

THE SILENT SALIENCE OF CLASS BIAS: PRONATALIST ECONOMIC INCENTIVES AND CHILDBEARING DECISIONS IN SINGAPORE

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Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between pronatalist population policy and individual childbearing decision making in the case of postindustrial, multiethnic Singapore. Fertility rates first fell below the replacement level in 1977; and since the 1980s, the Singapore government has adopted monetary and non-monetary incentives to encourage the local population to give birth to more children. However, the drop in fertility rates has continued, reaching 1.29 per resident female of childbearing age in 2007. To understand the gap between the aim of government pronatalist policies and the persistence of low fertility, I administered semi-structured interviews with 165 women, and conducted 37 focus-group interviews with their peers, parents, and spouses or prospective spouses.

Findings include the following: First, the recurring observation among parents and prospective parents is that Singapore is an expensive place in which to raise children. This is the larger context within which people contemplate whether government policies are effective in influencing them to have more children. Second, there is a lack of knowledge about the details of the “baby bonus” scheme—a policy geared toward economic support for having a child, particularly among lower-income citizens. Finally, interviewees point to a class bias in the implementation of economic incentives: The poor cannot contribute as much as the rich, so the requirement of matching funds (in contrast to universal child and family allowance) increases the capacity of the well-to-do or the middle class to have children. Implications for the economic approach to fertility are highlighted.