The Effects of Meaning in Life on Fertility Intentions in College Students

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ABSTRACT

China's population is 7.52 per 1,000 in 2021 falling below 10 per 1,000 for the second consecutive year. Research on fertility values from the perspective of psychology, to accurately understand people's fertility needs and grasp their fertility behaviour, will not only provide a basis for evaluating the current demographic situation and predicting future demographic trends, but will also allow for better targeting when formulating population and family planning policies. However, from the existing literature, studies have only dealt with the factors influencing fertility intentions, mostly focusing on the impact of objective factors such as economic and social factors on fertility intentions, but rarely on the internal psychological traits of individuals. Therefore, this study will adopt a survey analysis method, using the sense of meaningfulness of life as the independent variable, to explore the current situation of young people's fertility intentions, as well as to explore the influence of individual psychological factors such as the sense of meaningfulness of life on fertility intentions and their mechanisms of action, in order to provide data to support the formulation of population policies that are suitable for economic and social development.

This study was based on the principle of convenience sampling, and the questionnaire was administered using online questionnaire distribution and offline distribution. The questionnaire consisted of three parts, namely, basic personal information, the Fertility Values Scale and the Sense of Meaning in Life Scale.

The most central analysis of the questionnaire was achieved through SPSS analysis. The mean scores of the two scales were obtained separately, which were then analysed by correlation in SPSS and with the help of some basic information to obtain a more specific relationship between fertility value and sense of meaning in life.

There are three main categories of respondents in the study, namely the general urban and rural population, the reproductive age population and young people. Age is an important factor so young people under 35 years of age, are the most appropriate respondents. At the same time, as fertility is an act that is decided and carried out by the couple together, it is important that not only women but also men are surveyed.

I. INTRODUCTION:

Frankl, who developed a sense of the meaning of life, argued that people can discover the meaning of life in three different ways: through creative values that give meaning to work, through attitudinal values that give meaning to suffering, and through experiential values that give meaning to love.

However, little research has been conducted on the relationship and influence of an individual's sense of meaningfulness of life, a psychological factor that is important for individual behaviour and decision-making, on fertility intentions.

A sense of meaning in life is a goal that gives a sense of value and direction. The willingness to bear children is a highly subjective issue, and people are willing to endure the pain of childbirth because they can derive unique meaning and value from the suffering they endure. There must therefore be an influential relationship between these two subjective feelings, and we use the sense of meaning in life as the independent variable to explore its impact on fertility intentions.

From the introduction of the "selective two-child" in 2014, the "the universal two-child" in 2016 and the "three-child policy" in May 2021, the birth rate in 2021 will be 7.52 per 1,000 live births, falling below 10 per 1,000 for the second consecutive year. The birth rate in 2021 will also be the lowest in the past 72 years (since 1950). In this context, it is particularly important to formulate a population policy that suits the economic and social development of the country, and to explore and understand the fertility intentions of the population of childbearing age and the factors that influence them is a prerequisite for the formulation of a population fertility policy. Research on fertility values from the perspective of psychology can provide an accurate understanding of people's fertility needs and grasp their fertility behaviour, not only to provide a basis for evaluating the current demographic situation and predicting future demographic trends, but also to better target the formulation of population and family planning policies. As a psychological factor that is important for individual behaviour and decision-making, there is little research on its relationship with fertility intentions and its influence. Therefore, this study will adopt a survey analysis method, using sense of life meaning as the independent variable, to explore the current situation of young people's fertility intentions, as well as to explore the influence of individual psychological factors such as sense of life meaning on fertility intentions and their mechanisms of action, in order to provide data to support the formulation of population policies that are suitable for economic and social development.

1. Status of domestic research
Researchers in China have studied the fertility intentions of Chinese residents from different perspectives, and some representative research results have been achieved.

First, from an operationalisation perspective: the indicators used by domestic scholars in their studies of fertility intentions are slightly different.

Fan Huixin (2018) in advocating that fertility behaviour includes three aspects: gender, number and timing [1]; Zheng Zhenzhen's (2020) study focused on gender preference and number of children [2]; Tian Wenjing and Luo Yang (2017) also studied the fertility intentions of people of childbearing age from the three perspectives of willingness to have children: number, gender and timing [3]. They have basically been studied from the three perspectives of the number of intended children, gender and the timing of childbearing.

Secondly, from the research literature of domestic scholars, with the development of the times and the gradual change of people's fertility concept, the traditional fertility concept of giving preference to sons over daughters and raising children for old age has been gradually replaced by the fertility concept. Yang Mengsi (2017), through a study on the fertility intentions of urban families in Yingtan, concluded that "the fertility concept in Yingtan city has been changing to a modern fertility concept, with diversified fertility purposes; more attention is paid to the quality of children, and there is no obvious gender preference. [4] Wang Tao (2011) argues that "the fertility status of young rural women shows a trend of transition from traditional to modern, and the purpose of fertility is mainly to enjoy the happiness of family; most of the childbearing age is late; the gender preference of fertility is no longer obvious, but more concerned about the quality of children." [5].

Again, in terms of research on measures for a correct fertility concept: The conclusions of research scholars are summarised as mainly including economic aspects, social aspects, cultural aspects and family aspects. Research on economic measures: according to Ji Yuqi (2015), "Promoting the modernization of farmers' fertility concept first requires promoting the change of rural production methods to provide an economic basis for fertility." [[6] Research on social measures: Liu Qi (2015) recommends the establishment of a sound social security system and medical protection system, and the introduction of relevant policies to ensure the normal development of women's careers, from the perspective of improving white-collar fertility intentions. [7] Research on cultural measures: according to Lan Qingqing (2017), "the traditional fertility culture has two sides, and the quality factors in the traditional fertility culture should be fully explored to inject reasonable connotations for the establishment of a modern fertility concept." [8] Research on family measures: according to Lu Shanshan (2018), "it is necessary to properly handle the relationship between family members and avoid conflicts with the previous generation on fertility issues. It is also necessary to deal with the conflict of gender roles between couples." [9]

Finally, there may be a relationship between the meaning of life and fertility intentions previously. Yang, Xue and Xie, Lei (2022) found that subjective well-being and marital satisfaction significantly and positively influenced youth fertility arrangements. Further analysis found that subjective well-being significantly increased the likelihood of youth having a two-child birth arrangement, and marital satisfaction significantly increased the likelihood of having a three-child birth arrangement. [10]

2. Status of foreign research

In the 1970s, when fertility rates in most Western countries fell sharply again, even below replacement level, scholars again explored the reasons for the decline in fertility intentions during the "second demographic transition". The concept of "fertility intention", its measurement and the factors influencing it were formally introduced at this stage [11]. Theoretical framework for the analysis of factors influencing fertility intentions Morgan developed a progressive model of fertility uncertainty, which categorises fertility intentions and analyses changes in fertility intentions over the fertility cycle in a cascading manner by birth cohort [12].

Some other scholars have studied the trends of fertility intentions in France, Germany, Bulgaria, Hungary and other countries by means of tracking surveys, and have done a lot of country comparisons [13], finding that fertility intentions and final fertility levels are very similar in the Netherlands, England, Wales, the United States and Austria, and that women's fertility intentions have different trends at different stages of reproductive age and in different cohorts [14].

3. Literature Review

After extensive reading of the literature, the results of most of the studies show that both domestic and foreign scholars have paid extensive attention to the subject of fertility intentions, mainly from an operational perspective, from the perspective of changing attitudes and from the perspective of measures of correct fertility. Most of the studies have been conducted in the context of foreign policies, which are not in line with the current national context of China. This study will therefore focus on the impact of a sense of meaningful life as an independent variable on fertility intentions based on China's national context, and use this as a scholarly contribution to this study. However, there is a lack of empirical research on the relationship between the sense of meaning of life and fertility intentions, so this study uses an empirical research method of questionnaires to explore the relationship between the sense of meaning of life and fertility intentions.

II. Methods

1. Object of study

This study is based on the principle of convenient sampling, using online questionnaire distribution and offline distribution to administer the questionnaire. The age of the subject is an important factor in fertility intention surveys, and this study focused on a sample of people of childbearing age between 19 and 49. A total of 202 questionnaires were collected, and after excluding those who did not answer seriously and were under the age of 19 and over 49, a total of 190 valid questionnaires were obtained. Among them, 73 (38.4%) were male and 117 (61.6%) were female, with an average age of 23.87 years.

2. Research tools

2.1. Fertility intentions

This study uses the variables 'subjective fertility intention' and 'desired number of children' to reflect individual fertility intentions and behavior. This study measures the degree of fertility desire to investigate by a five-point scale .Higher scores indicating stronger subjective fertility intentions. The investigation of the desired number of children is closely related to fertility behavior [1].

2.2. The meaning in life

The Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ), developed by Steger et al. in 2006, was used[2] and the Chinese version of the C-MLQ was revised by Wang Mengcheng and Dai Xiaoyang in 2008[3]. The scale is divided into two dimensions, The presence of meaning (MLQ-P) and The search for meaning (MLQ-S), in which the presence of meaning refers to the extent to which individuals experience their lives as meaningful, with more emphasis on the outcome, while the search for meaning refers to the extent to which individuals seek This refers to the extent to which the individual is actively seeking meaning in life, with more emphasis on the process. Each sub-dimension consists of 5 items and is scored on a 7-point Likert scale, with higher scores indicating a greater sense of meaning in life. In this survey, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the scale was 0.86, and the Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the two sub-dimensions were 0.78 and 0.90 respectively, indicating that the scale has good reliability and validity.

2.3. Sources of meaning in life

The Personal meaning profile brief (PMP-B) was developed by Paul Wong in 1998[4] and translated into Chinese by Xiao Rong et al. and revised[5] . The scale is divided into three primary dimensions and seven secondary dimensions, specifically the meaningful motivation dimension consisting of achievement and self-transcendence, the meaningful

cognition dimension consisting of life beliefs, self-acceptance and fairness, and the meaningful emotion dimension consisting of interpersonal relationships and intimacy. The scale has 21 items and is scored on a 7-point Likert scale. The mean score of each dimension reflects the individual's performance on different sources of meaning, with higher scores indicating a higher level of life meaning experienced by the individual on that source of meaning. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the scale in this survey was 0.97, and the Cronbach's alpha coefficients for all seven sub-dimensions ranged from 0.73 to 0.93, giving the scale good reliability.

3. Statistical tools

This study mainly used the SPSS 22.0 program to collate and analyse the data.

III. Results
1. Descriptive analysis
1.1. Demographic variables

	Percentage/mean		Percentage/mean
Gender		**Household Registration**	
Male	38.4	Towns	54.7
Female	61.6	Rural	45.3
Age (weeks)	23.87 (6.65)	**Annual household income**	
Education level		< 30,000	13.2
Primary school and below	0	30-80,000	23.2
Lower Secondary	4.2	80,000-150,000	28.4
High school/junior college/technical school	6.3	150-300,000	22.6
		300,000 - 800,000	6.3
Specialties	12.1	800,000-2 million	5.3
Undergraduate	72.6	> 2 million	1.1
Master and above	4.7	**Marital status**	
Religious beliefs		Single	55.8
None	95.8	Love	25.3
Buddhism	2.1	Married	17.9
Christianity	1.1	Divorced	0.5
Islam	1.1	Remarriage	0.5

**Table 1 Basic demographic variables of survey respondents (N=190)**

Of the 190 total valid responses, 61.6% were female and 38.4% were male. The mean age was 23 years, with a standard deviation of 6.65, indicating that there was a wide range of ages among the respondents, which better reflects the attitudes of different age groups among young people towards fertility and the sense of meaningfulness of life, and facilitates the correlation analysis.

The proportion of urban and rural households is relatively close, with 45% of the former and 55% of the latter, so that the results obtained are not overly biased in favour of one side.

Due to the cultural environment in China, nearly 96% of respondents to the religious beliefs survey were non-believers, with 2.1% of respondents believing in Buddhism, 1.1% in Christianity and 1.1% in Islam.

Marital status is one of the more important influences on fertility intentions and the sense of meaning in life. Due to the age limit of young people, nearly 60% of respondents are single, 25.3% are in a relationship and only 18.9% have ever been married (including married, divorced and remarriage).
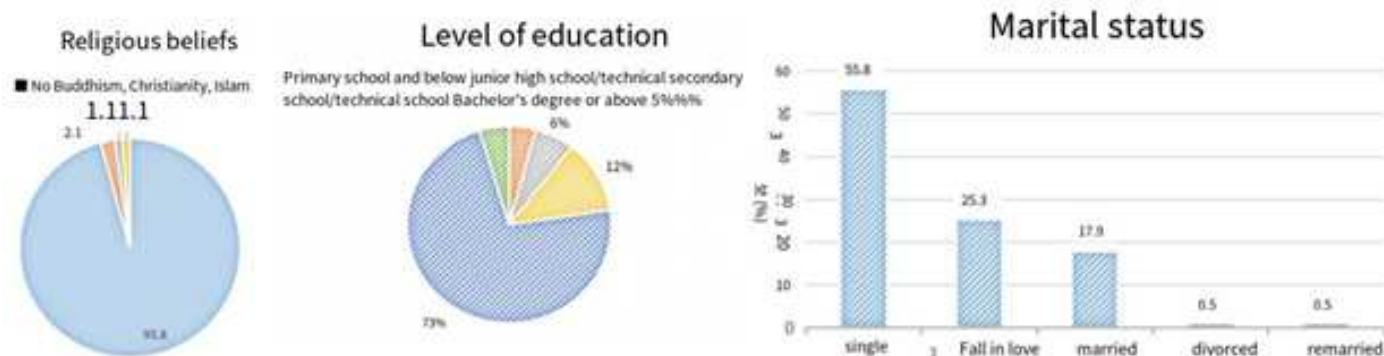
1.2. Fertility-related variables

In the survey on fertility status, 83.7% of the respondents were unmarried, and nearly 75% of the age distribution (Figure 7) was younger than 26 (the average age of marriage in China in 2022), indicating that there is a high overlap between unmarried respondents and those in the lower age groups, and that the fertility intentions of this group greatly affect the future population growth rate in China, so it is important to pay more attention to the fertility intentions of this group. Therefore, it is important to pay more attention to the fertility intentions of this group.

As for the gender preference of the child, close to 70% of the respondents had no particular preference, while 13% preferred boys and 19.5% preferred girls. It can be seen that the feudal ideology of preference for sons is gradually disappearing, giving women more freedom and choice in childbirth. Therefore, if we want to increase the birth rate, it is more important to pay attention to the fertility wishes of individuals

Nearly 60% of the respondents chose to be the main carer of their children, either by themselves or by their spouse, showing that more and more young parents are no longer leaving the care of their children to their parents, but seeing it as part of their responsibility. However, the time and energy spent on children will inevitably lead to a reduction in personal work and time available, so it is even more important to pay attention to the subjective and objective needs of respondents in order to avoid a reduction in their desire to have children.

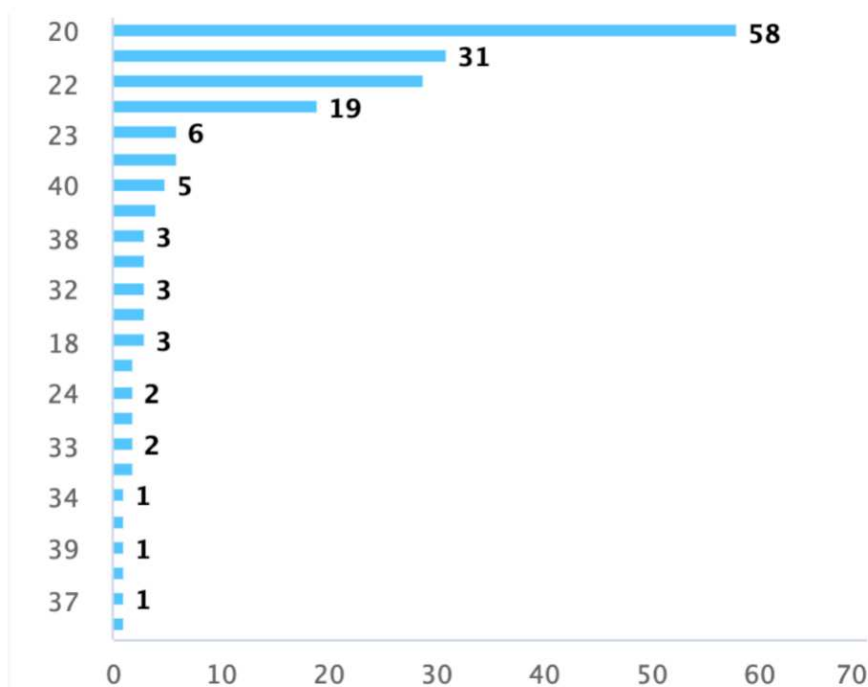**Figure Age distribution bar chart**

	Number of people	Percentage (%)
Fertility status		
Unreproductive	159	83.7
One child born	23	12.1
Have two children	5	2.6
Have three or more children	3	1.6

Child's gender orientation		
Male	23	12.1
Female	37	19.5
Doesn't matter	130	68.4
The child is primarily responsible for caring for the person		
Singles	67	35.3
Spouse	44	23.2
Both parents	61	32.1
Other personnel such as childcare workers	18	19

Table 2 Basic information on fertility-related variables among survey respondents (N=190)

1.3. Fertility intentions

We categorised fertility intentions into five levels from low to high, assigning each a score of 1-5, and obtained a mean score of 2.73, indicating that the average subjective fertility intention was relatively weak or fair, with less than 20% of respondents having a relatively or very strong desire to have children.

However, more than 50% of respondents want to have two or more children, indicating that the majority of young people still desire to have children, but are reluctant to do so because they are unable to meet their subjective needs due to realistic objective conditions and social pressures.

	Mean value/percentage (%)
Subjective desire to have children	2.73 (1.06)
Desired number of births	1.44 (0.75)
0 pcs	12.6
1pc	33.2
2	51.6
3 or more	2.6

Table 3 Fertility intentions of survey respondents (N=190)

1.4. The meaning in life

In terms of the dimensions of meaningfulness, the mean values for both experience and seeking exceeded the 4-point scale set in the table, at 4.85 and 5.21 respectively, with standard deviations of 1.12 and 1.18, indicating that the range of fluctuation is small and that respondents have a clear sense of meaningfulness in life. Seeking more than experience indicates that respondents are actively exploring the meaning of their lives and have good ideals, but in reality they are unable to experience it in a practical way due to constraints.

In terms of the dimensions of personal sense of meaning, life beliefs and self-acceptance in the cognitive dimension of meaning and interpersonal and intimate relationships in the affective dimension of meaning are both higher than the mean value of 5.22, indicating that contemporary youth have deeper feelings in both the cognitive and affective dimensions, while the sense of achievement and self-transcendence in the motivational dimension of meaning are slightly lacking.

	Means (standard deviation)
A sense of the meaning of life	**5.03 (0.98)**
Meaning of Life Experience	4.85 (1.12)
The search for the meaning of life	5.21 (1.18)
A sense of personal significance	**5.22 (1.17)**
Meaningful Motivation Dimension	4.95 (1.29)
Sense of accomplishment	5.03 (1.30)
Self-transcendence	4.87 (1.43)
Meaningful perception dimension	5.26 (1.30)
Life beliefs	5.37 (1.44)
Self-acceptance	5.31 (1.33)
Sense of fairness	5.08 (1.44)
Meaningful emotional dimension	5.41 (1.16)
Interpersonal relations	5.50 (1.21)
Intimacy	5.31 (1.20)

Table 4 Survey respondents' sense of meaning in life and sources of meaning in life (N=190)

2. Correlation analysis

Subjective fertility intentions are significantly correlated with gender and age, with women scoring higher than men in subjective fertility intentions, and subjective fertility intentions increasing with age; there is also a significant correlation between current emotional and fertility status and subjective fertility intentions.

In the relationship between life meaning and fertility intentions, the dimension of life meaning experience is positively correlated, which means that the stronger the life experience the stronger the fertility intentions, but life meaning seeking is not significantly correlated with fertility intentions. In terms of sources of meaning, both the motivation and cognitive dimensions are positively correlated with subjective fertility intentions, but the affective dimension is not significantly correlated with fertility intentions.

The number of children expected is significantly correlated with gender, with men expecting a higher number of children than women.

In the relationship between life meaning and desired number of children, the dimension of life meaning experience is positively correlated, meaning that the stronger the life experience the greater the desired number of children, but life meaning seeking is not significantly correlated with desired number of children. In terms of the source of life meaning, the meaning perception dimension is positively correlated with the number of desired births, but the meaning motivation dimension is insignificantly correlated with the number of desired births.

Table 5 Results of correlation analysis

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Gender	-											
2. Age	.036	-										
3. Emotional status	.082	.722**	-									
4. Fertility status	.117	.755**	.720**	-								
5. Meaning of Life Experience	-.031	.180*	.101	.158*	-							
6. The search for meaning in life	-.032	.037	.057	-.010	.457**	-						
7. A sense of the meaning of life	-.037	.125	.092	.084	.845**	.861**	-					
8. Meaningful Motivation Dimension	-.076	.115	.107	.078	.635**	.613**	.730**	-				
9. Meaning perception dimension	-.090	.211**	.169*	.160*	.600**	.601**	.704**	.881**	-			
10. The emotional dimension of meaning	.039	. 095	. 144*	. 108	.531**	.580**	.652**	.757**	.785**	-		
11. sense of personal meaning	-.052	. 158*	. 152*	. 129	.628**	.643**	.745**	.937**	.962**	.897**	-	
12. Subjective desire to have children	-.292**	.266**	.199**	.152*	.212**	.109	.187**	.255**	.258**	.102	.222**	-
13. Desired number of births	-.214**	.122	. 083	. 068	. 163*	.098	. 152*	.133	.174*	.082	. 142	.485**

Note: ** indicates correlation significant <0.01, * indicates correlation significant <0.05

3. Analysis of factors influencing fertility intentions

3.1. Analysis of the factors influencing subjective fertility intentions

Table 6 reports the effect of life meaning on subjective fertility intentions. Models 1 and 2 are baseline regression models that examine the sense of meaning in life and the source of meaning in life, respectively. Models 3 and 4 are regression results based on Models 1 and 2 with the addition of variables such as demographic and marital characteristics. The results show that the higher the experience of meaning in life, the higher the source of the motivational dimension of meaning in life and the higher the intensity of subjective fertility intentions. The regression analysis demonstrated a significant effect of meaningful life experience and meaningful life motivation dimension on subjective fertility intentions after excluding control variables such as demographic and marital status.

Table 6 Results of regression analysis of the effect of meaning of life on subjective fertility intentions

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Meaning of Life Experience	0.205*(2.552)		0.158*(2.061)	
The search for the meaning of life	0.015 (0.192)		0.012 (0.156)	
Meaningful Motivation Dimension		0.211 (1.397)		0.254*(1.764)
Meaningful Perception Dimension		0.305*(1.918)		0.109 (0.698)
Meaningful emotional dimension		-0.296*(-2.578)		-0.192 (-1.715)
Gender			-0.292** (-4.341)	-0.262** (-3.878)
Age			0.255*(2.289)	0.235*(2.104)
Marital status			0.092 (0.879)	0.085 (0.819)
Fertility status			-0.098 (-0.876)	-0.072 (-0.662)
F	4.418*	7.055**	7.218**	7.258**

Note: ** indicates correlation significant <0.01, * indicates correlation significant <0.05

3.2. Analysis of the factors influencing the number of desired births

Table 7 reports the effect of life meaning on the number of desired births. Models 1 and 2 are baseline regression models that examine the sense of meaning in life and the source of meaning in life, respectively. Models 3 and 4 are regression results based on models 1 and 2 with the addition of variables such as demographic and marital characteristics. The results show that the higher the experience of meaning in life, the higher the source of the motivational dimension of meaning in life and the higher the number of desired births. The regression analysis demonstrated that after excluding control variables such as demographic and marital status, the meaningful life experience and meaningful life motivation dimensions had a significant effect on the number of desired births.

Table 7 Results of regression analysis of the effect of meaning of life on desired number of births

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Meaning of Life Experience	0.150*(1.853)		0.127 (1.556)	
The search for the meaning of life	0.029 (0.358)		0.027 (0.334)	
Meaningful Motivation Dimension		-0.053 (-0.342)		-0.043 (-0.279)
Meaningful perception dimension		0.326*(1.979)		0.224 (1.323)
Meaningful emotional dimension		-0.133 (-1.120)		-0.063 (-0.523)
Gender			-0.213** (-2.968)	-0.198** (-2.702)
Age			0.106 (0.895)	0.092 (0.759)
Marital status			0.029 (0.259)	0.023 (0.205)
Fertility status			-0.028 (-0.234)	-0.020 (-0.172)
F	2.632	2.494	2.742*	2.331*

Note: ** indicates correlation significant <0.01, * indicates correlation significant <0.05

IV. Conclusions and Recommendations

1. Conclusions

In general, the higher the experience of meaning in life, the higher the source of the motivational dimension of meaning in life, the stronger the subjective desire to have children and the higher the desired number of children.

Marital status is an important factor influencing fertility intentions and the sense of meaningfulness of life, with a high degree of overlap between unmarried respondents and those in the lower age groups, and the fertility intentions of this group greatly influencing the future growth rate of China's population. Most young people still have a strong desire to have children, but are reluctant to do so because they are unable to meet their subjective needs due to objective constraints such as time, energy and money. Therefore, it is more important to pay

attention to the subjective and objective needs of young people in order to avoid a decrease in their willingness to have children.

2. Recommendations

2.1. Respondents have a clear sense of the meaning of life. Contemporary young people have deeper feelings in the cognitive and affective dimensions, while the motivational dimensions of meaning are somewhat lacking in the areas of achievement and self-transcendence.

2.2. The State should continue to strengthen family building and promote a "family" culture. At present, many young people place too much emphasis on individualism due to a variety of factors, and more emphasis should be placed on family values and encouraging family responsibilities in order to gradually change attitudes.

2.3. Launching the construction of a new culture of marriage and childbirth. In the recently published "Highlights of the Work of the China Family Planning Association in 2022", it is proposed that the focus should be on "respecting the social value of childbirth, advocating marriage and childbirth at the right age, giving birth to children in a good way, encouraging couples to share responsibility for childcare, and breaking stereotypical practices such as high bride price", strengthening the guidance of young people's views on marriage and family, reshaping the culture of raising a family with many children In addition.

2.4. Gradually change young people's attitudes towards marriage and childbirth and strengthen family responsibilities and concepts. In addition to the "symptomatic" methods of fertility subsidies and job security, it is also necessary to "address the root causes" - gradually changing the views of marriage, fertility and family among those who are fit to have children, and creating a favourable cultural environment for fertility.

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