

## CROSS-DOMAIN EFFECTS OF WORK-FAMILY CONFLICT ON ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENT AND PERFORMANCE

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Two important hypotheses concerning the consequences of work-family conflict are matching-domain effect and cross-domain effect. However, neither of these has been explicitly tested in a Chinese context despite the increasing attention given by business and organization researchers to the Chinese business world. Moreover, the extant evidence is less clear for performance outcomes than for attitudinal outcomes. In this study, we considered both economic and cultural characteristics of employees to examine the relationships between bidirectional work-family conflict and work outcomes in China. We surveyed a sample of 241 supervisor-subordinate dyads employed at 3 hospitals in Beijing and Xi'an and found that, among our participants, family-to-work conflict was negatively related to affective and normative commitment to the organization that employed them, and that family-to-work conflict, rather than work-to-family conflict, was negatively related to their task performance at work.

*Keywords:* work-family conflict, organizational commitment, task performance, China.

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In the extant work-family literature, researchers have tended to conclude that work-family conflict, especially work-to-family conflict (WFC), has a direct detrimental effect on work-related outcomes (for a meta-analysis, see Allen, Herst, Bruck, & Sutton, 2000). An underlying assumption has been that involvement in one role, either the work domain or the family domain, would exhaust the individual's resources and ultimately impair role functioning in that domain. In line with this assumption, a more recent meta-analysis showed that both WFC and family-to-work conflict (FWC) were related to each of three types of outcomes: work-related outcomes, family-related outcomes, and domain-nonspecific outcomes (Amstad, Meier, Fasel, Elfering, & Semmer, 2011). These researchers suggested that their findings provided stronger support for the matching-domain argument than for the cross-domain hypothesis.

However, in a review that we carried out of the above meta-analyses, two gaps were revealed in the data in the work-family literature. First, most studies included in the meta-analyses were based on single-source data on attitudinal outcomes, such as organizational commitment and job satisfaction, and there were far fewer studies in which performance data had been collected from a second source. Second, most of the empirical studies included in the meta-analyses were based on western samples, especially North American samples, which limited the generalizability of the conclusions to regions of the world that are culturally dissimilar to North America. In the light of the matching-domain and cross-domain hypotheses, in the current study our aim was to contribute to the literature by surveying a non-Western sample to test the relationships of bidirectional work-family conflict in regard to both attitudinal and performance outcomes.

## **Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses**

### **Matching-Domain Versus Cross-Domain Hypothesis**

Individuals often need to choose between "making a life" and "making a living" (Zhang, Straub, & Kusyk, 2007). According to role conflict theory, individuals have a fixed and finite amount of psychological and physiological resources to expend on fulfilling their role obligations (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000). Involvement in multiple roles will exhaust these resources and, ultimately, impair role functioning. According to the matching-domain hypothesis it is posited that the primary effect of work-family conflict resides in the domain from which the conflict originates (Amstad et al., 2011). In other words, WFC has its consequences primarily in the work domain, whereas FWC has its consequences mainly in the family domain. Nonetheless, Amstad et al. (2011) also stressed that this matching-domain hypothesis does not imply that the cross-domain hypothesis regarding the relationship between WFC/FWC conflict and family/

work outcomes should be abandoned, in that it is only the relationships with matching-domain outcomes that are stronger than with cross-domain outcomes.

According to the cross-domain hypothesis, it is posited that an increase in cognitive preoccupation or energy reduction in one role undermines an individual's ability or willingness to meet the obligations of the other role (Frone, 2003). This cross-domain hypothesis has yielded positive results in a number of robust studies, among which the most influential is possibly the one conducted by Frone, Russell, and Cooper (1992), in which they articulated and tested a model according to which work-related stressors travel through WFC and have negative effects on family outcomes, and family-related stressors travel through FWC and have negative effects on work outcomes. A recent meta-analysis by Ford, Heinen, and Langkamer (2007) further supported the proposition put forward in the hypothesis on the cross-domain effect that role stressors specific to the work domain and to the family domain are related to satisfaction outside of those domains. Specifically, they found that more variance in family satisfaction was explained by work domain variables, such as job involvement, job stress, and WFC, whereas a considerable amount of variability in job satisfaction was explained by family domain variables.

### **The Work-Life Context in China**

Despite the upswing in interest by both practitioners and academics in the work-life context in China, issues in the field of work-life conflict have received little attention from researchers in the Chinese organizational environment (Xiao & Cooke, 2012). It has often been claimed that Chinese employees have fewer work-family problems than those in other countries of the world because of the high degree of traditionalism in the Chinese culture, in that men focus on work and women focus on family, and also because of the cultural tradition of collectivism, which means that Chinese employees are highly identified with the organizations in which they work. However, we argued that work-family issues pertain to both women and men in Mainland China today. The empirical findings in previous studies also support the proposition that rapid social modernization in China has resulted in more work-family interference between the work and family domains (Lu, Siu, Spector, & Shi, 2009; Siu, Spector, Cooper, & Lu, 2005; Xiao & Cooke, 2012).

Further, empirical results seem to suggest that, at this critical juncture of an economic transformation period, the ways in which Chinese employees perceive, and react to, work-family conflict show some consistent patterns. Using a Chinese sample, Lu et al. (2009) did not find any significant negative correlations of WFC with job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and career satisfaction. In a recent study by Xiao and Cooke (2012) these researchers interviewed Chinese organizational leaders and workers and found that both groups had accepted

work-life conflicts as a fact of life, but that, choosing from among various strategies, each individual tended to adopt his or her own way of coping.

We also found it interesting that the results of another recent study by Lu, Tjosvold, Shi, and Wang (2012) echoed this trend, in that, when encountering a work-family conflict situation, Chinese working parents were more likely to turn to family members, rather than to leaders or coworkers in their work domain, for solutions. Therefore, in this study we argued that WFC might not have a negative relationship with work outcomes and that the cross-domain hypothesis may be more applicable than the matching-domain hypothesis to the Chinese work-life situation.

### **The Current Study**

In the light of the cross-domain hypothesis (Ford et al., 2007), in this study our aim was to investigate the relationships of work-family conflict and family-work conflict with individuals' organizational commitment and their task performance at work.

### **Work-Family Conflict and Organizational Commitment**

In a meta-analysis conducted by Amstad et al. (2011), these authors summarized the weighted mean correlation between WFC and organizational commitment and between FWC and organizational commitment and found that these were  $-.17$  and  $-.15$ , respectively. However, the studies included in both meta-analyses (Allen et al., 2000; Amstad et al., 2011) were based on Western samples. When they conducted a study with a Chinese sample of dual-career working parents, Lu et al. (2009) did not find a significant negative relationship between the WFC and affective commitment of their sample. Because of job security and income stability considerations, Chinese employees may give higher priority than their western counterparts to their work role, so there may be a weaker relationship between WFC and work outcomes. Instead, we reasoned that, consequently, role-related outcomes of FWC might be expected to lie in the work domain. With a fixed amount of physical, cognitive, and emotional energy available, employees may feel too drained to increase their investment of psychological and emotional resources in their work role, resulting in a low level of organizational commitment. Based on this reasoning and on the findings in previous research, our first proposition was:

**Hypothesis 1:** Family-to-work conflict will have a stronger negative relationship with affective commitment than will work-to-family conflict.

In a meta-analysis of correlates of organizational commitment, Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, and Topolnysky (2002) found that, without differentiating the direction of work-family conflict, continuance commitment was positively correlated with work-family conflict. Casper, Martin, Buffardi, and Erdwins

(2002) also explored the relationship of continuance commitment with two forms of work-family conflict, and found that continuance commitment was significantly positively related with WFC, but not with FWC. In both of these studies the authors point to a positive relationship between continuance commitment and WFC, but found that the relationship of continuance commitment with FWC was unclear. Because employees in China currently have a high sense of job insecurity in the environment of a turbulent transitional economy, we hypothesized that:

**Hypothesis 2:** Work-to-family conflict will have a positive relationship with continuance commitment, whereas family-to-work conflict will have a weak relationship with continuance commitment.

In the very few studies that have been conducted on work-family conflict and normative commitment, the findings have indicated that there was virtually no relationship between them (see the review by Meyer et al., 2002). Based on the strong family sense and the organizational moral obligation felt by Chinese employees, we considered that there might be a significant relationship between work-family conflict and normative commitment in a Chinese context. That is:

**Hypothesis 3:** Family-to-work conflict will have a stronger negative relationship with normative commitment than will work-to-family conflict.

### **Work-Family Conflict and Task Performance**

Findings concerning the performance consequences associated with WFC have been mixed. In their meta-analysis Allen et al. (2000) found that the weighted mean correlation observed across studies was  $-.12$ . Allen and colleagues also noted that only one study in the data pool gathered for their study used supervisor ratings of job performance, and the relationship between WFC and job performance in that study was found to be weak and nonsignificant. Gilboa, Shirom, Fried, and Cooper (2008) further reinforced this finding when they reported in their meta-analysis that work-family conflict was negatively correlated with self-reported performance, whereas the relationship between work-family conflict and supervisor-rated performance was weak and nonsignificant. A study conducted by Witt and Carlson (2006) is one of very few in which the relationship between supervisor-rated job performance and FWC has been specifically tested and these authors found that high levels of FWC led to low levels of job performance.

We also reasoned that role-related outcomes of FWC would include performance of core job tasks in the light of the hypothesis of cross-domain effect. Because high FWC hinders more involvement with work roles, employees do not possess sufficient physical and cognitive energy to invest more in their work role, resulting in an impaired quality of in-role task performance. Regarding the relationship between WFC and task performance, because high WFC actually implies a considerable amount of time and attention invested into work roles, we

reasoned that high WFC should not lead to deterioration in task performance at work. We thus hypothesized the following:

**Hypothesis 4:** Family-to-work conflict will have a stronger negative relationship with employees' task performance than will work-to-family conflict.

## Method

### Sample and Data Collection Procedure

Respondents who provided the data used in this study were drawn from three hospitals located in Beijing and Xi'an, People's Republic of China. We asked both supervisors and subordinates to participate in the survey we conducted for this study. Memoranda and survey forms were sent from personnel offices to supervisors and they were asked to participate in the study. Respondents were assured of the confidentiality of their responses and were informed that participation in the survey was voluntary. Each supervisor was also asked to distribute survey forms to two of his or her subordinates. Each respondent placed his or her completed survey form in a sealed envelope and returned it directly to a designated box in the personnel office of the hospital in which that respondent was employed.

Two sets of questions comprised the measures we used in the present study. First, the supervisory questionnaire contained the performance measures, in which supervisors were asked to evaluate the task performance of two immediate subordinates. The subordinates' questionnaires included measures of their perception of work-family conflict and their level of organizational commitment. All items adopted from existing instruments and used in the present study were translated into Chinese using a standard translation and back-translation procedure (Brislin, 1970). All items were measured on a 5-point scale, with response categories ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

From 183 supervisor forms we distributed, 137 supervisors returned their questionnaires, yielding a response rate of 74.9%. We received 266 subordinate questionnaires. We excluded 22 subordinate questionnaires from the analyses because the corresponding supervisor questionnaires were not returned. Another three subordinate questionnaires were dropped because many responses were left blank. In the final sample, there were 241 dyads matched.

### Measures

**WFC and FWC** were measured by two strain-based work-family conflict subscales, each consisting of three items, obtained from the questionnaire developed by Carlson, Kacmar, and Williams (2000). The Cronbach's alphas for the WFC and FWC scales were .78 and .82, respectively.

**Organizational commitment** was measured with an 18-item scale developed by Meyer, Allen, and Smith (1993) to measure employees' affective, continuance, and normative commitment to their organizations. The Cronbach's alphas for the affective, continuance, and normative scales were .79, .65, and .81, respectively.

**Task performance** was rated by the supervisor using an 11-item scale developed by Tsui, Pearce, Porter, and Tripoli (1997) for measuring employees' generic performance. The Cronbach's alpha for the scale was .94.

**Demographic variables.** We measured with separate single items the demographic variables of gender, age, marital status, parental status, organizational tenure, and position tenure.

## Results

The descriptive statistics, zero-order correlations, and Cronbach's alphas for the study variables are presented in Table 1. As shown in the table, the magnitude of the correlation between the two directions of work-family conflict further supports the suggestion that WFC and FWC are distinct but related constructs.

In addition to zero-order correlation results, we performed a series of hierarchical multiple regression analyses to test the hypotheses predicting work outcome variables. The first block consisted of demographic variables: sex, age, marital status, parental status, organizational tenure, and position tenure. The second block consisted of the two directions of work-family conflict. The results are presented in Table 2. Hypothesis 1 regarding the relationship between work-family conflict and organizational commitment received mixed support: FWC was negatively related to affective commitment ( $\beta = -.25, p < .01$ ), whereas the relationship between WFC and affective commitment was not significant ( $\beta = .039, p = ns$ ); further, FWC was negatively related to normative commitment ( $\beta = -.22, p < .05$ ). Hypothesis 2, in which we proposed that FWC would have a stronger negative relationship with task performance than would WFC, was supported: FWC was negatively related to task performance ( $\beta = -.25, p < .05$ ), whereas the relationship between WFC and task performance was not significant ( $\beta = .11, p = ns$ ).

## Discussion

The results suggest that, for the Chinese participants in our study, FWC, rather than WFC, had a significant impact on work outcomes, including their affective commitment, normative commitment, and task performance. The results demonstrate the applicability of the cross-domain effect to this study topic in modernized Chinese society, though the reasons underlying this applicability need to be further explicated.

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, Internal Consistencies, and Correlations of Constructs

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Gender (M = 0; F = 1)	.67	.47	--											
2. Age (in years)	33.06	7.48	-.29	--										
3. Marital status (Single = 0)	.74	.43	-.10	.18*	--									
4. Parental status (No = 0)	.66	.47	-.13	.32**	.80**	--								
5. Organization tenure (in years)	1.69	7.39	-.17*	.78**	.29**	.31**	--							
6. Position tenure (in years)	4.07	3.26	.01	.55**	.22**	.23**	.53**	--						
7. Family-to-work conflict	2.76	.58	.21**	-.20**	-.04	-.07	-.03	.11	--					
8. Work-to-family conflict	3.13	.58	.06	-.11	-.03	.00	-.10	.08	.47**	--				
9. Affective commitment	3.80	.63	-.14	.03	.08	.09	-.08	-.15	-.33**	-.09	--			
1. Continuance commitment	3.49	.71	.15*	.01	.10	.11	.10	-.03	.06	.15*	.28**	--		
11. Normative commitment	3.40	.71	-.08	.00	.05	.05	-.10	-.13	-.21**	.01	.71**	.33**	--	
12. Task performance	3.65	.67	-.03	.08	.01	-.04	.09	-.18*	-.14*	.00	.15**	.04	.12	-.94

Note.  $n = 211\sim 238$ , \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ . Cronbach's alpha reliabilities are in parentheses on the diagonal where appropriate.

Table 2. Results of Hierarchical Regression Analyses for Work-Family Conflict and Work Outcomes

Control variables	Affective commitment	Continuance commitment	Normative commitment	Task performance
Sex (M = 0; F = 1)	-.164	.071	-.127	-.082
Age (in years)	.103	-.073	.119	.069
Marital status (Single = 0)	.242*	.139	.244*	.270*
Parental status (No = 0)	.026	-.044	-.010	-.043
Organization tenure (in years)	-.307*	.126	-.318*	-.262*
Position tenure (in years)	-.116	-.041	-.061	-.049
Independent variables				
FWC	-.250**	.011		-.217*
WFC	.039	.139		.066
R <sup>2</sup>	.147	.025	.115	.147
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.112	.015	.078	.099
R <sup>2</sup> Change	.147	.025	.115	.033
Sig. F Change	.001	.711	.007	.069
				.189
				.058
				.048
				.041
				.045

Note. n = 211~214, \* p < .05, \*\* p < .01.

In general, the findings concerning organizational commitment support the cross-domain effect proposition. The results for affective commitment suggest that employees with a high level of FWC are not able to exert any further psychological and emotional resources than they currently use to perform their tasks at work, making them less likely to develop an affective bond with the organization. We found that there was a negative relationship between FWC and the normative commitment of our respondents. This may suggest that these employees were becoming more exposed to the influence of personal as well as organizational life, as the traditional Chinese moral loyalty and obligation to an organization is gradually diminishing in the environment of a market economy (Wong, Wong, Ngo, & Lui, 2005; Xiao & Cooke, 2012). According to Chinese traditional cultural values, individuals seek for balance between work and life. However, rather than providing individuals with conciliation opportunities, the separation of work and personal life that exists in modern Chinese society creates greater role conflict than was the case previously in these two settings. That lack of conciliation opportunity is especially reflected in the levels of employees' affective commitment and moral commitment to an organization, but not in the sense of a pure economic obligation that is implied by continuance commitment because the current rapid economic development in China provides individuals with more job opportunities and higher rotation than was previously the case.

Our findings regarding employees' task performance suggest that, although work and family play important roles in the lives of adults, employees who experience a high level of FWC may have fewer physiological and cognitive resources available to perform their jobs; therefore, their performance in the core competencies of the job such as standard, accuracy, and efficiency, may be influenced by their high FWC. These results contradict some previous findings based on self-reported data (van Steenbergen, Ellemers, & Mooijaart, 2007). The discrepancy may suggest that conclusions drawn on the basis of self-reported job performance should be cautious. Our findings related to employees' task performance in this study corroborate the findings in Witt and Carlson's (2006) study in that FWC, compared to WFC, had a stronger negative relationship with in-role job performance.

### **Implications**

In this study, our findings have demonstrated both divergence from, and convergence with, theoretical propositions derived from the West in the specific context of China. In contradiction to the matching-domain hypothesis, results in our study showed that WFC had no direct impact on desirable work outcomes such as affective commitment, normative commitment, and task performance for the Chinese participants in our research. Therefore, researchers should be

cautious in generalizing the matching-domain hypothesis to employees in China, for whom the cross-domain hypothesis may be more applicable. We, thus, reiterate the importance of recognizing the duality of work-family conflict, and especially the differences that may be found according to culture. For example, in a Chinese cultural context, exclusion of FWC measures or the use of mixed measures of both directions of work-family conflict may lead to mixed findings.

The practical implications of our findings are, firstly, that whereas, for a long time, evidence from work-family studies gave little indication to employers of any detriments to performance as a consequence of work-family issues, in our study we have demonstrated that work-family imbalance, especially family-to-work conflict, has a direct impact on employees' performance outcomes. Employers should not, and cannot, ignore the consequences of work-family issues simply for the sake of organizational effectiveness. Our findings also indicate that an effective way to tackle these issues is to help employees to fulfill the demands of their family role as effectively as is possible. Family-friendly work practices, such as flexible schedules and good child-care arrangements, can help to reduce the FWC experienced by employees, which, in turn, will improve employees' organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and task performance.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

In this study we proposed and tested the cross-domain effects of work-family conflict, but a limitation of our research was that we were unable to collect parallel outcome variables from matched family members in order to measure family outcomes. Future studies are necessary in which research is conducted to examine the impact of WFC on family outcomes. Another limitation was that we collected the data from hospitals in China; the generalization of the findings to other industries or cultures may be problematic, although the risk of a problem in this regard should be minimal as our results corroborate those reported in prior studies conducted with respondents from different cultures and industries. Finally, because the findings in this study were based on correlational analyses, the relationship between work-family constructs and work outcomes could demonstrate reverse causation.

In conclusion, in this study of work-family conflict among employees in Chinese hospitals we have highlighted the negative relationships between family-to-work conflict and certain work outcomes. The general applicability of the extant western literature to this field of study in China also suggests a potential cultural convergence in China in terms of work-family issues, especially in economically developed areas.

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