

The evolution of son preference among rural-urban migrants in China: A research based on social network theory

Extended abstract

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Background

A social network is a set of nodes (people, organizations or other social entities) connected by a set of relationships, such as friendship, affiliation or information exchange. A social network concerns the interactions and relations between individuals. Social interactions among network members have an impact on individuals' attitudes and behaviors. Studies show that son preference in traditional Chinese culture has been a fundamental cause of the high sex ratio at birth. Since the mid 1990s the number of rural-urban migrants has increased dramatically, and to some extent, strong son preference among the rural-urban migrants results in a high sex ratio at birth in urban areas. It is known that son preference is stronger among the rural population than among the urban population in China. According to acculturation theory, son preference among the rural-urban migrants will change during the process of reconstruction of the social network after migration. It is inevitable that the evolution of the son preference among the rural-urban migrants will exert an influence on the sex ratio at birth in urban areas. It is important to analyze the characteristics of the childbearing discussion network and to study the evolution of the son preference among the rural-urban migrants using the social network theory. This may lead to alleviation of the dangerously high sex ratio at birth in contemporary urban China.

Objectives

Although some studies have indicated that migrants' attitudes change after migration, to date there have been few empirical studies on the evolution of the attitude towards

childbearing using data from surveys of migrants. Using data from a survey of temporary immigrants in Shenzhen, this paper uses social network theory to study the evolution of son preference among rural-urban migrants during the process of the non-institutionalized integration. First, the paper analyzes the characteristics of the rural-urban migrants' childbearing discussion network, such as network size, structure of relations, frequency of contacts, diversity and son preference of the network members. Second, the paper studies the evolution of son preference among rural-urban migrants after migration. Finally, logistic regression models are used to analyze the effects of social network, social integration, migration and individual factors on the evolution of son preference among the rural-urban migrants. The paper provides policy suggestions to reduce son preference and lower the high sex ratio at birth in urban China.

Data and methods

Data

Data used in this study come from the survey of temporary immigrants in Shenzhen conducted by the Institute for Population and Development Studies at Xi'an Jiaotong University in April 2005. The survey aims to examine the evolution of attitudes and behaviors among rural-urban migrants. The total population in Shenzhen is 7,008,800 and the ratio of migrants to permanent urban residents is 4.3:1. Shenzhen is one of the cities where the proportion of rural-urban migrants is relatively high. The survey was conducted from 20th to 28th of April. The respondents were rural-urban migrants above 15 years old, divided into two categories, scattered and concentrated residents. Scattered respondents were selected using stratified simple random sampling in four townships of Luohu, Yantian, and Nanshan districts, and the concentrated respondents were selected by cluster sampling in Nanshan, Longgang and Bao'an districts.

The number of satisfactory responses is 1,739. The average age was 31, 51 percent of them are men, 67 percent were aged younger than 35, and 68 percent were

ever-married. The average stay in the city was 6.78 years, and about 50 percent have resided in the city for more than 5 years.

Methods

Our analysis is divided into three parts. The first analyzes the characteristics of the rural-urban migrants' childbearing discussion network, such as network size, structure of relations, frequency of contacts, diversity, and son preference of the network members. The second concerns the evolution of son preference after migration; the difference in son preference before and after migration is examined by likelihood ratio test. The third employs logistic regression models to explore the impacts of social network and social integration factors on the evolution of son preference among the rural-urban migrants, where migration and individual factors are also considered. The dependent variable is whether a rural-urban migrant has son preference at present. The independent variables in the models are social network factors, including the network size, structure of relations, and frequency of contacts with network members in the childbearing network. Social integration factors include residential environment, the extent of social discrimination and the extent of local language use. Migration factor is expressed as years of living in the urban areas. Individual factors include gender, age, education and marriage status et al.

Results and conclusions

The characteristics of the childbearing discussion network The average size of childbearing discussion network is 1.43. 57 percent of respondents have one network member, while only 2 percent of them have 5 network members. Thus the size of the network is relatively small. Most network members are non-Shenzhenese; that is, rural-urban migrants seldom associated with permanent urban residents. The network members of male and female respondents show a remarkable difference by sex, and individuals tend to discuss childbearing topics with persons of the same sex.

Relationships between respondents and their network members are mainly strong ties,

such as blood and geographical relations. Most of the respondents contact their network members daily. The number of never-married network members is much greater than that of ever-married members. Education of network members is mainly to junior middle school. Son preference among the network members is relatively weak.

The evolution of son preference among rural-urban migrants After migration, the attitude towards childbearing has changed, and son preference among rural-urban migrants is weaker.

The determinants of son preference evolution among rural-urban migrants. After migration, social network factors, social integration factors, migration and individual factors have effects on the evolution of son preference among the rural-urban migrants. The larger the size of the childbearing discussion network, the weaker is the son preference. Migrants living in urban areas without being discriminated against by permanent urban residents will have weaker son preference than those who ever been discriminated. The longer the time of living in urban areas, the weaker is the son preference among rural-urban migrants. Gender, age, and education also have significant effects on the son preference among rural-urban migrants.

In conclusion, the results of our analysis reveal that rural-urban migrants' social networks are reconstructed after migration, and the average size of their childbearing discussion network is small. Blood and geographical relations are still their main social connections. After migration, the rural-urban migrants' attitudes towards childbearing have changed, and their son preference becomes weaker. Social network, social integration, migration and individual factors have effects on the evolution of son preference among the rural-urban migrants. Promoting the social integration between urban and rural areas and thereby weakening son preference among rural-urban migrants is an effective way to lower the sex ratio at birth in urban and rural areas.