THE IMPACT OF DIALECT ABILITY OF CHINESE FEMALE DOMESTIC WORKERS ON OCCUPATIONAL DISCRIMINATION

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Abstract: Due to some reasons, such as the irregularity of work, domestic workers are susceptible to occupational discrimination. Studies have shown that language ability can reduce discrimination. So, is the ability of dialect of the working city related to occupational discrimination, can it reduce occupational discrimination? To answer this question, the research discussed its impact on the occupational discrimination of female domestic workers. Using the survey data and the instrumental variable CMP estimation method, it were found that female workers in domestic dialects with a worse dialect of the working city were significantly more likely to perceive occupational discrimination. The results show that the dialect ability of the working city has a significant impact on occupational discrimination. On these basis, the mechanism of the working city dialect ability on occupational discrimination was analyzed and discussed.
Keywords: Dialect ability; Occupational discrimination; Instrumental variable; Female domestic worker

1 INTRODUCTION

Language serves not merely as a tool for communication but also as a mirror reflecting one's identity and image. It has a direct bearing on both the effectiveness of communication and work efficiency, while also exerting a profound influence on the impressions and evaluations that others form of individuals and even entire groups. Remarkably, infants can discern between their mother tongue and foreign languages within just four days of birth[1]. In everyday interactions, people can swiftly ascertain whether a person's language is standard or non-standard based on just a few sentences or words. Those whose language is non-standard often confront negative evaluations and, at times, discrimination, particularly from language normative groups[2-6]. Conversely, enhancing language proficiency has been shown to mitigate the incidence of such discrimination[7].

Language exhibits regional characteristics, which manifest in the form of dialects. Serving as a communication medium within a defined geographical area, dialects hold profound social significance within the service industry. The use of standard dialects can bolster the appeal and competitiveness of services, elevate the social standing and reputation of practitioners[8-10], and their importance is particularly pronounced in the domestic service sector. Domestic workers in cities where the dialect is spoken more proficiently can garner greater respect and trust from employers, thereby fostering equitable and harmonious relationships between both parties[11-13].

Home services touch the lives of countless households. Domestic workers, often facing informal work arrangements and a low social standing, are particularly vulnerable to professional discrimination. This occupational discrimination can not only induce health issues such as anxiety and depression among individual domestic workers but also pave the way for distressing incidents like abuse of the elderly and children, posing risks to the safety of employers and even undermining social stability. Consequently, addressing occupational discrimination and ensuring decent work conditions for domestic workers demands the urgent attention of both the academic community and all sectors of society. Given the substantial value of dialects in the domestic service industry and the fact that language proficiency can mitigate discrimination, this article focuses on exploring whether there is a correlation between female domestic workers' proficiency in speaking the local dialect of their work city and the level of occupational discrimination they face. Specifically, it investigates whether a limited ability to speak the local dialect exacerbates discrimination, whereas a stronger proficiency can alleviate it.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Discrimination has consistently been a focal point in sociological research. Conceptually, discrimination entails the unfair treatment of individuals solely based on their membership in a specific group or category[14]. From a sociological lens, the discrimination includes three dimensions: attitude, behavior, and systemic structures[15]. The forms of discrimination are intricate and multifaceted, ranging from prejudice and verbal abuse to belittlement and unequal treatment[16]. The triggers and underlying factors of discrimination span numerous realms, including individual, familial, and societal dynamics. In the following sections, the research will delve into the impact of language proficiency on discrimination.

Research has revealed that language ability in the destination location holds immense sociocultural significance and plays a pivotal role in various aspects of migrants' work and life. Issues related to language proficiency not only lead to differential treatment in the labor market, which amounts to actual discrimination against migrant populations, such as

fewer job opportunities and lower wages for those with poorer proficiency in the local dialect[17-21], but also have profound impacts on breaking down identity-based discrimination and facilitating social interactions[22-24].

Although research on the functions of language ability has achieved a relatively mature and comprehensive state, studies directly examining the impact of language ability on discrimination have emerged more recently and are still in their developmental phase. However, a handful of scholars have ventured into this territory. Broadly speaking, prejudice is a negative attitude or inclination towards individuals belonging to specific groups, often manifesting through language use[25]. Discrimination frequently originates from prejudice, prompting individuals to discriminate against those who do not share the same language. Research indicates that respondents whose mother tongue or primary language is not the mainstream language may confront discrimination due to linguistic factors. Even when the mother tongue or primary language aligns with the mainstream, many individuals still face discrimination because of their impure or non-standard accents[2-5,26]. Language proficiency plays a crucial role in employment discrimination: incorporating language proficiency information can enhance interview opportunities for non-native applicants and mitigate the discrimination they encounter. In roles requiring high levels of oral expression and communication skills, such as secretarial positions, language proficiency can even alleviate racial discrimination[7].

As a profession characterized by close interpersonal communication and frequent interactions, female domestic workers are particularly susceptible to discrimination based on their language proficiency, particularly in the workplace. In a study by Piller, a cleaning worker who had resided in Germany for several decades faced criticism for her inadequate German-speaking skills when she filed a harassment lawsuit against her employer[27]. Similarly, Hall et al conducted a qualitative study in the Macau region of China, revealing that most Filipino domestic helpers have limited knowledge of the primary languages spoken there: Chinese and Portuguese. These language barriers hinder their ability to fully understand their employers' instructions and result in differential treatment when accessing medical services, legal support, and government public services[28]. A survey by scholars on Beijing's high-income families and their employed domestic workers found that some workers perceive Mandarin (the main language spoken in Beijing) as carrying significant social weight. Proficiency in Mandarin is viewed as a reflection of one's quality, cultivation, public image, and social status. Fluent Mandarin speakers can bridge the psychological gap between employers and urban residents, earning them greater respect from others[29].

After reviewing the existing literature, it has been discovered that scholars have delved into the impact of language on discrimination and have garnered certain insights. However, several shortcomings persist: (1) The majority of studies primarily focus on populations in developed countries or regions like the United States, Canada, and France, neglecting the group of domestic workers who exhibit distinct occupational characteristics and are highly susceptible to discrimination due to their work; (2) Scholars have acknowledged that individuals, particularly vulnerable groups such as immigrants, may encounter discrimination stemming from language barriers, and that enhancing language proficiency can mitigate this discrimination. However, relevant research is still nascent and has yet to delve deeply into the socio-cultural implications of language; (3) Although some scholars have recognized the link between language proficiency and discrimination, the exploration of causal mechanisms remains largely confined to qualitative analysis or basic descriptive analysis, with a notable absence of high-quality quantitative research; (4) Existing quantitative analyses insufficiently address the endogeneity issues commonly encountered in empirical research on language function, and there is a tendency to simplify data processing and model selection. Consequently, the validity of these conclusions urgently requires further validation. Therefore, this study focuses on the Chinese domestic worker group, employs the instrumental variable method to address endogeneity problems, and examines the role of dialect proficiency in occupational discrimination within their work cities.

3 MATERIAL AND METHODS

3.1 Data and Participants

The research analyzed questionnaire survey data collected in 2019 from domestic workers in four cities in China: Nanjing, Wuxi, Guangzhou, and Foshan. The survey employed the Respondent Driven Sampling (RDS) method, effectively addressing the challenge of lacking scientific sampling frames in domestic worker surveys. A total of 1,029 questionnaires were gathered, with 1,007 being deemed valid. Specifically, 303 were collected in Nanjing, 183 in Wuxi, 315 in Guangzhou, and 206 in Foshan. The research team conducted a thorough analysis to assess the balance and homogeneity of the survey sample, finding that it achieved equilibrium, mimicking a random sample.

The survey data offers a comprehensive exploration of domestic workers' dialect proficiency, household registration locations, and other pertinent information in their respective work cities. Notably, the survey locations of this data are all economically developed cities with obvious local dialect characteristics and important positions[30-31], providing an excellent data foundation for the author to investigate the dialect proficiency of domestic workers in their work cities and its impact on occupational discrimination.

The focus of this article is on female domestic workers (hereinafter referred to as "female domestic workers"). Among the 1,029 surveyed workers, 988 were women. Due to missing values in some variables within individual samples, the final analytical sample size was 983.

3.2 Measurement

3.2.1 Occupational discrimination

Discrimination can manifest in both real forms (such as unequal treatment and institutional segregation) and perceived forms (where individuals subjectively perceive discrimination through the words and actions of others). Since real discrimination is frequently prohibited by law, perceived discrimination often serves as a more accurate reflection of discriminatory practices[32]. Consequently, this study employs perceived occupational discrimination as the primary measurement indicator of occupational discrimination. The survey inquired about respondents' perceptions of discrimination based on their status as domestic service workers, offering five response options: "never," "rarely," "sometimes," "often," and "always." This study utilizes this perception as an operational indicator of occupational discrimination and treats it as a binary variable. Specifically, a value of 0 is assigned if a female domestic worker has never felt discriminated against due to her occupation, while a value of 1 is assigned if she has experienced any form of perceived discrimination.

3.2.2 Dialect ability

The survey inquired about respondents' proficiency in speaking the dialect of their work city, allowing them to self-evaluate their ability. During the data processing phase, the level of dialect proficiency in the work city was categorized into three distinct groups based on their responses: poor (encompassing those who were "completely unfamiliar" or "somewhat familiar"), average, and good (amalgamating those who rated themselves as "good" or "very good").

3.2.3 Covariates

The research strives to account for as many factors as feasible that contribute to occupational discrimination against female domestic workers. Prior research has highlighted several key factors, including low employment barriers (predominantly middle-aged rural women with advanced age and limited education), minimal work experience requirements, low technical skills, modest income, and a low social standing, which significantly impact discrimination towards domestic workers[33-38]. Furthermore, inadequate food provision, inability to meet basic needs for nourishment and shelter, and a lack of privacy protection due to employers' reluctance to install cameras in their homes can exacerbate feelings of disrespect among domestic workers[28]. Additionally, the nature of work (categorized as care-oriented, such as nannies, childcare providers, and elderly caregivers, versus work-oriented roles like housekeepers and cleaners) and work schedules (non-residential, including hourly and day shifts, versus residential arrangements) constitute fundamental work conditions. The city of employment also plays a crucial role in shaping the social environment and must be considered as a control variable. In summary, the research incorporates a comprehensive range of control variables, including age, education level, type of household registration, job type , work schedule, monthly salary, years of experience in domestic work, score for the ability to use intelligent tools, employer's home installation monitoring, being able to eat enough at the employer's house, satisfaction with meals at the employer's house, can the income from work meet the economic needs, and the city of work.

3.3 Data Analysis

Firstly, descriptive statistics were computed for all variables in Stata 17.0, encompassing frequency, mean, standard deviation, and percentage. Secondly, a causal analysis was conducted to investigate the relationship between dialect proficiency among female domestic workers and occupational discrimination. Existing research indicates potential endogeneity concerns in the empirical analysis of individual language proficiency and occupational discrimination. Consequently, this study employed the instrumental variable (IV) method to address these issues. Given that dialect proficiency is an ordinal multicategorical variable, traditional IV methods such as Probit and two-stage least squares (2SLS) may not be applicable. Instead, this study utilized Roodman's Conditional Recursive Mixed Process (CMP) IV model. CMP is a versatile mixed model estimation approach tailored for categorical endogenous explanatory variables or truncated data[39], which has garnered widespread recognition and application in academic circles[40]. Therefore, the author chose to apply the CMP estimation method to mitigate endogeneity challenges.

4 RESULT

4.1 Preliminary Analysis

The frequent and percent for major variables in this investigation were shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Key Variable Description Statistics (N=983)

Variable	Option	Freq	Percent
Occupational discrimination	No	601	61.14
	Yes	382	38.86
dialect ability	Poor	399	40.59
	General	86	8.75
	Good	498	50.66

4.2 Regression Analysis

Table 2 presents the regression analysis results of the impact of dialect proficiency of female domestic workers on occupational discrimination. Model 1 is the Probit analysis result, and Model 2 is the CMP analysis result. In Model 1,

the coefficient for average dialect ability is 0.402 (p<0.01), while the coefficient for good dialect ability is -0.013 (p>0.05). In Model 2, the average and good coefficients for dialect ability were -0.396 (p<0.05) and -1.396 (p<0.001), respectively.

In order to satisfy the prerequisites for employing instrumental variables, it is imperative to report several crucial statistical indicators prior to delineating the regression outcomes of these variables, thereby ensuring the credibility of the results. Initially, during the first stage of regression, a notable correlation emerges at the 0.001 significance level between whether an individual's household registration and work city fall within the same dialect region and their dialect proficiency in the work city. This underscores a robust relationship between the instrumental variables and the endogenous explanatory variables, confirming the suitability of the selected instrumental variables and ruling out the possibility of weak instrumental variables. Furthermore, the endogeneity test parameters achieve significance at the 0.05 level, highlighting a systematic disparity between the traditional model and the instrumental variable model. This observation implies a definitive endogeneity between dialect proficiency and occupational discrimination, necessitating the abandonment of the Prbit model and the adoption of the CMP analysis results instead.

The estimation results of the instrumental variables reveal that, after accounting for other variables, domestic workers who possess general proficiency in the work city dialect are 32.70% less likely to encounter occupational discrimination compared to those with poor dialect skills. Furthermore, those with superior dialect proficiency in the work city are 75.24% less likely to experience occupational discrimination. In simpler terms, as the proficiency in the work city dialect diminishes, the likelihood of domestic workers perceiving occupational discrimination increases.

Table 2 Regression Analysis Results of The Impact of Dialect Ability on Occupational Discrimination

	Model 1 (Probit)	Model 2 (CMP)
Dialect ability (poor as a reference)		
general	$0.402^{**}(0.155)$	$-0.396^{*}(0.183)$
good	$-0.013(0.099)$	$-1.396^{***}(0.214)$
Age ($\leq$39 as reference)		
40-55	$0.134(0.182)$	$0.132(0.125)$
$\geq$56	$0.160(0.211)$	$0.134(0.146)$
Educational level (without any education as a reference)		
primary school	$-0.321(0.188)$	$-0.251(0.140)$
junior high school	$-0.285(0.184)$	$-0.219(0.136)$
high school and above	$-0.370(0.217)$	$-0.274(0.165)$
Type of household registration (non rural registered residence as reference)	$0.116(0.108)$	$0.045(0.079)$
Job type (mainly cleaning and cooking as a reference)	$-0.112(0.119)$	$-0.075(0.084)$
Work schedule (not staying at the employer's house at night as a reference)	$-0.032(0.119)$	$-0.014(0.085)$
Monthly salary (in thousands of yuan)	$0.058^{**}(0.019)$	$0.038^{*}(0.019)$
Years of experience in domestic work	$0.006(0.007)$	$0.005(0.005)$
Score for the ability to use intelligent tools	$-0.010(0.008)$	$-0.007(0.006)$
Employer's home installation monitoring (not used as a reference)		
Yes	$0.269^{**}(0.099)$	$0.170^{*}(0.085)$
not sure	$0.234(0.142)$	$0.163(0.105)$
Being able to eat enough at the employer's house (No as a reference)	$-0.539^{*}(0.255)$	$-0.340(0.200)$
Satisfaction with meals at the employer's house (dissatisfaction as a reference)	$-0.303(0.158)$	$-0.248^{*}(0.113)$
Can the income from work meet the economic needs? (No as a reference)	$-0.266^{**}(0.090)$	$-0.183^{*}(0.073)$
City of work (Nanjing as a reference)		
Wuxi	$-0.382^{**}(0.132)$	$-0.352^{***}(0.097)$
Guangzhou	$0.202(0.117)$	$0.015(0.103)$
Foshan	$-0.111(0.138)$	$-0.186(0.099)$
cons	$0.481(0.377)$	$1.191^{***}(0.265)$
N	983	983
R^2	0.0568	
The relevance of the first stage		$0.271^{***}(0.076)$
Atanhrho (Endogenous test parameters)		$1.270^{*}(0.564)$

Note:The numbers in parentheses are standard errors; *** is p< 0.001, ** is p< 0.05, * is p< 0.01

5 CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The objective of this study is to investigate how the proficiency in the local dialect of female domestic workers in their work city influences occupational discrimination. The findings, after addressing endogeneity concerns, indicate that

female domestic workers who speak the local dialect fluently are notably less likely to experience occupational discrimination.

What accounts for the significant impact of dialect proficiency on occupational discrimination faced by female domestic workers? Are there additional mechanisms beyond dialects serving as a vital cultural capital? The author contends that the capacity to speak authentic and fluent local dialects reduces occupational discrimination against domestic workers because dialects possess a broad and profound social function. They transcend being mere communication tools for specific regions; they are crucial indicators of regional identity and reflect the identity status of their speakers. Specifically:

Firstly, humans speak multiple languages and use a shared linguistic symbol system to form a community, known as a language community[41]. Members of the same language community naturally bond and engage in more daily interactions. For female domestic workers, speaking the same language fosters a sense of closeness and trust with employers, paving the way for the establishment and maintenance of intimate working relationships[11-13]. Such intimate relationships can mitigate the occurrence of discrimination.

Secondly, in certain societies where speech is paramount, specific discourses share identical forms and meanings[41]. Put simply, individuals who speak the same dialect understand each other more precisely and with less ambiguity. Consequently, female domestic workers proficient in their work city's dialect can communicate more effectively with employers, enhancing work efficiency, minimizing conflicts, and ensuring a harmonious employment relationship[28]. This facilitates a relatively equal and friendly interaction between both parties.

Again, language signifies identity and status, and distinct dialects carry different social reputations, reflecting varying levels of identity and status. In particular regions, dominant languages (like Cantonese and Shanghainese) enjoy a high social standing. Domestic workers who use these languages are more likely to gain respect and recognition, thus experiencing less occupational discrimination.

Finally, the ability to speak the local dialect is a crucial means for individuals, particularly migrant populations, to integrate into the local society[42-44,19,24]. The more fluent and authentic a domestic worker's dialect is, the higher their acceptance within the local community. This aids their integration into mainstream society and enhances communication across different groups. As time spent together increases, mutual understanding deepens, leading other groups to gradually recognize the work value and social significance of domestic workers, thereby reducing occupational discrimination.

6 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Due to the constraints of the research topic and the accessibility of data, several issues remain unresolved in this paper. Firstly, the model outcomes indicate that as the actual monthly salary increases, so does the likelihood of female domestic workers feeling occupational discrimination. The author speculates that this correlation may stem from the higher expectations these workers, particularly confinement wives, hold for their profession and social standing. They perceive a greater need for societal respect and heightened sensitivity towards others' words and actions, potentially heightening their awareness of occupational discrimination. However, this is merely speculative and requires further validation. Secondly, Mandarin, as the prevalent language in China, holds significant importance in both professional and personal contexts. Regrettably, this study did not incorporate Mandarin proficiency into its analysis regarding its impact on occupations, leaving the influence and mechanics of Mandarin proficiency on occupational discrimination among domestic workers unclear. Thirdly, within the domestic service industry, it is imperative to investigate which language proficiency—Mandarin or workplace dialects—has a more profound impact on occupational discrimination. Understanding the similarities and differences in their functional roles is a critical question meriting further research and in-depth analysis.

COMPETING INTERESTS

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