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Full Text

Intergenerational Changes in Fertility Values and Their Family Transmission Pathways

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Practical Implications

This study reveals the patterns of intergenerational transmission of fertility values within families, providing a reference for understanding fertility choices today. For the general public, it is important to recognize the influence of family beliefs and to view one' s own fertility attitudes rationally. For policymakers, fertility-support measures that better fit real-world conditions can be formulated by taking into account differences between urban and rural areas, generational differences, and the role of parenting-related cognitions and positive parenting experiences, thereby helping to create a favorable environment for childbearing.

Abstract

Based on national sample data, this study takes parents' fertility values and offspring' s fertility values as core variables, systematically examines the intergenerational transmission of fertility values, and investigates the moderating roles of gender, birth cohort, urban–rural background during upbringing, perceived parenting conditions, and positive parenting experiences. The results show that parents' fertility values significantly and positively predict offspring'

s fertility values. Moderation analyses indicate that both structural and psychological factors significantly affect the strength of the transmission of fertility values within families. The study reveals the mechanism through which traditional fertility beliefs persist within families, providing empirical evidence for understanding attitudinal change in low-fertility societies and for formulating related policies.

Keywords fertility values, intergenerational transmission, birth cohort, urban-rural background, parenting cognition

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Abstract

Based on a nationally representative sample, this study identifies the intergenerational transmission of fertility values between parents and their offspring as its core research focus. It systematically examines the predictive relationship of fertility values across generations while exploring the moderating roles of demographic variables (gender and birth cohort), developmental contexts (urban-rural upbringing), and cognitive-affective factors (perception of rearing conditions and positive parenting affect). The results indicate that parental fertility values significantly and positively predict those of their offspring. Moderation analysis reveals that both structural and psychological factors significantly influence the transmission intensity of these values within the family system. This research elucidates the psychological mechanisms underlying the persistence of traditional fertility values and provides empirical evidence for understanding value shifts in low-fertility societies, offering insights for the formulation of related population policies.

Key words: fertility values, intergenerational transmission, traditional fertility concepts, birth year, urban-rural background, parenting cognition

1 Introduction

Population issues are closely related to national development, and a rational population structure is highly important for national economic growth, social security, and scientific and technological progress (於嘉 et al., 2021). According to statistics, China' s birth rate declined continuously from 2017 to 2023, and the total fertility rate has been far below the replacement level required to maintain population stability, indicating that China has gradually entered the ranks of low-fertility countries (陈卫民 and 王佑茹, 2024). Against the backdrop of the continuing deepening of low fertility, explaining fertility behavior solely in terms of economic costs or policy incentives has become insufficient for fully revealing the internal logic of individuals' fertility choices. Therefore, to understand the phenomenon of low fertility more profoundly, researchers need to examine the cognitive antecedent of fertility behavior—namely, what important effects fertility values have on fertility decision-making—and, from a family perspective, explore the mechanisms and influencing factors of the intergenerational transmission of fertility values.

1.1 Fertility and Fertility Values

The theory of the second demographic transition emphasizes that, in low-fertility societies, changes in individual value orientations and social norms have become the main drivers of fertility decline, rather than merely the effects of economic and policy factors (Lesthaeghe, 2010). Within this theoretical framework, fertility is viewed not only as a passive response to economic conditions or policy environments, but also as reflecting individuals' values concerning family, responsibility, and social roles.

Fertility decision-making is usually a layered process that moves from value judgment, to the formation of intentions, and then to behavioral implementation. The theory of planned behavior holds that individuals' behavior is primarily predicted through "intention," while intention is jointly determined by individuals' attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control (Ajzen, 1991). In the "values–intentions–behavior" framework, fertility values reflect individuals' basic attitudes toward the meaning and norms of childbearing; fertility intentions are the concrete fertility plans and expected number of children formed on this basis, which in turn influence fertility behavior (Ajzen & Klobas, 2013; 顾宝昌, 2011). Thus, with regard to fertility issues, this theory can be used to explain "how people form fertility intentions" : individuals' values influence their fertility attitudes and beliefs, thereby shaping their fertility plans.

Existing researchers have defined fertility values as individuals' views or cognitive evaluations of the importance of various aspects of childbearing, which may be reflected in people' s choices and trade-offs among different fertility purposes, methods, and so forth (张进辅 et al., 2005). Unlike fertility intentions or specific fertility plans, fertility values do not directly point to the number of children, but instead provide a normative framework for individuals' fertility judgments

and choices. Given that fertility values themselves are highly multidimensional and difficult to measure comprehensively, this paper operationally defines fertility values as individuals' degree of endorsement of traditional fertility concepts, mainly including concept orientations with clear attributes of cultural inheritance, such as "the more children, the more blessings" and "raising sons to provide for old age." Such concepts not only reflect individuals' understanding of family functions and intergenerational responsibilities within a specific sociocultural context, but also provide a value reference for how they view fertility in the modern context of low fertility, making them an important entry point for understanding the transformation of social values.

1.2 The Familial Intergenerational Transmission of Fertility Values

Family-centered culture is a typical manifestation of the cultural values of Chinese families. Traditional fertility concepts reflect the social structure and cultural logic of a specific historical stage, and their influence continues to be transmitted between parents and children through the family (Murphy, 2012).

According to intergenerational transmission theory and family systems theory, the intergenerational inheritance of fertility values is mainly organized around the family as the basic unit and parents as the primary actors. Familistic values have a significant intergenerational transmission effect in Chinese families (Booth & Kee, 2009; Xia Yanyu et al., 2025). Family socialization is the mainstream theory for explaining the intergenerational transmission of fertility, encompassing two mechanisms: parents' intentional transmission of values and children' s active learning and imitation (Yang Liuqingqing et al., 2024). On the one hand, parents consciously instill cultural ideas and a sense of responsibility and mission concerning childbearing, shaping fertility values consistent with their own and strengthening the mechanism of intergenerational transmission within the family (Bernardi & Klärner, 2014; De Valk & Liefbroer, 2007). On the other hand, during the process of socialization, individuals observe their parents' fertility-related behaviors and experiences, internalize them as their own fertility values, and thereby have their fertility intentions influenced (Cools & Kaldager Hart, 2017). Accordingly, Hypothesis H1 is proposed: parents' fertility values can positively predict the fertility values of the offspring generation.

1.3 Moderating Roles of Structural and Psychological Variables

Fertility values arise within a multilayered environment of biological, psychological, social, economic, cultural, and political conditions. They are influenced not only by individual-level micro factors such as gender and age, but also by macro factors such as culture, the economy, and social institutions (Huinink et al., 2015; Li Zhi and Wu Yongjiang, 2022). Ma Yunyun' s (2019) analysis of a national sample found that rural women of childbearing age have stronger fertility intentions than urban women of childbearing age. Liu Songlin et al. (2024),

based on CGSS data, likewise concluded that rural household registration has a positive effect on fertility intentions. Studies show that men tend to desire more children than women, while women' s attitudes toward childbearing are more negative than men' s (Wang Qian et al., 2024; Wang Xinyue and Li Ming, 2025). This difference may result from the physical costs of childbearing for women and from the traditional gendered division of roles. Women are socially expected to devote more time and energy to the family and childrearing, and the dual role conflict between work and family weakens their fertility intentions (Chang Baorui et al., 2021; Sheng He and Li Jianxin, 2023).

Fertility intentions are also affected by childrearing conditions and parenting experiences. The *China Childbearing Cost Report: 2024 Edition* points out that the average cost for families nationwide to raise a child to age 17 exceeds 500,000 yuan. As the costs of childbearing rise and its returns decline, people tend to have fewer children. Contemporary young people have higher requirements for the conditions of childrearing than the previous generation; believing that their own capacities do not meet those requirements, they become unwilling to have children (Wang Yuesheng, 2024). With the transformation of the socioeconomic structure and the diversification of values, contemporary young people increasingly emphasize personal feelings, exhibiting fertility views centered on self-fulfillment. The life choices of the previous generation—regarding love and marriage, childbearing, work, and so forth—were mainly based on values such as social needs and collective contribution, whereas contemporary young people place greater emphasis on personal needs, individual rights, and self-worth (Qiu Xiqian and Lai Kaisheng, 2024; Zheng Wen et al., 2025). Accordingly, Hypothesis H2 is proposed: fertility values differ across generations, and younger groups show a lower level of identification with fertility values.

The strength of the intergenerational transmission of fertility values is influenced by multiple factors in the micro and macro environments in which individuals are situated. For example, at the family micro level, the degree of family democracy, the frequency of parent–child interaction, and the quality of relationships are regarded as key factors affecting the effectiveness of intergenerational transmission. The higher the degree of family democracy, the more autonomous individuals are in their fertility views; they are more willing to question traditional fertility norms and are less likely to be constrained by them (Yang Liuqingqing et al., 2024). In a broader cultural context, community culture can also significantly affect the extent of intergenerational transmission of familistic norms (Feng Zhen and Li Zhonglu, 2025). At the same time, the strength of transmission also exhibits cohort differences alongside social change; for example, some studies have found

···the intergenerational transmission effect declines across successive birth cohorts. Some studies, from a life-course perspective, have also pointed out that intergenerational transmission effects may weaken or even disappear as individuals grow older. The strength and persistence of intergenerational transmission also show clear urban–rural and gender differences. Parental influence changes

with children' s marriage and childbearing events: after children experience childbearing, mothers' influence tends to weaken, whereas fathers' influence on adult sons may still persist, and is "mainly manifested in rural areas" (Qing Shisong, 2022; Feng Zhen and Li Zhonglu, 2025). Therefore, examining under which structural and psychological conditions the intergenerational transmission of fertility values is stronger or weaker will help us further understand how people' s fertility attitudes are formed.

Given that macro-level variables are difficult to measure accurately through individual questionnaires, and that this paper focuses on the family-level process of intergenerational transmission, this study, based on data availability and research purposes, mainly focuses on two types of factors. The first consists of relatively stable structural conditions such as gender, birth cohort, and urban-rural background during upbringing, which reflect the social environment and intergenerational position of the individual. The second consists of fertility-related individual cognitive and affective orientations, such as perceptions of childrearing conditions and anticipated positive feelings about the childrearing process, which characterize individuals' subjective evaluations in the internalization of fertility values. Accordingly, Hypothesis H3a is proposed: structural variables such as gender, cohort, and urban–rural background moderate the transmission of fertility values; and Hypothesis H3b: psychological variables such as perceptions of childrearing conditions and positive feelings about childrearing moderate the transmission of fertility values.

In summary, this study focuses on the familial transmission pathways of traditional fertility values and uses a large nationwide sample as its research object, aiming to reveal through empirical analysis the relationship between parents' fertility values and those of their children.

2 Methods

2.1 Participants

This study used convenience sampling. Questionnaires were distributed online, and written instructions informed participants of the response requirements and obtained their informed consent. The demographic information of the study sample is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic information statistics

Variable	Category	Number	Percentage
Gender	Male	9111	66.2%
	Female	4652	33.8%
Cohort	1950s cohort	64	0.5%
	1960s cohort	239	1.7%
	1970s cohort	1357	9.9%
	1980s cohort	4382	31.8%

Variable	Category	Number	Percentage
	1990s cohort	5688	41.3%
	2000s cohort	2033	14.8%
Residence before age 18	Rural area	6901	50.1%
	County-level or lower towns	3487	25.3%
	Prefecture-level or higher cities	3375	24.5%
Total		13763	100%

2.2 Research Instruments

2.2.1 Personal Fertility Values

A self-developed scale was used to assess the extent to which individuals endorsed traditional fertility concepts and a sense of social responsibility for childbearing. The scale was developed with reference to commonly measured content in domestic studies of fertility values (Zhang Jinfu et al., 2005). It contains 5 items (Items 11, 12, and 15–17) and uses a five-point Likert scoring method, with responses ranging from "very inconsistent" to "very consistent," scored from 1 to 5 in order. Higher scores indicate stronger endorsement of traditional fertility values. The Cronbach' s α coefficient of this scale was 0.809.

2.2.2 Parents' Fertility Values

This measure assessed respondents' subjective perceptions of their parents' fertility concepts. The scale content was structurally consistent with the offspring fertility-values scale (Items 22–26), and the scoring method was the same. Higher scores indicate a higher perceived level of parents' traditional fertility values. The Cronbach' s α coefficient of this scale was 0.881.

2.2.3 Positive Feelings Toward Childrearing

This measure assessed individuals' expectations of the emotional rewards that childrearing may bring. It includes 2 items (Items 13 and 14), with the same scoring method as above. The Cronbach' s α coefficient for this dimension was 0.742.

2.2.4 Perceived Childrearing Conditions

This measure assessed individuals' subjective judgments about the material resources and abilities required for raising children. It includes 3 items (Items 19-21), with the same scoring method as above. Higher scores indicate that individuals perceive higher requirements for childrearing conditions. The Cronbach' s α coefficient for this dimension was 0.788.

2.2.5 Demographic Variables

Demographic variables included gender, birth cohort (born in the 1950s–1970s, 1980s, 1990s, or 2000s), place of residence before age 18 (rural area, county-level or lower town, prefecture-level or higher city), marital status (married, unmarried, divorced, widowed), whether the respondent had children, and the number of children already born.

2.3 Data Processing

Data were processed using SPSS 22 and the PROCESS plugin.

3 Research Results

3.1 Test of Common Method Bias

Harman' s single-factor test was used to examine common method bias (Zhou Hao & Long Lirong, 2004). The results showed that the variance explained by the largest factor was 38.19% (less than 40%), indicating that there was no serious common method bias.

3.2 Correlation Analysis

Personal fertility values were significantly and positively correlated with parents' fertility values, positive feelings, and perceived childrearing conditions. The correlation matrix is shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Correlation analysis of variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1 Gender	1							
2 Place of residence before age 18	−.104***	1						

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
3 Current place of residence	−.146***	.426***	1					
4 Cohort	−.068***	−.14	−.037***	1				
5 Positive feelings about childrearing	.091***	−.063***	−.032***	−.165***	1			
6 Perceptions of childrearing conditions	−.107**	.065***	.092***	−.047***	.340***	1		
7 Personal fertility values	.174***	−.069***	−.062***	−.146***	.580***	.262***	1	

8 Parents' fertility values	.049***	−.057***	−.008	.126***	.395***	.397**	.593***	1

Note: p<*.05,* **p<*.01,** *p*<.001; the same below.

3.3 Comparison of Generational Differences in Fertility Values

To examine differences in fertility values across different birth cohorts, this study used personal fertility values, perceptions of childrearing conditions, and positive feelings about childrearing as dependent variables, and birth cohort as the independent variable, conducting ANOVA and Welch' s analysis of variance tests.

As shown in Table 3, there were significant differences across birth cohorts in fertility values, perceptions of childrearing conditions, and positive feelings about childrearing.

Table 3. Analysis of variance of fertility values across different birth cohorts

	50s, 60s, and 70s cohorts(n=1660)	80s cohort(n=4382)	90s cohort(n=5688)	00s cohort(n=2033)	*F*	η^2
Fertility values	16.28(4.26)	15.89(4.53)	15.08(4.52)	14.11(4.41)	104.07***	.022
Positive feelings about childrearing	7.61(1.96)	7.60(1.93)	7.19(2.03)	6.53(2.06)	149.45***	.032
Perceptions of childrearing conditions	12.59(2.65)	12.66(2.46)	12.50(2.55)	12.23(2.69)	13.53***	.003

Post hoc tests found that endorsement of traditional fertility values gradually declined across successive cohorts, with the 00s cohort showing the lowest endorsement of traditional fertility concepts, as shown in Figure 1. Positive feelings about childrearing also weakened across cohorts: the 90s cohort was significantly lower than the 50s–80s cohorts, and the 00s cohort was the lowest. For perceptions of childrearing conditions, the 90s cohort was significantly lower than the 80s cohort, and the 00s cohort was the lowest.

Figure labels:
Y-axis: Scores on each variable
Legend: Post-50s–70s; Post-80s; Post-90s; Post-00s
X-axis categories: Fertility values; Positive feelings about childrearing; Perceptions of childrearing conditions

Figure 1. Fertility values and childrearing-related perceptions among different birth cohorts

Note: The error bars in the figure represent standard deviations (SD). The significance levels marked above the difference lines are: $^{**}p < .01$, $^{***}p < .001$. The short vertical lines at the two ends of each difference line clearly indicate the two specific bars being compared.

3.4 Regression Analysis of the Effects of Parents' Fertility Values on Offspring' s Fertility Values

To test the intergenerational transmission of family fertility values, parents' fertility values were used as the independent variable and individuals' fertility values as the dependent variable. Linear regression analysis was conducted to examine the predictive effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable; see Table 4.

First, a baseline model without control variables was constructed (Model 1). The results showed that parents' fertility values significantly and positively predicted offspring' s fertility values ($\beta = .593$, $p < .001$): the higher parents' endorsement of traditional fertility beliefs, the higher the offspring' s endorsement as well.

On this basis, gender, cohort, place of residence before age 18, perceptions of childrearing conditions, positive feelings about childrearing, whether one had given birth, number of children already born, and marital status were further included in the model (Model 2) as control variables. The results showed that, after controlling for the above variables, the positive predictive effect of parents' fertility values on offspring' s fertility values remained significant ($\beta = .438$, $p < .001$). Although the regression coefficient decreased, it remained stable, indicating that the intergenerational transmission effect of family fertility values has relatively good robustness.

Table 4. Results of Linear Regression Analysis of Parents' Fertility Values Predicting Offspring' s Fertility Values

Variable	Model 1 B	Model 1 *SE*	Model 1 *t*	Model 2 B	Model 2 *SE*	Model 2 *t*
Constant	5.882	.114	51.672***	2.824	.226	12.483***
Parents' fertility values	.553	.006	86.362***	.409	.006	63.843***
Gender (0 = female)				1.041	.060	17.395***

Variable	Visible statistic(s)		
Birth cohort	-.180	.038	-4.773***
Place of residence before age 18	-.008	.033	-.243
Positive feelings about childrearing	.909	.015	59.863***
Perceived childrearing conditions	-.070	.012	-5.815***
Marital status	-.290	.050	-5.826***
Whether has given birth/has children (0 = no)	-.287	.129	-2.226*
Number of children already born	.304	.063	4.841***
R^2	.351		.511
Adjusted R^2	.351		.510

3.5 Moderating Effects of Structural Variables and Psychological Variables

3.5.1 The Moderating Roles of Gender, Cohort, and Place of Residence Before Age 18 in the Transmission of Fertility Values

To test the moderating roles of gender, cohort, and place of residence before age 18 in the path from parents' fertility values to individuals' fertility values, other variables were controlled, and Model 1 of PROCESS was used to analyze the data. Gender was entered into the model as a moderating variable; for birth cohort, those born in the 1950s–1970s served as the reference group, and dummy variables were constructed respectively for those born in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s; for place of residence before age 18, rural areas served as the reference group, and dummy variables were constructed respectively for county-level and lower towns and for prefecture-level and higher cities. The interaction terms between parents' fertility values and each dummy variable were entered into the model simultaneously to test the moderating effects of different categories relative to the reference group. The results are shown in Table 5.

Table 5 Moderating Effects of Structural Variables on the Transmission of Fertility Values

Predictor variable	Model 1: Moderator—Gender B	SE	t	Model 2: Moderator—Cohort B	SE	t	Model 3: Moderator—Urban-rural B	SE	t
Constant	1.631***	.264	17.544	2.497***	.350	7.135	2.429***	.238	10.210
Parents' fertility values	.315***	.010	32.916	.425***	.017	24.580	.433***	.009	50.321
Moderator (W)	-1.534***	.206	-7.452	-1.027 (W1)** -.110 (W2) .855 (W3)*	.395 (W1) .362 (W2) .349 (W3)	-2.838 (W1) -.316 (W2) 2.166 (W3)	.596 (W4) *.876 (W5)***	.247 (W4) .237 (W5)	2.409 (W4) 3.685 (W5)
Parents' fertility values × moderator	.152***	.012	13.067	-.035 (W1) -.030 (W2) -.008 (W3)***	.020 (W1) .019 (W2) .022 (W3)	-1.599 (W1) -3.816 (W2) 1.775 (W3)	-.045 (W4) **-.050 (W5)***	.014 (W4) .013 (W5)	-3.197 (W4) -3.746 (W5)
R^2	.517			.513			.512		
F	1470.02***			1035.45***			1200.23***		

Note: Gender is a binary variable (0 = female, 1 = male). For cohort, W1 = post-1980s, W2 = post-1990s, W3 = post-2000s; for place of residence before age 18, W4 = county-level and lower towns, W5 = prefecture-level and higher cities.

The results show that gender significantly moderated the effect of parents' fertility values on individuals' fertility values ($B = .15$, $p < .001$), indicating that

the relationship between parents' fertility values and individuals' fertility values differed significantly by gender. Simple-slope analysis found that the positive predictive effect of parents' fertility values on offspring' s fertility values was significant in both the male and female groups, but the effect was stronger among males (male: $B = .467$, $p < .001$; female: $B = .315$, $p < .001$). The positive association between parents' and individuals' fertility values was stronger in the male group ($\Delta B = .15$, 95% CI [0.129, 0.175]), indicating that, compared with females,

Men' s fertility values may be more susceptible to the influence of traditional family beliefs.

Figure content. *Y-axis:* Individual traditional fertility values. *X-axis:* Low parental traditional fertility values; High parental traditional fertility values. *Legend:* Female; Male.

Figure 2. Moderation model of gender in the transmission pathway of traditional fertility values

Birth cohort significantly moderated the effect of parents' fertility values on individuals' fertility values ($p < .001$). Using the 1950s–1970s birth cohorts as the reference group, the interaction terms for the 1980s and 1990s cohorts did not reach significance, whereas the coefficient for the corresponding interaction term for the 2000s cohort was significantly negative ($B = -.084, p < .001$). Simple-slope analysis showed that the positive predictive effect of parents'fertility values on individuals' fertility values reached significance in all groups; the conditional effects were 0.425, 0.459, and 0.394 for the 1950s–1970s, 1980s, and 1990s cohorts, respectively, while in the 2000s cohort this effect decreased to 0.340. Thus, the association between parents' fertility values and individuals' fertility values was not consistent across different birth-cohort groups.

To further examine whether the effect of parents' fertility values on offspring' s fertility values showed a systematic trend of change across birth cohorts, birth cohort was included in the moderation model as an ordinal variable. Parents' fertility values and birth cohort were centered, and their interaction term was constructed. The collinearity diagnostics showed that the variance inflation factors (VIFs) for all predictor variables were below 5. The regression results showed that the interaction term between parents' fertility values and birth cohort was significant ($B = -.032, p < .001, 95\%$ CI$[-0.047, -0.017]$), indicating that the positive effect of parents' fertility values on offspring' s fertility values significantly weakened as birth cohorts became more recent.

Figure 3. Moderation model of cohort in the transmission pathway of traditional fertility values

Y-axis: Individual traditional fertility values
X-axis: Low parental traditional fertility values; High parental traditional fertility values
Legend: 1950s–1970s cohorts; 1980s cohort; 1990s cohort; 2000s cohort

Place of residence before age 18 significantly moderated the effect of parents' fertility values on individuals' fertility values ($p < .001$). Taking rural areas as the reference group, the interaction term between parents' fertility values and type of residence was significantly negative for both towns (B = −.045, $p < .01$) and cities (B = −.050, $p < .001$). Taking rural areas as the reference group, the conditional effects of parents' fertility values under different urban-rural conditions were estimated separately. Among individuals who lived in rural areas before age 18, the conditional effect of parents' fertility values on offspring' s fertility values was 0.433; among individuals who grew up in towns and cities, the conditional effects declined to 0.389 and 0.383, respectively, and both differences reached a significant level. Overall, urban–rural differences in place of residence before age 18 significantly moderated the strength of the relationship between parents' fertility values and individuals' fertility values; in town and urban growth environments, this association was weaker than among rural groups.

Figure 4. Moderation model of place of residence before age 18 in the transmission pathway of traditional fertility values

Y-axis: Individual traditional fertility values
X-axis: Low parental traditional fertility values; High parental traditional fertility values
Legend: Rural; Town; City

3.5.2 Moderating Effects of Perceived Childrearing Conditions and Positive Childrearing Feelings on the Transmission of Fertility Values

Testing whether perceived childrearing conditions and positive childrearing feelings moderate the pathway through which parents' fertility values influence individuals' fertility values is

whether it held. Parents' fertility values, perceived childrearing conditions, and positive feelings about childrearing were all mean-centered before the interaction terms were constructed. The collinearity diagnostics showed that the variance inflation factors of all predictors were below the commonly used threshold (VIF < 5), indicating no serious multicollinearity problem. Controlling for other variables, the data were analyzed using Model 1 in PROCESS. The results are shown in Table 6.

Table 6 Moderating effects of psychological variables on the intergenerational transmission of fertility values

Predictor	Model 1: Moderator—Perceived childrearing conditions			Model 2: Moderator—Positive feelings about childrearing		
	B	*SE*	*t*	B	*SE*	*t*
Constant	4.643***	.406	11.437	8.129***	.332	24.484
Parents' fertility values	.277***	.025	10.948	.059***	.017	3.414
Moderator-variable	-.212***	.029	-7.315	.115**	.040	2.897
Parents' fertility values * moderator variable	.010***	.002	5.394	.048***	.002	21.529
R^2	.512			.527		
F	1441.06***			1529.83***		

Perceived childrearing conditions and positive feelings about childrearing both played significant moderating roles in the intergenerational transmission of fertility values. The interactions between parents' fertility values and perceived childrearing conditions ($B = .010,\ p < .001$), and between parents' fertility values and positive feelings about childrearing ($B = .048,\ p < .001$), both reached significance.

Simple slope analyses were conducted at the $M \pm 1SD$ levels of perceived childrearing conditions and positive feelings about childrearing. When perceived childrearing conditions were relatively low, the conditional effect of parents' fertility values on individuals' fertility values was 0.378; at a high level, this effect increased significantly to 0.430, with a difference of $\Delta B = .051$, 95% CI [0.036, 0.065]. When positive feelings about childrearing were relatively low, the effect of parents' fertility values on individuals' fertility values was .348; at a high level, this effect increased significantly to 0.540, with a difference of $\Delta B = .192$, 95% CI [0.181, 0.213]. Both differences reached significance.

Taken together, compared with lower levels of perceived childrearing conditions and positive feelings about childrearing, at higher levels the positive association between parents' fertility values and their offspring' s fertility values was more significant.

Figure 5. Moderating model of perceived childrearing conditions in the transmission pathway of traditional fertility values

- Y-axis: Individual traditional fertility values
- X-axis: Low parental traditional fertility values; High parental traditional fertility values
- Legend: Low childrearing conditions; High childrearing conditions

Figure 6. Moderating model of positive childrearing experiences in the transmission pathway of traditional fertility values

- Y-axis: Individual traditional fertility values
- X-axis: Low parental traditional fertility values; High parental traditional fertility values
- Legend: Low positive childrearing experiences; High positive childrearing experiences

4 Discussion

From the perspective of family socialization, this study explores the mechanisms through which parents' fertility values influence those of their children, and analyzes the moderating effects of structural and psychological factors. The findings not only reveal the pattern of intergenerational transmission of fertility values, but also have certain theoretical and practical significance for understanding changes in family values and for policymaking in the context of low fertility. In the discussion of this paper, expressions such as "mechanism" and "pathway of influence" represent interpretive understandings of statistical associations from the perspective of existing theory, rather than causal mechanisms directly identified from the data.

First, the study finds that parents' fertility values significantly and positively predict the fertility values of the offspring generation, thereby verifying Hypothesis 1. This indicates that, as the most important agents of socialization during children' s development, parents' fertility values have a relevant influence on the formation of their children' s values.

a key role. Through both verbal instruction and personal example, parents lead their children to internalize traditional fertility views as standards for their own value judgments. This is consistent with the perspectives of intergenerational transmission theory and family systems theory: the family is the core arena for

the transmission of culture and values, and parents are the primary bearers of ideational transmission (Booth & Kee, 2009; Nauck & Yi, 2007).

The study also found significant differences across birth cohorts in individuals' endorsement of traditional fertility views. The younger generation shows a lower level of endorsement of traditional fertility views, thereby confirming Hypothesis 2. Macro-level factors such as economic development, social transformation, and value pluralization may be reshaping individuals' understanding of the meaning of childbearing, gradually weakening traditional fertility values. However, generational differences have not eliminated value transmission within the family. Even as traditional views decline overall, parents' fertility values continue to influence children' s value orientations through family relationships. It can thus be seen that generational change in fertility values is not a "rupture-style replacement," but is closer to a weakened continuation against the background of social change. The family has become an important arena linking traditional norms and contemporary individual values.

Finally, starting from two types of moderating mechanisms—structural and psychological conditions—this study reveals that the influence of parents' fertility values on their children' s fertility values does not occur homogeneously across all groups; rather, its strength varies according to differences in social position and subjective psychological context, thereby confirming Hypothesis 3.

In terms of structural factors, gender, birth cohort, and urban-rural upbringing background can be understood as composite representations of individuals'social roles, generational replacement, and the process of urbanization. In this study, men were slightly more strongly influenced by their parents' fertility values than women, a result consistent with existing findings that gender differences exist in the intergenerational transmission of fertility values (Qing Shisong, 2022; Feng Zhen & Li Zhonglu, 2025). Li et al. (2025) found that the pathway through which paternal attachment affects fertility intentions via family beliefs is more significant among men. Research on gender socialization points out that the role expectations faced by different genders in the process of value socialization are asymmetrical (Hoominfar, 2021); men may be more readily assigned normative expectations related to family continuity and family responsibility. This explains, to some extent, why the influence of parents' fertility values differs in strength across genders. The strength of the association between parents' fertility values and children' s fertility values gradually weakens as birth cohorts advance. This indicates that, in the process of value internalization, family influence is not constant, but weakens with generational replacement and social change. From a macro perspective, this is consistent with the view of second demographic transition theory (Lesthaeghe, 2010): under more diversified living conditions, younger generations place greater emphasis on individual freedom and self-realization, which may reduce the value authority of the family and thereby weaken the intergenerational transmission of traditional norms. Children from cities and towns are less influenced by their parents than children from rural areas. Existing research shows that urban-rural background itself af-

fects patterns of intergenerational value transmission (Yi & Chen, 2014). From the perspective of changing social values, individuals in urban and town contexts have access to denser channels of socialization—schools, media, and peer networks—and stronger pluralistic value inputs, thereby weakening traditional family norms. By comparison, rural social relationships and normative structures are more likely to maintain dependence on family authority, making the role of parents' values in the formation of children' s attitudes more stable (Inglehart & Baker, 2000).

In terms of psychological factors, the higher the requirements for childrearing conditions, the stronger the influence of parents' views on their children. This may be because, when children' s requirements for childrearing conditions and parenting capacity continue to rise, fertility decisions are often no longer regarded as individual choices, but depend more on

resources and emotional support at the family level, thereby strengthening the younger generation' s reliance on parental opinions in fertility-related judgments. As the social-network perspective points out, the older generation participates in the younger generation' s fertility decision-making process through normative expectations together with social support. When childbearing is perceived as an act involving higher costs and higher thresholds, this mechanism of influence within the family may be further reinforced (Bernardi & Klärner, 2014). The stronger the positive feelings about childrearing, the greater the influence of parents' views on the younger generation. In light of self-determination theory, positive emotional experiences may help promote value internalization: when individuals hold stronger positive expectations regarding the experience of raising children, they are more likely to develop emotional identification with the traditional fertility values emphasized by their parents, increase their acceptance of those values, and thus exhibit higher intergenerational consistency (Deci et al., 1994). This result reveals the complex interaction between emotional and cognitive factors in the intergenerational transmission of values.

In summary, drawing on a national sample, this study systematically examined the mechanisms through which traditional fertility values are transmitted across generations within families. Parents' fertility values positively influence those of their children, and this process is moderated by structural factors—gender, birth cohort, and urban–rural background—as well as psychological factors, including perceptions of childrearing conditions and positive feelings about childrearing. This indicates that the family remains an important channel for the intergenerational transmission of traditional fertility values, but its influence is being shaped by multiple forces, including social change, the rise of individual autonomy, and emotional experience. Future fertility policies and intervention measures, while emphasizing economic support and social security, should also attend to the intergenerational continuity of family values and the cultivation of fertility attitudes among contemporary young people, so as to promote a reasonable increase in fertility intentions at the cultural and psychological levels.

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Appendix

Fertility Survey Questionnaire

Hello!

This is a survey about family and fertility issues. All information you provide will be used only for this survey research and will not be disclosed in any other form. This questionnaire contains 30 questions in total. Please choose the answer that reflects your true thoughts; there are no right or wrong answers. Each question must have one response selected or filled in.

We sincerely thank you for your cooperation!

1. Gender: Male Female
2. Before age 18, you lived in: Rural area County-level or lower town Prefecture-level or higher city
3. Please select the province, city, and district/county where you lived before age 18.

Example: Shandong Province-Linyi City-Yinan County (three-level province-city-district/county selection)

4. Where you currently live: Rural area County-level or lower town Prefecture-level or higher city

5. Please select the province, city, and district/county where you currently live.

   Example: Shandong Province-Linyi City-Yinan County (three-level province-city-district/county selection)

6. Have you had children: No Yes

7. Number of children you have had: (dependent on Option 2 in Question 6)

   (1) 1 child

   (2) 2 children

   (3) 3 children

   (4) 4 or more children

8. Sex of the children you have had: (dependent on Question 7)

(Select 1) One boy One girl (dependent on Question 7, option 1)

(Select 2) Two boys Two girls One boy and one girl (dependent on Question 7, option 2)

(Select 3) Three boys Three girls Two boys and one girl Two girls and one boy (dependent on Question 7, option 3)

9. How many children do you think would be ideal for a family to have?

0 1 2 3 4 or more

10. Then what is your preferred gender composition for the child(ren)?

(Select 1) One boy One girl No preference (dependent on Question 9, option 1)

(Select 2) Two boys Two girls One boy and one girl No preference (dependent on Question 9, option 2)

(Select 3) Three boys Three girls Two boys and one girl Two girls and one boy No preference (dependent on Question 9, option 3)

11. I think the saying "more children, more blessings" makes sense.

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neutral Somewhat agree Strongly agree

12. I think it is necessary to raise children as support for old age.

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neutral Somewhat agree Strongly agree

13. I think watching videos related to young children makes me feel happy and blessed.

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neutral Somewhat agree Strongly agree

14. I think raising children can bring me a great sense of achievement.

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neutral Somewhat agree Strongly agree

15. I think bearing and raising children is a responsibility to the country and society.

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neutral Somewhat agree Strongly agree

16. I think bearing and raising more children is a contribution to the country and society.

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neutral Somewhat agree Strongly agree

17. I think bearing and raising children is very important for continuing the family bloodline.

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neutral Somewhat agree Strongly agree

18. If you were to have only one child, would you prefer a boy or a girl?

Boy Girl

19. I think raising children requires having stable housing.

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neutral Somewhat agree Strongly agree

20. You believe that raising children requires a stable source of income.

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

21. You believe that raising children places very high demands on parents' child-rearing abilities.

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

22. Your parents believe that having more children brings more blessings.

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

Figure 1

Figure 1: Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 2: Figure 2

23. Your parents believe that raising children provides support in old age.

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

24. Your parents believe that having children is a responsibility for carrying on the family line.

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

25. Your parents believe that bearing and raising children is everyone' s social responsibility.

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

26. Your parents believe that having and raising more children is a contribution to society.

Please: Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

27. Compared with when you were young, family and kinship gatherings have become less frequent now.

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Neither agree nor disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

28. You are: Post-1950s Post-1960s Post-1970s Post-1980s Post-1990s Post-2000s

29. Marital status: Unmarried Married Divorced Widowed

30. Relationship status: In a romantic relationship Have been in a romantic relationship Have never been in a romantic relationship

This concludes the questionnaire. Thank you again for your responses!

Figures

Figure 3

Figure 3: Figure 3

Figure 4

Figure 4: Figure 4

Figure 5

Figure 5: Figure 5

Figure 6

Figure 6: Figure 6