

How Does the New Rural Social Pension Insurance Affect Family-Based Elderly Care? A Literature Review Based on the Debate over Crowding-in and Crowding-out Effects

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Abstract

The deepening aging of the rural population and the weakening of the traditional family support function for older adults have attracted wide attention to the institutional effect of the New Rural Social Pension Insurance (NRPS). The core controversy over whether the NRPS generates a crowding-in effect or a crowding-out effect on family intergenerational support, the existing research has not reached a consensus. This article constructs a three-path theoretical framework of “income effect”, “pension substitution” and “intergenerational interaction”, and systematically sorts out the empirical evidence of more than 30 studies in the four fields of economic well-being, intergenerational support, production factor allocation and health outcomes. The study found that the NRPS has improved the economic situation and multi-dimensional welfare of the elderly through economic empowerment, institutional substitution and intergenerational interaction, but there are significant group and regional heterogeneity in its impact. On the core issue of intergenerational support, empirical evidence presents the coexistence of the crowding-in effect and the crowding-out effect. This article believes that the impact of the NRPS on family-based elderly care model is not one-way. Its net effect is conditional, depending on the specific situation such as family structure, support type and research methods. Future research can seek breakthroughs in the construction of interdisciplinary frameworks, the introduction of new data and new methods, and the expansion of cutting-edge issues such as psychological well-being and digital integration.

Keywords

new rural social pension insurance, family-based elderly care, intergenerational support, crowding-in effect, crowding-out effect.

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

The aging of China’s rural population continues to deepen, and the function of the traditional family-based elderly care model continues to weaken. As an institutional arrangement aimed at ensuring the basic old-age life of rural residents, the New Rural Social Pension Insurance (hereinafter referred to as “NRPS”) has become

an important part of the rural old-age security system since its pilot implementation [1, 2]. Focusing on the implementation effect of the NRPS, the existing research has formed a core debate: whether the NRPS produces a crowding-in effect or a crowding-out effect on family intergenerational support.

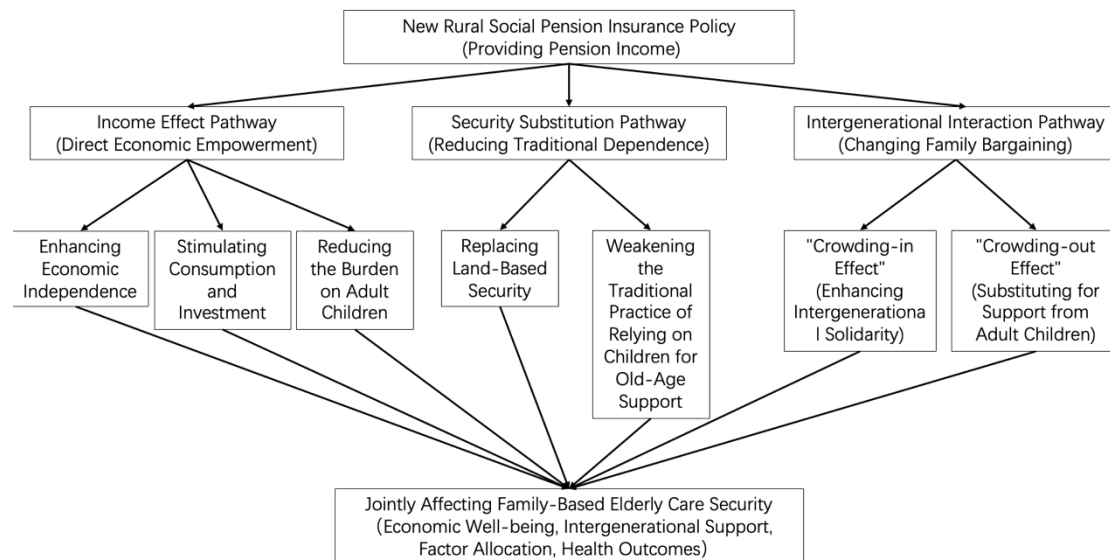
On the one hand, the income represented by the pension increases the economic autonomy of the elderly and reduces the need to support their children, so it is possible to replace intergenerational economic transfer in some way [3, 4]; However, pensions can be regarded as family public resources, which is conducive to the formation of intergenerational feedback in promoting intergenerational care or sharing family expenses, that is, the Crowding-in Effect [5, 6]. The resulting differences just show that the effects of NRPS are highly context-dependent. Its positive or negative effects should be judged according to the conditions of the pension, family structure and subsidy form.

Despite the rapid accumulation of literature, the existing reviews mostly focus on the induction of single-dimensional effects, and the systematic combing of the theoretical logic and situational conditions behind the controversy is not sufficient. In view of this, this article takes crowding-in effect and crowding-out effect as the main controversial points, puts forward three types of analysis paths of “income effect”, “pension substitution” and “intergenerational interaction”, summarizes, compares and comments on more than 30 important studies, promotes the interpretation of the relationship between the NRPS and the family-based elderly care model to gain a unified foothold, and rewrites the “direction dispute” mentioned by the previous research into a verifiable “condition identification” problem.

1.2 Theoretical Analytical Framework

The policy effect of the NRPS is mainly transmitted through three core paths that are interrelated but different from each other. Among them, the income effect path and the pension substitution path mainly point to the logic that pensions “replace” traditional pension resources, thus producing a crowding-out effect. The intergenerational interaction path accommodates both the possibility of a crowding-out effect and a crowding-in effect. The three paths together constitute an integrated analysis framework to explain the complex impact of the NRPS. Its core logic and transmission path are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Theoretical Mechanism Framework of the Impact of the New Rural Social Pension Insurance on Rural Family-Based Elderly Care



As shown in Figure 1, stable pension income is the starting point of the policy, which triggers three major mechanisms at the same time. The income effect path lays the material foundation for family-based elderly care and provides an economic premise for the emergence of the crowding-out effect by improving their own economic independence, releasing the consumption and investment potential at the family level, and reducing the direct maintenance burden of children. The security substitution pathway reduces the family's dependence

on the two traditional pillars of “land” and “children”, reduces the family’s pension risk expectations, provides institutional conditions for land flow and intergenerational resource restructuring, and constitutes the structural support of the crowding-out effect. The intergenerational interaction path is the most complex. Pension income changes the bargaining power and interaction mode within the family, which may produce both the crowding-in effect and the crowding-out effect, and the net effect depends on the specific family situation. These three paths are not isolated, but intertwined and work together, ultimately shaping the multi-dimensional final output of family endowment security in terms of economic well-being, intergenerational support, production factor allocation and health outcomes.

1.2.1 Income Effect Pathway

The income effect is the most basic mechanism of the NRPS. The NRPS provides fixed-term pension income for eligible rural elderly people, which essentially provides financial transfer payments to the elderly or their families, significantly increasing their disposable income [7]. This new income has a chain reaction through multiple channels.

First of all, it directly enhances the economic independence and personal well-being of the elderly. If the economy is relatively abundant, the elderly’s right to choose independently in basic life, health care, etc. will be enhanced, and they will no longer be completely dependent on children’s support, so that they can more actively influence the direction of decisions in the family [8].

Secondly, it effectively alleviates the liquidity constraints of families and stimulates productive and developmental investment. From the perspective of preventive savings, after the NRPS reduces the uncertainty of old-age care, consumption is likely to rise, especially development and enjoyment consumption [8]. What’s more noteworthy is that now disposable cash allows families who were short of money in the past to start various investments: either to buy capital for agriculture [9], or use part of the money to do relevant skills training to improve the quality of the workforce, that is, to improve the level of human capital [10].

Thirdly, it reconstructs the division of labor in the family by reducing the burden of child support. Children’s original obligation to contribute money to help their parents is now replaced by pensions, so their personal finances are less tight, and they can freely use resources for occupation, non-agricultural labor or various attempts for labor migration [11].

In general, from the perspective of income effect, the mechanism discussed is the idea that the elderly gain more economic freedom and the pressure of children is alleviated, that is, the phenomenon is explained by the crowding-out effect, but it does not exclude the possibility of crowding-in effect - when pensions are reconfigured as family-shared resources, it may also indirectly promote intergenerational cooperation.

1.2.2 Pension Substitution Pathway

The discussion on the alternative path is to compare the NRPS with the traditional informal old-age method represented by “land” and “children”, and points out the behavioral adjustment and resource allocation changes caused by it over a long period of time [12].

At the level of “land security”, the NRPS weakens older adults’ dependence on land-based old-age support. The stable income brought by the NRPS separates the two functions of production and security undertaken by the land, so that the elderly do not have to rely so much on land to maintain their lives, and do not have to use heavy labor to make a living. Therefore, it is easier to give up land cultivation and use less land resources, thus driving land circulation and promoting a wider range of business forms in agriculture [13].

At the level of support from adult children, the NRPS weakens the economic contract on which “relying on children for old-age support” is based to a certain extent, and does not fully maintain the exchange relationship between generations with the economy as a link. Parents’ dependence on their children’s economic support is reduced, and the flow of internal family resources can be rearranged [4].

The path of pension substitution provides a structural institutional basis for the occurrence of the crowding-out effect - pensions replace land and children as safeguards, the elderly can live more freely, and the dependence on intergenerational support within the family is correspondingly weakened.

1.2.3 Intergenerational Interaction Pathway

The analysis of intergenerational interaction should discuss the impact of pension income on the power, feelings and interaction of the family. According to this point of view, the impact discussed is not unilateral, but its complexity should be summarized by the crowding-in effect and the crowding-out effect. The conclusions obtained should be examined in combination with social reality and family details [6].

The “crowding-out effect” is mainly based on the exchange motivation of economics. The financial support of children can be regarded as a “payment” for providing services to their parents. The NRPS pension increases the non-working income of parents and reduces the “price” of financial support provided by children, resulting in a decrease in child transfer payments [3, 4].

However, China’s profound family ethics and altruistic tradition make the crowding-in effect equally common. First of all, we should consider whether the pension can be regarded as a “family sharing fund”. When parents use their income to supplement the daily needs of the family and do things such as intergenerational care, the benefits involved are holistic, which is more likely to promote the gratitude and reciprocity psychology of their children, so they repay them with feelings or money [5]. Secondly, the NRPS promotes intergenerational unity through the “time release effect”. It relieves the burden of the elderly to cultivate, so that families have more time to take care of each other, especially children. It is a rear guarantee for children to go out to work, and also encourages children to repay their parents by economic means [14].

The intergenerational interaction path accommodates the two opposite mechanisms of crowding-out effect and crowding-in effect. The so-called intergenerational interaction path takes into account the two opposing mechanisms of crowding-out effect and crowding-in effect, and its final effect should be judged according to how family resources are allocated and whether intergenerational reciprocity exists. In terms of inherent contradictions or undeterminedness, intergenerational interaction is the basic and core hub for examining the impact of the NRPS on family-based elderly care.

2. Progress in Empirical Research

Under the guidance of the theoretical framework, this part will thoroughly sort out the research progress of the NRPS in four key empirical areas, carefully present the rich experience findings, and identify the consensus and differences.

2.1 Research on Economic Well-being and Poverty Alleviation

From the current empirical research, it can be found that the positive effect of NRPS in promoting economic improvement or poverty reduction for the elderly in rural areas has been confirmed. However, the welfare improvement promoted by this policy is not a universally consistent phenomenon, but is combined with social and economic factors in a more complex way, with obvious group and regional heterogeneity.

From the perspective of income and consumption, the “open source” and “promoting consumption” of the NRPS are dual effects. Hong Li and Yin Kang [15] have pointed out that joining the NRPS is a driving factor for the elderly to increase their pension income significantly. Ma Jiujie et al. [9] analyzed that for middle-aged farmers who are not eligible for it at present, the NRPS will help alleviate the worries about future old-age care, and can also encourage agricultural investment in the current period, so that family income can grow in the long term. In the discussion on consumption, Li Yaqing and Cai Liqi [8] proposed that the NRPS not only raises the total amount of rural consumption, but also makes the consumption structure reasonable. The development or enjoyment consumption is much more than the survival consumption, that is, the policy has successfully lifted the consumption suppression, and the increased consumption is of positive significance to life and development.

At the level of poverty alleviation, the research perspective has expanded from income poverty to multidimensional poverty. After analyzing the FGT index, Lv Jie et al. [7] believe that the NRPS can better reduce the relative poverty, depth and intensity of poverty encountered by families. Ji Jiangming [16] established multi-dimensional relative poverty indicators on health, education level and living conditions, which also proved that the NRPS has obvious significance for alleviating the multi-dimensional poverty of the elderly in rural areas. Huang Juanjuan and Guo Chunna [17] thought about the problem according to the idea

of common prosperity, and gave an estimate of about 14% of the new agricultural basic pension to increase the income of low-income people, that is, the embodiment of its supporting role. Tang Zhidong et al. [18] pointed out that the alleviation of income inequality in the NRPS is generally promoted by pension receipt, and the contribution itself is not a key factor.

The heterogeneity of the effect is one of the most solid consensus in this field. As far as the NRPS is concerned, the economic benefits involved are more obvious in low-income households, families of female heads or elderly members, and in the eastern regions [7, 15, 17], which is not only a manifestation of the policy's ability to better meet the needs of the vulnerable, but also an explanation of the difference in the actual effect of the policy when the region is not completely balanced.

As far as the core controversy is concerned, the improvement of economic well-being is the prerequisite for understanding the subsequent controversy. It is associated with crowding-out effect in a way that the elderly have more money autonomy, and can also promote crowding-in effect through the overall increase of family resources. The question of which of the two effects is more important should be answered by examining the actual evolution of intergenerational support.

2.2 Research on Intergenerational Support and CARE Arrangements

This point is the most active and has the most differences in the research on the NRPS, and the empirical materials have clearly shown that the two effects of the crowding-in effect and the crowding-out effect exist at the same time.

The research on the crowding-in effect examines the NRPS as an element of “lubricant” and “catalyst” of family relations. According to Wang Xiaozeng et al. [6], after parents get the NRPS, the emotional connections held by adult children have increased significantly, and pensions may promote intergenerational emotional attachment. Dong Ying et al. [5] proposed the mechanism chain of “intergenerational overflow”: the NRPS pension makes the elderly more willing to take care of them from generation to generation, and the children give back more money in the form of compensation and gratitude. This chain intermediary phenomenon just explains why the introduction of social old-age care in most Chinese families did not weaken the intergenerational economic bond, but strengthened it. Lin Yuchan and Luo Mingzhong [19] extended this idea to intergenerational fertility, pointing out that the NRPS pension of the father's generation will increase the probability of childbirth in rural children by 34.2%. The mechanism lies in the improvement of family economic capacity and the alleviation of the healthy economic pressure of children. The pension support referred here applies to both the existing father-son relationship and the upbringing of the third generation. Guo Linke et al. [20] have made relevant analysis on “livelihood resilience”, and the results are exactly in line with the above view, that is, the NRPS enhances the overall ability of families to cope with risks by affecting expenditure on entertainment and health care consumption, which may include the contribution of intergenerational cooperation.

On the other hand, the research that supports the crowding-out effect adheres to the basic logic of economics. Yue Ximing and Fan Xiaohai [3] found that under the background that the current level of NRPS pension is still low, it still has a significant alternative effect on the economic transfer of children. Hao Chunhong et al. [4] further found that the NRPS may not only generate a crowding-out effect on intergenerational support, but also have a significant crowding-out effect on the labor supply of the elderly themselves. Guo Lin and Wang Feng [21] found from the perspective of fertility decision-making that parents' access to the NRPS will significantly inhibit children's fertility decision-making. The mechanism lies in the fact that the NRPS increases the participation of parents' intergenerational care, resulting in a relative reduction in the role of parents' sharing the cost of children's fertility.

In the face of seemingly contradictory evidence, the understanding of the academic community is deepening and integrating. Yang Ruilong et al. [14] have given a basic insight that the impact of the NRPS on various forms of intergenerational support is different - receiving pensions crowding-in children's help for economic purposes, but also crowding-out the time help (accompanying) given by children. It can be judged that when the parents have improved financially, children may arrange different types of supportive behaviors in an alternative way. The opposition result of Lin Yuchan and Luo Mingzhong [19] and Guo Lin and Wang Feng [21] is exactly in line with this judgment: The focus of the former is on how economic resources are passed on (crowding-in effect) between generations, and the focus of the latter is on the sharing of care time or cost

(crowding-out effect). These two mechanisms can coexist in the same family, and different studies draw different conclusions due to different mechanisms of focus.

2.3 Research on Production Factor Allocation

By changing the risk expectations and time allocation of families, the NRPS deeply affects its allocation decision-making on core production factors such as labor and land. Changes in the allocation of production factors can reflect the profound impact of pensions on family decision-making from the side, which is an important extension of evidence for understanding the crowding-out effect.

In terms of labor supply for the elderly, the research consensus has shifted from “whether to retire” to “how to adjust”. Given that the current pension level is not enough to support full retirement, the main effect of the NRPS is to lead to “labor restructuring” rather than “labor participation withdrawal”. The elderly will reduce the participation rate and working time of agricultural labor with high labor intensity and relatively low income, especially the reduction of land management area, but at the same time, they may increase the time investment in non-market activities such as family care and community activities [22]. Zhang Zhengyu and Cao Sili [23] introduced the concept of “policy benefit ratio” and further refined the findings: The NRPS has an inhibitory effect on the labor supply of low-labor supply groups, so that they can enjoy more leisure; However, for groups with high labor supply, it has a promoting effect by easing credit constraints and improving health status. Sun Linlin et al. [24] found that the NRPS has significantly improved the labor productivity and total factor productivity of elderly farmers. The path is to increase machinery input and health care expenditure, indicating that pensions have improved production efficiency through capital replacement labor.

In terms of adult children's behavior, the NRPS has significantly promoted the non-agriculturalization and migration of the labor force. Zhang Ye and Cheng Lingguo [11] revealed their mechanism: Parents' receive pensions, on the one hand, relieves the credit constraints of children and provides start-up funds for migration; On the other hand, parents can withdraw from high-intensity labor and have more time to take care of their grandchildren, which reduces the psychological burden and opportunity cost of child migration.

In terms of land resource allocation, some studies support the prediction of the alternative path, believing that the NRPS will reduce the dependence of farmers on land and promote land transfer [13]. Li Cuizhen and others [25] also confirmed that the NRPS can strengthen the role of aging in promoting the separation between rural households and agricultural land. However, Wang Shengsheng et al. [26] found the opposite evidence: the land rental rate of insured farmers decreased by an average of 2.4 percentage points. The mechanism is that pension income reduces the marginal utility discount rate of the family, making it more important to the long-term stability of self-run agriculture, thus reducing land lease. The impact of the NRPS on land transfer is not linear, but is regulated by multiple factors such as regional non-farm employment opportunities, farmers' risk preferences, and the emotional value of land [12].

2.4 Research on Medical Services and Health Outcomes

As a social policy, one of the ultimate goals of the NRPS is to improve people's livelihood and well-being, and health is its core dimension. Research has confirmed that the NRPS has played a positive role in promoting the health behavior and health outcomes among older adults through economic empowerment and psychological protection. Improvements in health outcomes may be achieved through the strengthening of intergenerational support, so evidence in this area can be an important supplement to the understanding of the crowding-in effect.

In terms of the utilization of medical services, the NRPS has significantly improved the probability of medical treatment and medical access for the elderly. Chen Feng and Yu Min [27] used a regression discontinuity design to find that receiving NRPS significantly improved the utilization of medical services for the elderly in rural areas, and the impact on the utilization of hospitalization services was much greater than that on outpatient services. The study also found that there is a synergistic effect between NRPS and intergenerational economic support in promoting the use of medical services, indicating that there is a complementary relationship between pension and intergenerational support. There is also a synergistic effect between the NRPS and the new rural cooperative medical treatment. Lv Jie et al. [7] pointed out that the pension income of the NRPS can reduce the occurrence of “poverty due to disease” together with the new agricultural cooperative, and the interactive effect of the two is better than that of a single insurance.

In terms of health outcomes, the research horizon has expanded from physical health to cognitive ability and mental health. After examining the connection between the NRPS and the cognitive ability of the elderly, Du Xingyan et al. [28] pointed out that participation in the NRPS is conducive to improving cognitive ability. Among them, the pension allows the elderly to have the resources and conditions to do more social or cultural things, so the transition from “economic support” to “cognitive health” is a feasible path. Zhang Yuyang and Chen Dong [29] used the “opportunity inequality” method to analyze the problem, believing that the NRPS has an effect on alleviating the inequality of opportunities for elderly health caused by urban and rural household registration. According to subjective feelings, Liu Guanghui and others [30] and Zhao Yifan and Zhou Jin’e [31] have both proved that the NRPS has significantly improved the happiness of the rural elderly according to the “wealth effect” and the “labor–leisure substitution effect”. The “livelihood resilience” proposed by Guo Linke et al. [20] is a systematic view of welfare, which includes health, and points out that recreational health care consumption can enable the NRPS to help elderly families overcome difficulties.

3. Research Review and Future Prospects

3.1 Consensus and Controversies in Existing Studies

After systematically combing the existing literature, it can be found that the academic community has reached significant consensus at multiple levels, but there are also some core controversies that need to be explored in depth.

In terms of consensus, studies generally confirm that the NRPS has significantly improved the economic welfare of the elderly in rural areas as a whole, and has a positive effect on alleviating income poverty and multi-dimensional poverty. At the same time, there is a profound heterogeneity in its impact, and the policy effect is more prominent in low-income families, female head families, the elderly and the central and western regions, which not only reflects the function of policy support, but also reveals the imbalance of regional development. In addition, the study generally agrees that the impact of the NRPS is multi-dimensional and multi-path. It is not only an economic policy, but also a social policy that deeply disturbs family decision-making and social relations [2].

In terms of disputes, the focus is mainly on three points. The first is the battle between the core mechanism, that is, the “income effect” and the “pension substitution effect” are more important in explaining family behavior (such as labor supply and land flow). Different studies have drawn different conclusions due to differences in samples and situations. The second is the struggle for intergenerational influence, that is, whether the NRPS has a crowding-in effect or crowding-out effect on intergenerational support. The coexistence of empirical evidence shows that its net effect is conditional and highly dependent on the bargaining power within the family, altruism and the complex game of exchange motivation. The third is the struggle for long-term effects. Most of the existing studies are based on medium- and short-term data. There is still a lack of time and strength to track and verify the continuous impact of policies on the subjective happiness, health trajectory, cognitive ability and other long-term well-being of the elderly.

Further examination of the above controversy can be found that the root cause lies mainly in three levels. First, the difference in research methods. The identification strategies adopted by different studies (such as difference-in-differences (DID), regression discontinuity design (RDD), and fixed-effects models) have different assumptions for causal inference, and there are also differences in sample composition for studies using different databases, which may lead to inconsistency in conclusions. Second, the difference in the types of intergenerational support. The impact of the NRPS on economic support, time support and emotional support may be differentiated. Studies have shown that pensions crowding-in children’s economic support, but at the same time crowding-out children’s time support [14]. Focusing on the study of different types of support, it is natural to draw seemingly contradictory conclusions. Third, the differences in family situations. Whether there is a need for intergenerational care and whether children go out to work may determine the direction of the net effect of the pension. This shows that the impact of the NRPS is inherently conditional, not one-way.

3.2 Limitations of Existing Research

Despite the fruitful results, there are still several obvious limitations in the existing research. First of all, there is indirectness in the mechanism test. The vast majority of studies are satisfied with establishing a

correlation between policy investment and the final result, but rarely go deep into the “black box” to directly measure the core intermediary variables that really drive behavioral changes, such as “old-age risk expectations” and “psychological sense of security”. Therefore, the argument of the causal chain is mechanical and weak. Secondly, the data base faces the challenge of timeliness. A large number of influential empirical studies in this field are based on survey data from 2018 and before. However, with the integration of NRPS and urban insurance and the continuous improvement of pension standards, the institutional environment has undergone profound changes, and the applicability of old data conclusions may be limited. Finally, the research perspective presents a single nature. Most of the existing literature focuses on the allocation efficiency of resources and time from the perspective of economics, while relatively ignoring the analysis of sociology, psychology and other dimensions, and insufficiently explores the social connotation of the non-economic level of the NRPS.

3.3 Directions for Future Research

Based on the above comments, future research can seek breakthroughs in the following three directions.

First, it is necessary to expand the theory. Economics should avoid being dominated by research alone, but should incorporate the discourse on the evolution of family and power in sociology, the happiness or behavior patterns proposed by psychology, and the reflection on the causes of a healthy society in public health to form a multidisciplinary analysis method.

Second, we should put forward new ideas on the method. The multi-period tracking data used should be sorted out relatively completely, and the quasi-experimental method can be appropriately improved. The relevant scale should be designed and used based on the credibility and validity, so as to directly analyze the basic concepts such as “risk perception” and “negotiation power” and carry out an investigation of the “black box”.

Third, the content should be expanded. It can explore the interaction mechanism between the NRPS and emerging service models such as “combination of medical care and nursing” and “mutual assistance for old-age care”; Pay more attention to the impact of policies on the management of chronic diseases, cognitive decline and depressive symptoms of the elderly; Examine the relationship between pension and the “digital divide” and social integration of the elderly; And put the NRPS under the strategy of “rural revitalization” and “common prosperity” to evaluate its long-term contribution to narrowing the welfare gap between urban and rural areas [32] and promoting inclusive growth.

4. Conclusion

This article systematically sorts out the empirical evidence of the impact of NRPS on family-based elderly care by building a three-path framework of “income effect”, “pension substitution” and “intergenerational interaction”. The study found that the field of intergenerational support presents a situation of crowding-in effect and crowding-out effect. The impact of the NRPS on family-based elderly care is not one-way, but conditional.

The conclusion itself has shown that if the NRPS generates a crowding-in effect or a crowding-out effect without considering the actual situation, such questions may not be answered directly. Instead of arguing about the direction, it is better to identify the conditions - for the support involved in various families, generations, and various studies, when is the crowding-in effect or crowding-out effect established respectively. Taking the “strife for direction” as the starting point and thinking with “condition identification”, it is probably a more suitable academic analysis method for the relationship between NRPS and family-based elderly care model.

Of course, this analytical framework itself also has limitations. At present, it basically starts from the perspective of economics, and the thinking about non-economic factors such as intergenerational emotions or dignity has not been sufficiently developed; At the same time, limited by the coverage of existing literature, the discussion on the long-term effect of the policy needs to be deepened after accumulating more evidence.

The above findings also have certain policy implications. The institutional optimization of the NRPS should pay attention to the diversity of family structure, and take into account the function of economic security and

the function of intergenerational relationship adjustment in the setting of the pension level, so as to avoid a simple “standard increase” and have an unexpected impact on the intergenerational relationship of families.

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Conflicts of Interest

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