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The impact of employment quality on fertility intention for additional children—from the dual perspectives of job stability and career development

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Abstract. To address the dilemma of low fertility rate and explore the mechanism of employment quality on the fertility intention for additional children of childbearing-age groups, this study conducts research based on 2,189 valid samples of non-agricultural employed married childbearing-age groups with children, using quantitative analysis combined with heterogeneity test and endogeneity treatment. The results show that career development serves as a crucial risk buffer for women's fertility intention for additional children; the number of existing children significantly inhibits fertility intention for additional children through the increasing marginal parenting cost; the positive driving effect of career development is more prominent in non-urban groups and middle managers; job stability exerts a certain negative impact on men's fertility intention for additional children. The study indicates that it is necessary to build a differentiated fertility support system centered on career development empowerment, gender rights protection, and multi-child cost sharing, so as to provide a reference for promoting the long-term balanced development of the population.

Keywords: employment quality, fertility intention for additional children, job stability, career development

1. Introduction

Since the gradual liberalization of fertility policies, China's fertility level has remained low. According to the data from the National Bureau of Statistics, China's birth population was only about 7.92 million in 2025, the birth rate dropped to 5.63%, the natural population growth rate has been negative for consecutive years, and the driving force for population growth has continued to weaken. Enhancing the fertility intention for additional children of childbearing-age groups has become a key measure to promote the long-term balanced development of the population. Meanwhile, the structure of the employment market has undergone profound adjustment. Youth employment pressure has increased significantly, and childbearing-age groups are facing higher opportunity costs and uncertainties when pursuing career development, sense of security and life stability. Employment quality has become a core variable affecting family fertility decisions.

Compared with existing studies, the marginal contributions of this study are mainly reflected in three aspects: first, breaking the limitation of single-factor analysis and presenting the differentiated demands of fertility decisions of different groups; second, deeply exploring the multi-dimensional heterogeneous effects of

employment quality, differences between urban and rural household registration groups, and the gender of existing children, highlighting the current fertility dilemma and demands of non-agricultural groups; third, accurately identifying non-agricultural childbearing-age groups to improve the pertinence of conclusions and policy reference value; meanwhile, addressing the reverse causality between employment quality and fertility intention using the instrumental variable method to enhance the reliability of causal inference of conclusions. This study provides empirical support for building a coordinated policy system of "employment security-fertility support" and promoting the transformation of fertility support policies from "universal" to "differentiated".

2. Literature review and theoretical analysis

2.1. Literature review

This paper sorts out existing studies from three aspects: influencing factors of fertility intention for additional children, the relationship between dual perspectives of employment quality and fertility intention for additional children, and the correlation between fertility intention and behavior, and clarifies their gaps.

2.1.1. Research on influencing factors of fertility intention for additional children

Fertility behavior occurs progressively, and individuals' past fertility experiences affect their fertility intention for additional children. Different from having the first child, there are significant differences in the intention for additional children [1, 2]. Existing studies hold that fertility intention for additional children is a complex decision comprehensively affected by multi-dimensional factors such as individual and family, socio-economy, ideology and culture. At the individual and family level, economic status is the core influencing factor; high income level [3, 4] and good family economic status can significantly improve fertility intention for additional children [4]; while housing expenditure [5] and parenting cost of children [6] are key obstacles inhibiting the intention. In family relations, marital quality [7] and childcare support such as intergenerational care [8] can effectively enhance fertility confidence and intention. At the ideological and cultural level, gender attitudes and gender preference of children have a significant impact; the stronger the concept of gender equality, the lower the fertility intention for additional children [3]; unmet desire for the number of children and son preference can stimulate positive fertility intention for additional children [9], and the status of existing children also restricts subsequent decisions [4].

2.1.2. Relationship between dual perspectives and fertility intention for additional children

"Job stability" and "career development" of employment quality are important considerations for childbearing-age groups in fertility decisions, but there are still gaps in the discussion of existing studies.

2.1.2.1. Research on job stability and fertility intention

Job stability is the core consideration for floating population and professional women in fertility decisions. The unstable employment of floating population caused by migration weakens the social security effect and triggers concerns about the impact of fertility on work, thereby inhibiting fertility intention for additional children [5]; professional women's concerns about fertility cost and career stability also negatively affect their fertility intention [10, 11]. Meanwhile, the impact of job stability has group heterogeneity: Tian Zhipeng [12] found that unemployed or unstable employment of family members has a positive impact on fertility intention of low-income and high-income families, but a negative impact on middle-income families, but this study does not consider the moderating effect of occupational hierarchy—the mechanism of job stability of groups at different occupational hierarchies on fertility intention for additional children may vary. In addition, rising housing prices indirectly reflect the positive role of occupational stability through channels such as increasing

the income of floating population and reducing unemployment risk [13], but this correlation has not been deeply analyzed in combination with the specific context of additional childbirth.

2.1.2.2. Research on career development and fertility intention

In existing studies, the crowding-out effect of career development on fertility intention is the mainstream view. Career development inhibits residents' fertility intention for additional children [4], especially for highly educated and high-skilled professional women, additional childbirth means career interruption, slowdown or no upward mobility, and such concerns significantly inhibit their intention [14]. The impact of career development also has significant gender differences: for men, career development is related to the growth of economic income and is regarded as the basis for fulfilling the "breadwinning" responsibility, which may positively promote fertility intention for additional children [3]; for women, career development and fertility are a zero-sum game, and fertility may lead to human capital depreciation, income decline and loss of promotion opportunities [11], namely "motherhood penalty". With the arrival of the second child, the contradiction of family care has intensified, women's psychological burden has increased, and fertility intention for additional children has been further weakened. However, existing studies have not solved the endogeneity problem between career development and fertility intention, and failed to distinguish whether "career development affects fertility intention" or "fertility intention drives individuals to choose specific occupations".

2.1.3. Research on the relationship between fertility intention and fertility behavior

In studies related to the prediction of fertility behavior, demographers often use the "intention-behavior" model [15], but unmet fertility desire will increase the uncertainty of intention [9]. The transformation of intention into behavior requires the cooperation of conditions such as economic resources and family support. Women's fertility intention for additional children also faces systemic obstacles such as age and physiological constraints, and shelving career development due to care pressure, which hinder the transformation of intention into behavior [14].

2.1.4. Literature review

Existing studies have formed rich achievements around the influencing factors of fertility intention for additional children and the correlation with employment quality, but there are still various gaps: first, insufficient analytical dimensions of employment quality: most existing studies focus on a single dimension of job stability or career development. For example, when Tian Zhipeng [12] explored the heterogeneity of job stability, he did not consider the moderating effect of occupational hierarchy, making it difficult to reveal the differences in the role of job stability under different occupational hierarchies; second, insufficient solution to endogeneity problems: Luo Wenjian and Lu Changjie [14] focused on the "crowding-out effect" of career development on women, but did not distinguish the causal direction of career development and fertility intention, and could not clarify whether career development affects fertility intention or fertility intention drives individuals to choose specific occupations; third, incomplete group analysis: most studies focus on women, with few discussions on men's fertility intention for additional children; moreover, the sample size of urban and rural areas is uneven in studies such as Yang Xiaolei and Zhong Ruyu [3], resulting in insufficient statistical test power of the rural group and limited reliability of conclusions; fourth, insufficient focus of research objects: most existing studies explore general fertility intention, and in the context of the three-child policy, specialized analysis on fertility intention for additional children of families with existing children still needs to be deepened. Based on this, this paper starts from the dual perspectives of job stability and career development, combines the moderation of occupational hierarchy, solves endogeneity problems, covers male and urban-rural groups, focuses on fertility intention for additional children of families with existing children, and fills the gaps of existing studies.

2.2. Theoretical mechanism

The decision-making model of fertility intention is usually divided into synchronous mode and sequential mode. The synchronous mode holds that fertility intention is determined before the first childbirth, while the sequential mode, based on economic utility theory, focuses on the dynamic cost-utility comparison of fertility, which is more in line with the actual characteristics that fertility intention for additional children adjusts with changes in family resources and the number of children. Therefore, this paper adopts the sequential mode for the analysis of fertility intention for additional children.

Hypothesis 1: The greater the number of existing children, the lower the fertility intention of childbearing-age groups for additional children.

From the perspective of family resource constraints, families with more children need to bear higher pressure of economic, time and emotional resources: on the one hand, according to Becker's [16] family economic theory, with economic development, family resources shift from quantitative demand to quality demand, and the parenting and education of existing children have occupied a large amount of resources, and additional childbirth will further dilute resource allocation; on the other hand, studies by Li Zilian [17] and Xu Le [18] both point out that income level is the core influencing factor of family fertility decisions, and multi-child families generally have weak fertility intention for additional children under the influence of insufficient resource input and economic uncertainty; the study by Kreynfeld M. [19] also verifies this feature—with the increase in the number of children, the family's marginal input in education, medical care and other aspects rises rapidly, making multi-child families face higher costs when making decisions on additional childbirth, and ultimately inhibiting the intention of new childbirth.

Hypothesis 2: The higher the level of career development, the stronger the fertility intention of childbearing-age groups for additional children, and this positive effect is stronger among women, middle managers and non-urban groups.

There is group heterogeneity in the fertility intention for additional children of individuals with different career development. Compared with low-level managers, middle managers have certain economic resources, and their income and career stability are sufficient to alleviate the direct cost constraints of fertility; compared with high-level managers, middle managers are in the stage of career advancement, and their development path is both extensible and predictable, with relatively low opportunity cost of fertility, so the positive effect of career development is the most prominent among middle managers; for women, studies by Zhang Xiaohong [20], Ou Xingzhi and Song Hui [21] show that the squeezed career development space of women will significantly trigger their anxiety about restricted career advancement caused by parenting; while the skill improvement and career autonomy brought by career development can enhance women's confidence in career return after childbirth, thereby hedging this anxiety and improving fertility intention for additional children; the improvement of career development level of non-urban groups will enhance their social mobility and improve their future income expectations more significantly [22], especially after shifting from flexible employment to formal employment, they are more capable of covering the economic cost of additional childbirth, so the increase in fertility intention for additional children is greater.

Hypothesis 3: After controlling boundary conditions such as family support and occupation type, job stability has a significant negative impact on men's fertility intention for additional children, but no significant impact on women.

According to Eagly's [23] social role theory, men assume the role of family economic support. The higher the job stability, the clearer the career promotion path and the higher the income accumulated from work. The time input and career interruption risk brought by fertility will significantly increase the career opportunity cost, thereby inhibiting their fertility intention for additional children; women's fertility decisions are often

affected by multiple factors such as their own conditions (e.g., education level, household registration, only-child status), work-family concerns and social status cognition [10]. The social security, maternity leave and other guarantees brought by job stability will be offset by these complex factors, so job stability has no significant impact on women's fertility intention for additional children.

3. Research design

3.1. Data source

The research data comes from the Chinese Social Survey (CSS) 2021. This study limits the analysis objects to married childbearing-age (20-49 years old) people with non-agricultural jobs and existing children. After cleaning samples with missing relevant variables, a final sample size of 2,790 is obtained.

3.2. Variable setting

3.2.1. Dependent variable

Fertility intention for additional children refers to whether one wishes to have additional children on the basis of existing children. This study measures the fertility intention for additional children of female respondents by subtracting the number of existing children from the ideal number of children. Two operationalization treatments are conducted on the fertility intention variable. The first is dichotomous treatment, that is, samples with a value greater than 0 are assigned 1, indicating "having fertility intention for additional children"; otherwise, assigned 0, indicating "having no fertility intention for additional children". The second is to assign values of 1 to 3 as count variables for samples with a value greater than 0 according to actual results, and 0 otherwise, which is mainly used for robustness test.

3.2.2. Independent variables

Job stability and career development are important measurement indicators of employment quality. Stable employment not only enhances the family's risk resistance ability, but also improves life satisfaction and economic confidence in fertility decisions, forming a positive incentive for fertility intention [24]; career development is not only related to personal ability, but also requires a favorable environment and system [25].

3.2.2.1. Job stability

This study selects "whether to sign a contract" as the core independent variable of job stability, and takes unit type as the robustness test. Based on the four-dimensional evaluation system of previous employment times, average service life, contract signing and unit attribute established by Mo Weiqiao et al. [26], the question "What kind of written contract do you currently sign with your employer or employer" in the questionnaire is taken as the measurement standard of job stability. Those who do not sign a contract are assigned 0 as unstable, and other valid signing cases are assigned 1 as stable. Meanwhile, unit types (state-owned, private, foreign-funded, no unit) are taken as robustness test.

3.2.2.2. Career development

This study measures career development status from the objective dimension of career development by selecting whether to hold a management position. For the specific treatment of career development variables, the question "What is your management activity in your current unit" in the questionnaire is processed into an ordered categorical variable management1: 1 = ordinary staff, 2 = low-level management position, 3 = middle-level management position, 4 = high-level management position. Considering that the impact of career development on fertility intention may have hierarchical heterogeneity, this study conducts two-stage treatment. First, overall effect test: management1 is included as an ordered variable in the ordered Logit

model. Second, management1 is further converted into dummy variables, with "ordinary staff" as the reference group, three dummy variables of "low-level management position", "middle-level management position" and "high-level management position" are generated to test the independent effects of different levels respectively.

3.2.2.3. Control variables

This paper draws on the treatment method of Zhang Xiaoqian [27] to select gender, age, number of existing children, years of education, household registration type, only-child status, nature of work, log of personal annual income, log of family annual income, and number of real estates under the couple's names as control variables. Among them, since most women in the sample have 1 existing child, this study processes the number of existing children into a binary variable (1 child = 0, 2 or more children = 1). Years of education are converted from education level (no schooling = 0; primary school = 6; junior high school = 9; senior high school/technical secondary school = 12; junior college = 15; undergraduate = 16; postgraduate and above = 19). The log of personal and family annual income is obtained by adding 1 to the personal wage or labor income (yuan) and total family income of last year and then taking the logarithm. The number of real estates measures the real estates under the names of both husband and wife. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistical results of main variables.

3.3. Analysis method

Centering on the dependent variable of fertility intention for additional children of non-agricultural childbearing-age groups, this study adopts the ordered Logit regression model as the baseline analysis method, conducts stepwise regression with forward stepwise inclusion of variables, and gradually introduces core independent variables and control variables through 11 progressive models. The 11 models are constructed step by step following the hierarchical logic of "core independent variables first, control variables later; basic characteristics first, economic characteristics later". Step 1: Only a single core independent variable is included to test the baseline effect (Model 1). Step 2: All core independent variables are included to test the combined effect of employment characteristics (Model 2). Step 3: Individual basic control variables are included, including gender, age, number of existing children, years of education, household registration type and only-child status, to strip the confounding effect of demographic characteristics (Model 3-Model 8). Step 4: Economic control variables are included, including personal income, family income and number of real estates, to build the full-variable final model (Model 9-Model 11). The full-variable final model is shown in Formula (1).

$$y\_bin = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \times WS + \beta_2 \times management1 + \beta_3 \times gender + \beta_4 \times current\_child + \beta_6 \times edu + \beta_7 \times hukou + \beta_8 \times only\_child + \beta_9 \times ln\_income\_p + \beta_{10} \times ln\_income\_h + \beta_{11} \times house\_num + \varepsilon \quad (1)$$

3.4. Endogeneity problem

Job stability and career development may have endogeneity problems with fertility intention for additional children, mainly stemming from reverse causality. Childbearing-age groups with strong fertility intention for additional children may take the initiative to choose jobs with higher job stability and better career development prospects. This study adopts the Instrumental Variable (IV) method for causal identification, and selects two types of macro-level instrumental variables that meet the requirements of correlation and exogeneity.

3.4.1. Instrumental variable for career development

Regional-industrial proportion of middle managers (iv_mg_ratio). Taking "province + industry code" as the grouping dimension, calculate the proportion of the number of middle managers in each group to the total number of employees. This variable is highly correlated with individual career development; the higher the

proportion of middle managers in the industry, the higher the individual promotion probability; as a macro structural indicator, it is independent of individual fertility intention for additional children, and only acts on the dependent variable indirectly through career development.

3.4.2. Instrumental variable for job stability

Regional-industrial labor contract signing rate (iv_contract_ratio). Taking "province + industry code" as the grouping dimension, calculate the proportion of the number of people who have signed labor contracts/personnel contracts in each group to the total number of employees. This variable directly affects individual job stability; the higher the contract signing rate in the industry, the higher the probability of individual stable employment; and it has no direct correlation with personal fertility intention, so exogeneity is guaranteed.

The endogeneity test model adopts the two-stage Probit model. The first stage is to strip endogeneity: taking career development (see Formula (2)) and job stability (see Formula (3)) as dependent variables respectively, instrumental variables as core independent variables, and controlling variables such as gender, age and number of existing children to estimate the correlation between instrumental variables and core independent variables. The second stage is to estimate the core effect: replacing the original endogenous variables with the fitted values obtained in the first stage (see Formula (4)) to regress their net effects on fertility intention for additional children (y_bin).

$$management1 = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 \times iv\_mg\_ratio + \alpha_2 \times ControlVariables + \varepsilon_1 \quad (2)$$

$$WS = \omega_0 + \omega_1 \times iv\_contract\_ratio + \omega_2 \times ControlVariables + \varepsilon_2 \quad (3)$$

$$y\_bin = \gamma_0 + \gamma_1 \times management1\_hat/WS\_hat + \gamma_2 \times ControlVariables + \mu \quad (4)$$

Table 1. Descriptive statistical results of main variables (N = 2189)

Variable Name	Mean/ Proportion	Standard Deviation	Variable Name	Mean/ Proportion	Standard Deviation
Fertility Intention for Additional Children			Number of Existing Children	1.67	0.67
Yes	39.70%	\	1	42.99	\
No	60.30	\	2	48.06	\
Number of Fertility Intention for Additional Children	0.35	0.71	3	7.77	\
Job Stability			4	1.10	\
Stable	63.79%	\	5	0.09	\
Unstable	36.21	\	Years of Education (Years)	11.18	3.59
Management Position			Urban Household Registration		
1 = Ordinary Staff	75.73%	\	Urban Household Registration	59.21	\
2 = Low-level Manager	9.11	\	Non-urban Household Registration	40.79	\
3 = Middle-level Manager	13.51	\	Only-child Status		

Table 1. Continued

4 = High-level Manager	1.63	\	Only Child	13.48	\
Gender			Non-only Child	86.52%	\
Male	45.41	\	Log of Personal Annual Income	10.24	2.31
Female	54.59	\	Log of Family Annual Income	11.32	1.20
Age (Years)	39.02	6.48	Number of Real Estates (Sets)	1.24	0.60

4. Empirical result analysis

4.1. Descriptive statistics

The valid sample size of this study is 2,189, and the descriptive statistical characteristics of main variables are shown in Table 1. The sample as a whole presents the characteristics of low intention. In terms of employment characteristics, most childbearing-age groups have stable jobs, and ordinary staff are the mainstream group; among management positions, middle managers are the core sample group of management positions. In terms of demographic characteristics, most families have 1-2 children; the gender distribution of childbearing-age groups is basically balanced between men and women, and they are in the late childbearing period; the proportion of only children is only 13.48%, which indicates that the previous generation of this childbearing-age group had high fertility intention.

4.2. Baseline regression analysis

This paper adopts the ordered Logit model to test the impact of core variables on fertility intention for additional children, and observes the coefficient stability by "stepwise inclusion of variables". The regression results are shown in Table 2. The following analyzes the effects of core variables and control variables respectively.

Table 2. Stepwise regression results of logit model

Variable Name	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Job Stability	0.607***	0.532***	0.532***	0.525***	-0.358**	-0.266
	(0.111)	(0.114)	(0.114)	(0.114)	(0.176)	(0.194)
Career Development		0.209***	0.201***	0.203***	0.264***	0.294***
		(0.0683)	(0.0688)	(0.0689)	(0.102)	(0.103)
Gender			0.123	0.123	0.229	0.224
			(0.107)	(0.107)	(0.161)	(0.162)
Age				-0.00947	0.00155	-0.00220
				(0.00830)	(0.0115)	(0.0120)
Number of Existing Children					-3.901***	-3.944***
					(0.175)	(0.180)
Education Level						-0.0328
						(0.0269)

Constant	0.688***	0.936***	0.977***	0.607*	-5.161***	-5.657***
	(0.0904)	(0.122)	(0.127)	(0.347)	(0.541)	(0.689)
Sample Size	1,519	1,519	1,519	1,519	1,519	1,517

Note: *, ** and *** indicate significance levels of 10%, 5% and 1% respectively, and the numbers in brackets are robust standard errors; the same applies to the following tables.

Table 2. Continued

Variable Name	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)
Job Stability	-0.263	-0.262	-0.251	-0.370*	-0.379*
	(0.195)	(0.197)	(0.202)	(0.215)	(0.216)
Career Development	0.294***	0.278***	0.339***	0.343***	0.339***
	(0.103)	(0.103)	(0.104)	(0.111)	(0.111)
Gender	0.223	0.316*	0.321*	0.447**	0.443**
	(0.162)	(0.165)	(0.174)	(0.181)	(0.181)
Age	-0.00140	-0.00915	-0.00615	-0.00392	-0.00489
	(0.0123)	(0.0127)	(0.0132)	(0.0142)	(0.0143)
Number of Existing Children	-3.950***	-4.037***	-4.062***	-4.176***	-4.180***
	(0.184)	(0.189)	(0.191)	(0.200)	(0.200)
Education Level	-0.0304	-0.0216	-0.0225	-0.0138	-0.0138
	(0.0279)	(0.0285)	(0.0297)	(0.0315)	(0.0316)
Household Registration	-0.0429	0.0326	0.113	0.150	0.143
	(0.181)	(0.183)	(0.186)	(0.195)	(0.196)
Only-child Status		-0.722***	-0.645***	-0.764***	-0.776***
		(0.218)	(0.222)	(0.228)	(0.229)
Log of Personal Annual Income			-0.0241	-0.0275	-0.0270
			(0.0350)	(0.0392)	(0.0394)
Log of Family Annual Income				0.0233	0.00596
				(0.107)	(0.109)
Number of Real Estates					0.107
					(0.132)
Constant	-5.626***	-6.015***	-6.068***	-5.808***	-5.929***
	(0.693)	(0.722)	(0.746)	(1.353)	(1.360)
Sample Size	1,517	1,517	1,474	1,408	1,407

Note: *, ** and *** indicate significance levels of 10%, 5% and 1% respectively, and the numbers in brackets are robust standard errors; the same applies to the following tables.

4.3. Endogeneity test results

The first-stage regression results are shown in Table 3. The coefficients of instrumental variables for career development and job stability are both significant, and the F-statistics of the two types of instrumental variables are both much larger than 10, indicating a strong correlation between instrumental variables and core independent variables.

The second-stage regression results are shown in Table 3. After controlling for endogeneity, the coefficients of the fitted value of career development (*management1_hat*) and the fitted value of job stability (*WS_hat*) on fertility intention for additional children are not statistically significant. This indicates that the positive correlation between employment quality and fertility intention for additional children observed in the baseline regression is not derived from the direct causal effect of employment quality on fertility intention for additional children, but mainly caused by reverse causality. Individuals with strong fertility intention for additional children are more inclined to choose management positions (high career development) or sign contracts (high stability) to cope with the economic and career risks brought by parenting.

Table 3. Impact of career development and job stability on fertility intention for additional children: instrumental variable estimation

Variable Name	Career Development	Fertility Intention for Additional Children-Career Development	Job Stability	Fertility Intention for Additional Children-Job Stability
Fitted Value of Career Development		0.101(0.0811)		
Regional-industrial Proportion of Middle Managers	2.401*** (0.155)			
Regional-industrial Labor Contract Signing Rate			3.899*** (0.139)	
Fitted Value of Job Stability				-0.0228(0.0348)
Constant		3.315***(0.712)	-3.548*** (0.751)	3.050***(0.719)
Sample Size		1,407	1,407	1,407

Considering that the core effect may have group heterogeneity, and the full-sample endogeneity test may mask the locally significant effect, this study further conducts subsample IV regression by gender and number of existing children. When dividing samples by gender, it focuses on female and male groups as the core subjects of fertility decisions; when dividing samples by number of children, it focuses on the one-child group and multi-child group with strong fertility intention for additional children, to test the differences in the causal effect of employment quality under the constraint of the number of children. The subsample IV regression still adopts the same instrumental variables as the full sample (regional-industrial proportion of middle managers/labor contract signing rate) to ensure the consistency of estimation logic, only changing the sample screening conditions.

As shown in Table 4, after dividing samples by gender, the coefficient of the fitted value of job stability for women (*WS_hat_f*) is significant at the 10% level, indicating that after controlling for endogeneity, stable employment of women can still significantly improve fertility intention for additional children (marginal effect

0.016). The reason is that women are more dependent on welfare guarantees such as social security and maternity leave of stable jobs to hedge fertility risks, and the reverse causality effect is weak; while the fitted values of career development and job stability in the male sample are not significant, consistent with the full sample, confirming that men's fertility decisions focus more on overall family resources rather than personal employment characteristics.

Table 4. Impact of job stability on fertility intention for additional children

Variable Name	Job Stability-Female	Fertility Intention for Additional Children-Job Stability-Female	Job Stability-One Child	Fertility Intention for Additional Children-Job Stability-One Child
Regional-industrial Labor Contract Signing Rate	3.780*** (0.187)		4.047*** (0.240)	
Subsample by Gender		0.0860*(0.0493)		
Subsample by Number of Children				-0.0506(0.0466)
Constant		3.280***(0.834)		1.117(0.883)
Sample Size	789	789	664	664

As shown in Table 5, in the one-child group, the coefficient of the fitted value of career development (mg_hat_1child) does not reach the traditional significance level, but the coefficient direction is consistent with the baseline, and the marginal effect (0.013) is close to that of stable employment of women, indicating that in one-child families, the fertility support role of career development has initially emerged, with weak resource constraints, and is not significant only due to sample size limitation; in the multi-child group, all fitted values are not significant, confirming that fertility intention for additional children in multi-child families is mainly inhibited by parenting costs, and the role of employment quality is completely offset.

Table 5. Impact of career development on fertility intention for additional children

Variable Name	Career Development-Female	Fertility Intention for Additional Children-Career Development-Female	Career Development-One Child	Fertility Intention for Additional Children-One Child
Regional-industrial Proportion of Middle Managers	2.656*** (0.223)		2.830***(0.257)	
Subsample by Gender		0.0224(0.105)		
Subsample by Number of Existing Children				0.0723(0.0815)
Constant		3.223***(0.831)		1.388(0.900)
Sample Size	789	789	664	664

4.4. Variable effects

Among core independent variables, the significant positive correlation between career development and fertility intention for additional children stems from reverse causality, that is, groups with high fertility intention for additional children are more inclined to choose management positions to cope with fertility risks,

and career development is a tool rather than a cause for realizing additional childbirth; the correlation between job stability and fertility intention for additional children is affected by the confusion of the number of children and reverse causality, and there is no significant causal effect after control. In terms of control variables, gender differences are significant, and men's fertility intention for additional children is higher than women's; the number of existing children is a strong dominant variable, which inhibits fertility intention for additional children through increasing marginal parenting costs, and also distorts the effects of other variables; only-child status reduces fertility intention for additional children due to insufficient family support. Variables such as age, years of education and number of real estates have no independent explanatory power, and their effects are covered by core variables due to the convergence of sample economic characteristics and the diminishing marginal effect of economic resources.

5. Robustness test

Robustness test examines the robustness of the explanatory ability of evaluation methods and indicators, that is, whether the evaluation methods and indicators still maintain a relatively consistent and stable explanation of the evaluation results when some parameters are changed. This project conducts robustness test using the following four methods:

5.1. Adopting different econometric models

Robustness test is conducted on the relationship between job stability, career development and fertility intention for additional children of childbearing-age groups through different models. The binary Probit model is used for robustness test, and the general formula of the binary Probit model is shown in Formula (5).

$$Prob(Y = 1) = \phi \times (\beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + ... + \beta_n X_n) \tag{5}$$

Model II is the binary Probit model regression result (see Table 6). The results show that job stability has a significant negative impact on fertility intention for additional children of childbearing-age groups at the statistical level of 0.1, and career development has a significant positive impact on fertility intention for additional children of childbearing-age groups at the statistical level of 0.01, which is consistent with the binary Logistic model regression results, ensuring the robustness of the baseline regression analysis.

Further calculate the marginal effects of job stability and career development on fertility intention for additional children. Since the marginal effects of non-linear models are not constant, the Average Marginal Effect (AME) is adopted. The regression results are shown in the Table 8: Model II shows that the AME of job stability is -0.036, indicating that each unit increase in job stability reduces the probability of childbearing-age population having fertility intention for additional children by 0.036 units; the AME of career development is 0.037, indicating that each unit increase in career development increases the probability of childbearing-age population having fertility intention for additional children by 0.037 units. This result is similar to that of Model I, further illustrating the robustness of the baseline regression results.

5.2. Changing the measurement type of dependent variable

For the second treatment method of the dependent variable in this project, that is, assigning values of 1 to 3 as count variables for samples with the value obtained by subtracting the number of existing children from the desired number of children greater than 0 according to actual results, and 0 otherwise, this paper adopts the Poisson regression model for supplementary test, and finds that the direction of each variable in the Poisson regression model (Model III) is consistent with that in the binary Logistic model (Model III). The average

marginal effect values of job stability and career development on the number of fertility intention for additional children are also calculated in the Poisson regression model, and the results are similar to those of Models I, II and III, all of which illustrate the robustness of the baseline regression results.

5.3. Narrowing the sample range

The research objects are limited to 20-49 years old in the baseline regression. Considering that women's fertility capacity decreases after the age of 40, including them in the analysis may underestimate the estimation results. Therefore, women's age is further limited to 20-45 years old and 20-49 years old. The regression results are shown in Table 6. After further narrowing the age range of the sample, the binary logistic model passes the significance test, and the coefficient directions of Model I are consistent with those of Models II, III and IV, with little difference in AWE size, illustrating the robustness of the baseline regression results.

Table 6. Regression results of replacing econometric models, changing measurement type of dependent variable and narrowing sample interval

Variable Name	Model I	Model I	AME	AME	Model II	Model II	AME	AME
Job Stability	-0.379*(0.216)	-0.038*	-0.192*	-0.036*	-0.078	-0.036*	-0.303	-0.029
		(0.022)	(0.111)	(0.021)	(0.067)	(0.021)	(0.255)	(0.027)
Career Development	0.339***	0.034***	0.180***	0.037***	0.089***	0.034***	0.334***	0.032***
	(0.111)	(0.011)	(0.059)	(0.011)	(0.029)	(0.011)	(0.120)	(0.011)
Control Variables					Controlled			
Constant	6.815***		3.830***		1.693***		8.239***	
	(1.399)		(0.738)		(0.399)		(1.591)	

Note: Models I-IV are logistic regression model, Probit model, Poisson model with age range of 20-49 years old, and logistic regression model with age range of 20-45 years old respectively.

6. Heterogeneity test and mechanism expansion

6.1. Gender difference subsample regression

The impact of employment quality on fertility intention for additional children of childbearing-age groups has significant gender differences. Baseline regression shows that job stability has a significant negative impact on men's fertility intention for additional children, but no significant impact on women; the positive effect of career development on women's fertility intention for additional children is more prominent, and weaker on men.

Combined with the endogeneity IV test, stable employment of women has a real local causal effect on fertility intention for additional children. The social security benefits of stable employment can hedge the risk of career interruption after childbirth and directly improve fertility intention for additional children; while the negative correlation of men's job stability disappears after controlling for endogeneity, and this effect stems from reverse causality. Men with strong fertility intention for additional children are more inclined to choose jobs with low stability but high income growth, rather than job stability directly inhibiting fertility intention.

From the perspective of gender roles, men focus on income growth, while women are more dependent on career development and stable employment to hedge "work-family conflict", so the real driving effects of both on women's fertility intention for additional children are more significant.

As shown in Table 7, the impact of employment quality on fertility intention for additional children of childbearing-age groups has significant gender differences. Baseline regression shows that job stability has a significant negative impact on men's fertility intention for additional children, but no significant impact on women; the positive effect of career development on women's fertility intention for additional children is more prominent, and weaker on men.

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From the perspective of gender roles, men focus on income growth, while women are more dependent on career development and stable employment to hedge "work-family conflict", so the real driving effects of both on women's fertility intention for additional children are more significant.

Table 7. Regression results of gender-based heterogeneity analysis

Variable Name	Male	Female
Job Stability	-0.883***(0.320)	0.046(0.294)
Career Development	0.384*(0.303)	0.346**(0 .154)
Control Variables	Controlled	
Constant	5.388**(2.535)	6.069***(1.551)

Note: *, ** and *** indicate significance levels of 10%, 5% and 1% respectively.

6.2. Household registration type difference subsample regression

China's household registration system leads to the differentiation of urban and rural groups in resource allocation and employment forms, and the impact of employment quality on fertility intention for additional children presents significant heterogeneity. In the full sample, job stability has no significant impact on fertility intention for additional children of both groups, and the positive effect of career development is stronger in non-urban groups (see Table 8).

Combined with the endogeneity IV test, this difference stems from different intensity of reverse causality interference. Non-urban groups are mainly engaged in flexible employment, and career development means employment formalization and income improvement, which can directly break through the economic bottleneck of "unaffordable to raise", with more significant real driving effect and weak reverse causality interference; urban groups have more standardized employment, career development mostly supports high-quality parenting, and the reverse impact of fertility intention for additional children on career choice is stronger, leading to the interference of real causal effect and relatively weak correlation.

From the perspective of group characteristics, fertility intention for additional children of urban groups is dominated by high-quality parenting factors such as education and housing, while the core constraint of non-urban groups is insufficient economic foundation, so the positive driving effect of career development is more prominent in the latter.

Table 8. Regression results of household registration-based heterogeneity analysis

Variable Name	Urban	Urban	Urban OR	Urban OR
Job Stability	-0.424(0.344)	0.654	-0.332(-0.284)	0.718
Career Development	0.264*(0.141)	1.302	0.414**(0.178)	1.512
Control Variables			Controlled	
Constant	7.093***(1.650)	1,202.926	5.365*(2.825)	213.75

Note: *, ** and *** indicate significance levels of 10%, 5% and 1% respectively.

6.3. Career development level heterogeneity test

It can be seen from the baseline regression analysis that the positive effect of career development on fertility intention for additional children has significant hierarchical heterogeneity: each level increase in occupational hierarchy increases the probability of fertility intention for additional children by 3.7% on average, but this effect does not cover all levels linearly. Only after occupational resources accumulate to the middle level can they effectively support fertility decisions (see Table 9).

Combined with the results of endogeneity Instrumental Variable (IV) test for further analysis, in the full-sample IV regression, the fitted value of career development (*management1_hat*) has no statistical significance, indicating that the "positive correlation between career development and fertility intention for additional children" at the full-sample level mainly stems from reverse causality. Individuals with strong fertility intention for additional children are more inclined to take the initiative to choose jobs with good career development prospects such as management positions to accumulate parenting resources in advance; however, the subsample IV test shows that in the middle manager group, the real causal effect of career development partially offsets the interference of reverse causality: in the cross sample of "one child + middle management position", the coefficient of the fitted value of career development (*mg_hat_1child*) is 0.0723 (although not reaching the traditional significance level, the coefficient direction is consistent with the baseline), and the marginal effect is close to the significant effect of stable employment of women, indicating that the occupational resources of middle managers can indeed produce a real driving effect on fertility intention for additional children.

Table 9. Results of career development level heterogeneity analysis

Variable Name	Hierarchical Logistic Regression Model
Job Stability	-0.360(0.220)
High-level Manager	1.155**(0.573)
Middle-level Manager	0.723***(0.266)
Low-level Manager	0.0688(0.295)
Number of Existing Children	-4.194***(0.201)
Constant	6.378***(1.374)
Sample Size	1,407

6.4. Grouped heterogeneity test of the number of existing children

The number of existing children is the core inhibiting factor of fertility intention for additional children. This study divides the sample into "one-child group" and "two or more children group" for grouped regression

(distribution results are shown in Table 10), to further explore the moderating effect of the number of children on the effect of employment quality. The regression results are shown in Table 11.

Table 10. Distribution of fertility intention for additional children of groups with different number of children

	No Fertility Intention for Additional Children	Fertility Intention for Additional Children	Total
One-child Group	176	765	941
Two or More Children Group	1,144	104	1,248
Total	1,320	869	2,189

The regression results of the one-child group show that career development is the only significant core variable, job stability has no significant impact, and this effect is not driven by simple reverse causality, but has a real local causal effect. The existing parenting costs of one-child families have been covered by current income, and the income increase brought by career development can support the marginal cost of additional childbirth. Its economic resources and career security can directly reduce the uncertainty of "incremental parenting", so the positive effect is significant; while the family has not yet faced the overload of time and energy for multi-child care, and does not need to rely on job stability to hedge risks, so its role is not significant.

In the two or more children group, all variables and the overall model have no significant impact, and fertility intention for additional children has been separated from the scope of employment quality impact. The strong resource constraints brought by the increasing marginal parenting cost make the income increase of career development unable to cover the new costs, and the core demand of the family is to reduce the parenting burden of existing multi-children. Fertility intention for additional children is low itself, and the driving effect on career choice is weakened, with neither real effect of employment quality nor reverse causality correlation effect.

Table 11. Results of number of existing children heterogeneity analysis

Variable Name	One-child Group	Two or More Children Group
Job Stability	-0.441(0.294)	-0.268(0.364)
Career Development	0.352**(0.141)	0.264(0.178)
Gender	0.250(0.223)	0.670**(0.307)
Age	-0.00434(0.0178)	-0.00841(0.0264)
Education Level	-0.0457(0.0407)	0.0377(0.0549)
Household Registration	0.00967(0.257)	0.389(0.304)
Only-child Status	-0.616**(0.248)	-1.274*(0.733)
Log of Personal Annual Income	-0.0453(0.0741)	-0.0133(0.0663)
Log of Family Annual Income	0.0195(0.161)	0.0256(0.190)
Number of Real Estates	0.0859(0.150)	0.139(0.258)
Constant	-2.364(1.780)	3.606(2.268)
Prob>chi2	0.0249	0.1140
Sample Size	664	743

6.5. Grouped heterogeneity test of the gender of existing children

Affected by traditional concepts, gender equality cognition and differences in parenting costs, the constraint of the gender of existing children on fertility intention for additional children has significant heterogeneity. This study divides the sample into three categories: "all-boy families", "all-girl families" and "families with both son and daughter". The regression results show (see Table 12): fertility intention for additional children is the highest in all-boy families, followed by all-girl families, and the lowest in families with both son and daughter, which is consistent in urban and rural samples.

All-boy families have high fertility intention for additional children, and the positive effect of career development is easier to appear, forming a positive cycle of "high intention-choosing high-development jobs-supporting additional childbirth"; all-girl families tend to avoid risks due to the economic cost of having an additional boy or the career impact risk of having an additional girl, and fertility intention for additional children is inhibited; families with both son and daughter have achieved the traditional fertility goal, the marginal benefit of additional childbirth is zero, and it will break the family balance, so they rationally choose not to have additional children.

Table 12. Regression results of gender of existing children

Variable Name	Logistic Model		Urban Sample Regression Results		Non-urban Sample Regression Results	
	By Gender	Not by Gender	By Gender	Not by Gender	By Gender	Not by Gender
Job Stability	-0.387* (0.216)	-0.381*(0.218)	-0.422 (0.341)	-0.424 (0.344)	-0.344 (0.287)	-0.332 (-0.284)
Career Development	0.336** (0.110)	0.538*(0.209)	0.255* (0.141)	0.264*(0.141)	0.426* (0.177)	0.414** (0.178)
All-girl Family	-0.459** (0.187)	\	-0.411* (0.250)	\	-0.510* (0 .297)	\
Family with Both Son and Daughter	-0.676** (0.292)	\	-0.832* (0.458)	\	-0.664* (0.382)	\
Control Variables			Controlled			
Constant	6.601*** (1.442)	6.219**(1.349)	6.720*** (1.720)	7.093**(1.650)	5.344* (2.849)	5.365* (2.825)

6.6. Dual heterogeneity analysis of the number of existing children and career development level

Combined with the heterogeneity results, the positive effect of career development only exists in the one-child group and is constrained by occupational level; the increase in the number of children will weaken the support of occupational resources. Further subsample test of this study finds that the positive effect of career development is only concentrated in middle management positions, high-level positions are not reliable due to small sample size, and low-level positions are not different from ordinary staff, unable to drive additional childbirth.

The dual heterogeneity results of the two or more children group show (see Table 13) that the effect of career development disappears significantly regardless of occupational level, and fertility intention for additional children is separated from the scope of employment resources and turns to individual characteristics

such as age and education. The reason is that the marginal parenting cost of multi-child families increases sharply, the income growth of middle management positions can no longer cover the new costs and resource support is fully offset; in addition, the fertility intention for additional children in multi-child families is inherently low, so the positive effect naturally vanishes.

Table 13. Results of dual heterogeneity analysis of the number of existing children and career development level

Variable Name	One-child Group	Two or More Children Group
Job Stability	-0.418(0.297)	0.0876(0.209)
Career Development	13.34***(0.434)	-0.148(0.872)
Gender	0.712**(0.323)	0.162(0.261)
Age	0.0603(0.328)	-0.168(0.259)
Education Level	0.266(0.223)	0.993***(0.184)
Household Registration	-0.00463(0.0176)	-0.216***(0.0175)
Only-child Status	-0.0464(0.0407)	0.150***(0.0364)
Log of Personal Annual Income	0.00212(0.256)	0.272(0.184)
Log of Family Annual Income	-0.608**(0.250)	0.754***(0.189)
Number of Real Estates	-0.0450(0.0738)	0.0182(0.0334)
Varieble Name	0.0165(0.161)	-0.136(0.106)
Job Stability	0.0888(0.150)	0.0761(0.141)
Constant	-2.767(1.788)	-5.351***(1.235)
Prob > chi2	0.00	0.00
Sample Size	664	1,094

6.7. Moderation test of the number of existing children on job stability

Empirical tests and IV estimations show that job stability has no direct causal effect on fertility intention for additional children. The positive effect in the initial model arises from reverse causality: groups with fewer children and stronger fertility intention for additional children are more likely to obtain stable jobs. After controlling for the number of existing children, this effect vanishes and turns marginally significant, which fully corrects the estimation bias.

The full-sample IV regression shows that the coefficient of *WS_hat* is only −0.0228, with no statistical significance. Fertility decisions dominate employment choices. Families with more children tend to choose stable jobs to balance costs and parenting pressure, yet more children per se suppress fertility intention for additional children. Families with fewer children have weaker demand for job stability and thus higher fertility intention for additional children. Therefore, the correlation between job stability and fertility intention for additional children is essentially an indirect distortion of estimation results caused by the number of existing children shaping employment choices, rather than a direct causal relationship between the two variables.

7. Conclusion and recommendation

Based on 2,189 valid samples, this study empirically examines the impacts of employment quality and family characteristics on the fertility intention for additional children among childbearing-age groups from a dual-core perspective, and reveals the heterogeneous patterns across gender, urban–rural divisions, and

occupational hierarchies. From the perspective of gender heterogeneity, career development acts as a critical risk buffer for women's intention to have additional children. The physiological costs of childbearing make women more reliant on career resources to mitigate risks. Career development eases the fertility–career conflict by enhancing economic security and resilience to career interruptions, which is essentially a rational choice to offset the *motherhood penalty*. In contrast, job stability has a limited positive effect on women's fertility intention for additional children, as stable employment alone cannot fully offset the risk of career stagnation caused by childbearing. Men's fertility intention for additional children is less constrained by individual career factors. Under traditional gender roles, men's decisions focus more on the allocation of overall family resources rather than trade-offs in personal career costs.

From the perspective of group differentiation, the driving effect of career development is subject to significant heterogeneity shaped by economic constraints. Non-urban groups' fertility intention for additional children depends more on income growth brought by career advancement, which is key to breaking the absolute income constraint of being unable to afford raising children. Urban groups face multiple costs of high-quality parenting such as education and housing, so the driving effect of career development is relatively weaker.

From the perspective of occupational hierarchy, the positive effect of career development concentrates on middle managers. This group has reached the threshold of occupational resources (income, time flexibility, etc.) to support additional childbearing: they possess the economic capacity to cover the marginal costs of childbearing and enjoy relatively flexible work arrangements. Low-level managers and ordinary employees show no significant effect because their occupational resources are insufficient. High-level managers do not exhibit stable effects due to limited sample size.

At the family characteristics level, the number of existing children suppresses fertility intention for additional children through the mechanism of increasing marginal parenting costs. As the number of children rises, families face mounting time, energy, and economic inputs, which sharply raise the opportunity cost of additional childbearing. This leads to a pattern where fertility intention for additional children declines with the number of existing children, consistent with the rational choice of families to optimize resource allocation for existing children under low fertility.

Based on the above conclusions, the policy implications are as follows: First, strengthen institutional support for women's continuous career development. Establish a linking mechanism between childbearing and career promotion, integrate childbirth-friendliness into corporate social responsibility evaluation, improve the maternity insurance system, and expand social protection coverage for flexibly employed women. Second, boost non-urban groups' income capacity through career development. Increase vocational skills training, cultivate skilled jobs, and promote a virtuous cycle of *skill improvement* → *income growth* → *fertility capability* to enhance the economic affordability of non-urban families. Third, build a childbirth-friendly work environment using the demonstration effect of middle managers. Guide enterprises to implement systems that align childbearing with career development for middle-level positions. Fourth, construct a full-cycle cost-sharing mechanism for multi-child families. Implement tiered childbirth subsidies, improve inclusive childcare services, and ease the parenting burden of multi-child households.

Overall, raising fertility intention for additional children requires moving beyond a single subsidy framework. A differentiated support system centered on career development empowerment, gender rights protection, and multi-child cost sharing is needed to resolve the core dilemmas of being unwilling to bear, unable to afford, and having no one to care for children, so as to promote the long-term balanced development of the population.

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