, the tension between tradition and modernity is palpable, highlighting the need for nuanced understanding and adaptive strategies in navigating the intricacies of familial dynamics.

#### **4.1. Consultation and discussion of fertility decisions**

Based on the open-ended coding of the interview transcripts, the codes were divided into two categories. The first category of codes dealt with mutual respect and equal relationships between parents. For example, when asked about negotiation and bargaining power, they both mentioned compromise and rational discussion of pros and cons. According to the respondents:

"We will be willing to compromise and give in. This means we will be willing to give up some of our own demands in exchange for concessions from the other party. This will help us better balance our commitment to each other with our bargaining power."

Additionally, they emphasized the importance of shared goals.

"(We) clarify our common goal to ensure that our discussions are always centered on that goal. For example, our common goal might be to provide the best educational and living environment for our children."

The second category focused on the role of communication and trust. Upon further investigation, they emphasized the keys to healthy negotiation: consensus, trust, and avoidance of conflict. For example, the mother stated, "Appropriate concessions in discussions are the key to avoiding conflict, and we have many in-depth discussions to shape healthy negotiations."

Both of these types of norms point to the theme of harmonious family (spousal) relationships. In essence, these norms reflect the couple's prioritization of family harmony over disagreements.

Several factors may explain these findings. Generational differences, influenced by evolving societal norms and expectations, may contribute to a shift towards more collaborative decision-making.[10] Education levels might also play a role, as higher education level is correlated with inter-spousal communication about reproduction issues [11] and could potentially foster rational discussion and compromise skills. Cultural values, particularly those emphasizing shared goals and family harmony, could shape negotiation dynamics.[12]

Studies have suggested that generational shifts impact decision-making styles, while educational attainment influences communication patterns. Additionally, cultural values emphasizing family cohesion align with the prioritization of family harmony in the discussed consultations. Understanding these factors is crucial for contextualizing the findings and comprehending the evolving landscape of fertility decision consultations.

#### **4.2. Fertility concept and cultural influence**

Study participants consistently emphasized equality as a fundamental value in relationships. The importance of joint decision-making and mutual respect emerged as key themes. One participant expressed this view when she said, "We believe in mutual respect and shared responsibility as the foundation of our equal husband and wife relationship." This finding is consistent with contemporary society's shift toward equal partnerships and challenges traditional gender roles in decision-making processes.

The emphasis on equality within spousal relationships among participants appears rooted in family of origin dynamics, where collaborative decision-making historically took priority. Evolving social norms, particularly the increasing emphasis on gender equality, contribute to a shift towards shared

decision-making. Additionally, higher education levels amplify awareness of the importance of equality in relationships, reflecting an educational influence on participants' perspectives.[13]

In the participants' reflections on traditional Chinese fertility culture and its influence on fertility decisions, there was a consistent sentiment that the cultural norm of "having more children and more happiness" was perceived as not ideal. Despite this view, participants did not outright reject or deny the existence of this traditional belief. The statement, "Sometimes having more children doesn't mean more blessings; it can mean more stress," captures a nuanced perspective. The participants' decision to have four children may seem contradictory to their perspective on traditional Chinese fertility culture. However, upon closer examination, their stance reflects a nuanced understanding of tradition within the context of modernity. While they may not fully embrace the traditional value of having many children, they also do not outright reject it. Instead, their perspective suggests a complex stance that acknowledges the existence of tradition while expressing reservations about its practicality in the contemporary context.

This nuanced perspective likely arises from an awareness of the potential challenges and stress associated with having more children in today's society. In today's society, the choice of family size is a complex and delicate issue. On the one hand, people may be influenced by the traditional belief that a large family can bring more joy and companionship. However, on the other hand, the pressures and challenges of modern life cannot be ignored. Financial factors are important considerations in deciding whether to have more children, as the cost of raising children is rising, including education, medical and living expenses. In addition, time commitment is also an important factor, as parents need to invest a lot of time and energy in caring for and educating their children. While they may recognize the cultural significance of large families, they also weigh the practical considerations such as financial constraints, time commitments, and the ability to provide quality care and education for each child. Therefore, their decision to have four children can be seen as a compromise between tradition and modernity, where they maintain a connection to cultural norms while adapting their family planning choices to fit their individual circumstances and values.

## 5. Discussions

The present study confirms the importance of spousal communication and cultural beliefs in reproductive decisions, which has been highlighted in previous studies. However, it also highlights the need for further research into the impact of personal preferences and values on reproductive decisions, as this study found that some families prioritize social harmony and family values over individual choices.

Limitations of the selected methodology, data collection and analysis include the small sample size and the fact that the study was conducted in a specific geographic area, which may not be representative of multi-child families in other regions. In addition, the study relied on self-reported data, which can be influenced by recall bias and social expectation bias.

To advance the field, future scholars may build on the findings of this study and design a survey to explore the impact of personal preferences and values on reproductive decisions within a broader, more diverse sample. In addition, longitudinal studies could track how reproductive decisions evolve in response to changing social norms, economic conditions, and individual goals, offering a dynamic understanding of family planning dynamics over time. Thirdly, future studies could combine qualitative and quantitative research methods to compare how factors such as personal values influence reproductive decisions across ethnicity, nations and class.

## 6. Conclusion

Through open coding of interview transcripts, two salient categories emerged in the consultation and



discussion of fertility decisions. The first category emphasized mutual respect and equal partnership between parents, fostering compromise, rational discussion, and shared goals. Participants highlighted the significance of common objectives, particularly in providing the best education and living environment for their children. The second category underscored the role of communication and trust, emphasizing consensus, trust-building, and conflict avoidance, all contributing to the theme of harmonious family relationships.

Equality emerged as a fundamental value in relationships, with participants expressing the importance of joint decision-making and mutual respect. This finding resonates with contemporary societal shifts toward equal partnerships and challenges traditional gender roles in decision-making. Additionally, participants exhibited a nuanced perspective on traditional Chinese fertility culture, acknowledging its existence but expressing reservations about its practicality in the modern context.

This research contributes to the theoretical understanding of fertility decision consultations within multi-child families by revealing the importance of equality, communication, and trust in decision-making processes. It challenges existing perspectives by introducing a nuanced view on traditional fertility culture, enriching the theoretical landscape of family planning dynamics.

The findings have practical implications for healthcare professionals, policymakers, and family counselors involved in supporting individuals and couples in their fertility decisions. Understanding the emphasis on equality and the complex relationship with traditional cultural norms can inform more tailored and culturally sensitive interventions, promoting informed and harmonious decision-making within families.

In essence, this study provides valuable insights into the evolving landscape of fertility decision consultations, offering a foundation for future research endeavors and practical interventions that respect the diversity of family dynamics and cultural values in contemporary society.

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## Appendix

1. Please describe the negotiation process between you and your partner before deciding to have the first child, second child; etc.
2. How do you balance your commitment to the relationship with the allocation of bargaining power during the negotiation process? Can you give some examples?
3. In your opinion, what role does communication style play in marriage and child-bearing negotiations? Please give specific examples.
4. When discussing having children, how do you and your partner perceive each other's work characteristics and the division of childcare?
5. During your negotiation of having children, please describe misunderstanding or conflict that happened. Why do you think it happened?
6. How can we learn from the lessons of the past when negotiating relationships and children?
7. What constructive advice can you offer when negotiating relationships and children?
8. Can you describe the consideration of the children's needs during your negotiation process?
9. What factors do you think are likely to become more and more important in future marriage and child negotiations? Give your prediction and explain why.
10. In your marriage, how do you view the power relationship between husband and wife? How has this affected you and your partner when discussing having children?
11. What influence do you think Chinese fertility culture (such as son preference, multiple children mean more happiness) has had on your discussion with your partner about having children?
12. What does marriage and having children mean to you and your partner in the Chinese cultural context?
13. How do you think the power relationship between husband and wife affects your fertility decisions in the context of Chinese fertility culture? (Family size, management of family income, education of children, adoption of family planning; Do you speak up when in disagreement with your partner? What do you do when you disagree? )
14. In your opinion, what aspects of Chinese fertility culture may exert pressure on modern couples' reproductive decisions? (such as son preference, multiple children mean more happiness, etc. mentioned in "Kane 2023")
15. In the Chinese cultural context, how has marriage and having children affected the career development of you and your partner?
16. In your opinion, in Chinese fertility culture, please describe any misunderstandings or conflicts between you and your partner. Why do you think that happened? (what factors may lead to misunderstandings or conflicts between couples when discussing the issue of having children?)
17. Can you offer some suggestions to help other couples better deal with the negotiation of fertility decisions in the context of Chinese fertility culture?
18. In your opinion, in the context of Chinese fertility culture, please describe how you and your partner balance the needs of family and career when discussing having children.
19. What new challenges or opportunities do you think may arise when couples discuss having children in the context of China's fertility culture in the future? Give your prediction and explain why.