

Obstacle or Reservoir: The Influence of Overwork on Marriage and Childbearing Behavior and its Mechanism

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With the wave of marketization in China over the past 40 years, China's economic development has entered a period of transition. However, as market-oriented reforms continue to deepen and global competition becomes more intense, overtime has become the “new normal” for contemporary workers. According to the China Labor Statistics Yearbook 2022, the average weekly working hours of China's urban employees in 2021 was 47.9 hours, far exceeding the average weekly working hours of other countries. Excessive labor has spawned a series of social problems while promoting continuous economic development. According to data from the National Bureau of Statistics and the Ministry of Civil Affairs, China's marriage rate will be 5.8 percent in 2020, and the average age of first marriage will be delayed from 22-24 years old in 1990 to 27-29 years old in 2020. The age of first childbearing has been significantly delayed and the fertility level has been decreasing, with the total fertility rate of women of childbearing age being only 1.3. As overtime labor has become more and more common among workers in China in recent years, under the condition that individuals have limited time and energy, the impact of the time squeeze caused by overtime labor may spill over to the marriages and families, and have an impact on the marriage and childbearing behaviors of the individuals. Does overwork affect marital and childbearing behavior? And how does it do so? In the context of the normalization of overwork, it is of great significance to explore the impact of overwork on individual marriage and childbearing behaviors, and on the basis of this, to explore the mechanisms involved in order to help the government formulate the corresponding population policy.

As an unavoidable problem in the process of economic development, overwork has received extensive attention from scholars since the early stages of capitalist development, with early theories focusing on the physical and psychological problems

caused by overwork. With the establishment of the market economy and the intensification of global competition, the impact of overwork on individual marriage and childbearing behaviors and the way it affects them have gradually become the focus of attention in the theoretical and policy circles against the backdrop of intensifying competition and rising work pressure among workers. How does overwork affect marriage and childbearing behavior? The crowding out effect of overwork on marriage and childbearing time is one of the most crucial factors. Work-family conflict theory points out that work-family conflict has three conflict structures: time-based conflict, stress-based conflict and behavior-based conflict. Among these, time-based conflict refers to the fact that investing time in meeting demands in one area consumes time invested in other areas and can be physically or psychologically occupied. According to the classical labor supply theory and time allocation theory, each person's time is fixed and can be divided into labor time and leisure time, and overwork will inevitably “squeeze out” leisure time (Gary Becker, 1998). Therefore, excessive labor may compress the life time of the youth group, which in turn affects the marriage and childbearing behavior of the youth group.

On the other hand, excessive labor may exert a reservoir effect of marital capital. Because of the marriage payment system consisting of bride price, dowry, banquet, etc. that exists for entering marriage in China, as well as the costs of childbearing and raising children, there is a certain capital threshold for the occurrence of marital and childbearing behaviors. On the one hand, excessive labor accumulates capital for marriage and childbearing by increasing income and reducing living expenses. The concept of work greed put forward by Nobel Prize winner Golding also points out that employees who are on call 24/7 in the workplace will receive higher wages than those who are only willing to work regularly from 9 to 5. Moreover, the rewards of job greed are non-linear, as an employee who is willing to work twice as many hours as another employee will be rewarded more than twice as much. Not only that, but those who are willing to work more overtime are also rewarded with more opportunities for advancement and thus more room for growth. Therefore, when living expenses are

certain, the degree of accumulation of marital capital is higher for the overworked group. On the other hand, overworkers may have reduced their living expenses and thus accumulated marital capital by squeezing out their leisure consumption time. It has been pointed out that leisure time has a positive effect on urban residents' material consumption, and increasing urban residents' leisure time can stimulate consumption more directly, while excessive working hours will inevitably lead to the extrusion of leisure time, reducing individual living expenses and thus accumulating capital for marriage and childbearing. According to Becker's theory of family economics, children are regarded as a kind of unique consumer durables in the family, and their reproductive decisions are closely related to the related costs and utilities. This is also true at the marriage level, where the current high cost of marriage is the main reason for the low marriage rate. Thus, given a certain level of living expenses, a decrease in capital accumulation delays the onset of marriage and childbearing behavior.

Based on the data of six periods of CFPS 2010-2020, this study examines the impact of overwork on marriage and childbearing behavior and its influence mechanism, and obtains the following main research conclusions: firstly, there is a significant negative impact of overwork on the age of the first marriage and the age of the first childbearing, and there is a significant positive impact on the interval of two children, and there is no significant impact on the interval of one child. Second, the marital capital reservoir effect of overwork is one of the important mechanisms of the influence of overwork on age at first marriage and age at first childbearing. Third, the time crowding-out effect of excessive labor is one of the important mechanisms of the influence of excessive labor on the interval of two children.

Excessive labor shows a negative effect on age at marriage and childbearing and verifies the marital capital reservoir effect in it. This is inextricably linked to China's universal marriage and childbearing context, where the age at marriage and childbearing has increased, but the proportion of lifelong childlessness is still low, and the majority of the uninitiated group still has the will to marry and have children. Thus the effect of overwork on the age of marriage and childbearing in the Chinese

cohort exhibits more of a reservoir effect of marriage and childbearing capital than a time crowding out effect. In this study, excessive labor has no significant effect on one-child spacing, but has a significant positive effect on two-child spacing, and verifies the time crowding out effect of excessive labor. This has a strong relationship with the traditional Chinese fertility culture, which emphasizes the transmission of generations, so the first child is a necessity. Compared with the first child, the incremental utility brought to the family by the second child may be long-term and implicit, and the birth cost of the second child is more immediate and outward. At the same time, due to biological characteristics, women are the main decision makers in childbearing. For women at different stages of their careers, having a second child may cause “depreciation” of their labor capital due to the inability to guarantee their work input, and they may be subjected to “gender discrimination” and “income punishment” in the job market, and encounter job promotion. “They may also be subject to gender discrimination and income penalties in the job market, encounter bottlenecks in job promotion, or even face career interruptions and difficulties in re-entering the workforce, which will inevitably cause them to incorporate more considerations of career development and role balance into their decision-making process regarding the birth of a second child.