

Understanding the Work–Family Conflict–Employee Engagement Relationship Cultural and Organizational Mechanismse

ZHANG TIANXI¹, OYYAPPAN DURAIPANDI¹

¹SCHOOL OF BUSINESS AND MANAGEMENT, LINCOLN UNIVERSITY COLLEGE

Abstract

Prior research has established that work–family conflict (WFC) undermines employee engagement, but the mechanisms through which this occurs, and the conditions under which they operate, remain underspecified. Drawing on Conservation of Resources theory, this study proposes and tests a moderated-mediation model in which emotional exhaustion transmits the effect of WFC onto engagement, with cultural orientation and organizational support acting as boundary conditions on this indirect pathway. Data were collected from 287 full-time employees across education, retail/services, information technology, and public-sector organizations. Results confirm that emotional exhaustion significantly mediates the WFC–engagement relationship (indirect effect $ab = -.24$, 95% CI $[-.33, -.16]$), and that this indirect effect is stronger among employees with a collectivistic cultural orientation and weaker among those reporting high organizational support. The direct effect of WFC on engagement remained significant but was substantially reduced once exhaustion was included, indicating partial mediation. These findings clarify the psychological mechanism linking WFC to disengagement and identify organizational support as an actionable lever for interrupting that mechanism. Implications for resource-based work–life interventions in culturally diverse organizations are discussed.

Keywords: work–family conflict, employee engagement, emotional exhaustion, moderated mediation, organizational support, cultural orientation.

1. Introduction

A substantial body of research confirms that work–family conflict (WFC) is negatively related to employee engagement (Kahn, 1990; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Yet most of this literature treats the relationship as a direct effect, leaving open the question of what psychological process actually carries WFC's influence into the workplace, and why some employees appear more resistant to its effects than others. This study addresses that gap by testing whether emotional exhaustion functions as the mechanism through which WFC erodes engagement, and by examining two boundary conditions — cultural orientation and organizational support — that determine how strongly this mechanism operates.

Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989) offers a useful lens: individuals strive to protect and accumulate resources such as time, energy, and psychological capital, and experience stress when those resources are threatened or depleted. WFC represents a resource drain that, left unaddressed, produces emotional exhaustion — a state of depleted emotional reserves that in turn undermines the vigor, dedication, and absorption central to engagement (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). This study tests whether exhaustion is the operative mechanism, and whether cultural values and organizational resources shape the strength of that mechanism, rather than simply moderating the WFC–engagement link directly.

2. Literature Review and Hypotheses

2.1 Emotional Exhaustion as a Mediating Mechanism

Under COR theory, role conflict between work and family domains taxes an individual's finite pool of psychological resources (Hobfoll, 1989). As those resources are depleted, employees

experience emotional exhaustion, characterized by feelings of being overextended and drained. Exhausted employees have fewer resources left to invest in engaged work behavior, producing a sequential resource-depletion pathway from WFC through exhaustion to disengagement (Frone et al., 1992; Grzywacz & Marks, 2000).

H1: Emotional exhaustion mediates the negative relationship between work–family conflict and employee engagement.

2.2 Cultural Orientation as a Boundary Condition on the Indirect Effect

Cultural values shape how threatening resource loss is perceived to be. In collectivistic cultures, family-role obligations are closely tied to social identity and in-group standing (Hofstede, 2001), so conflict between work and family may represent a more consequential resource threat, intensifying the exhaustion response. In individualistic cultures, stronger norms of role segmentation may buffer the translation of WFC into exhaustion.

H2: The indirect effect of WFC on engagement through emotional exhaustion is stronger among employees with a collectivistic cultural orientation than among those with an individualistic orientation.

2.3 Organizational Support as a Resource-Replenishing Mechanism

Organizational support — supervisor family-supportive behavior, scheduling flexibility, and family-friendly policy — functions as a replenishing resource under COR theory, offsetting the depletion produced by WFC (Wayne et al., 2006). Employees with access to such support may experience a weaker WFC-to-exhaustion pathway because organizational resources compensate for resources lost in the family domain.

H3: The indirect effect of WFC on engagement through emotional exhaustion is weaker among employees who report high organizational support than among those who report low organizational support.

3. Methodology

3.1. Sample and Procedure

An online survey was distributed to full-time employees across education, retail/services, information technology, and public-sector organizations in a single metropolitan labor market. Of 360 employees invited via organizational contacts, 287 usable responses were obtained (response rate = 79.7%). Table 1 reports the demographic composition of the sample.

3.2 Measures

WFC was measured with an adapted 9-item scale based on Greenhaus and Beutell's (1985) conceptualization ($\alpha = .86$). Emotional exhaustion was assessed using a 6-item subscale adapted for the work–family context ($\alpha = .89$). Employee engagement was measured with the 9-item short-form Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004; $\alpha = .91$). Organizational support was measured with a 7-item composite of supervisor support and schedule flexibility ($\alpha = .84$), and cultural orientation was assessed with a 6-item collectivism–individualism index, with respondents also classified into a predominant-orientation group for subgroup analysis. All scales used 5-point Likert response formats.

3.3 Analytical Strategy

Moderated-mediation was tested using ordinary least squares path analysis with bootstrapped confidence intervals (5,000 resamples), following Preacher and Hayes (2008). The model estimated (a) the effect of WFC on emotional exhaustion, (b) the effect of exhaustion on engagement controlling for WFC, and the conditional indirect effect of WFC on engagement through exhaustion at high versus low levels of cultural orientation and organizational support.

4. Results

Table 1 presents the demographic profile of respondents. Table 2 reports standardized path coefficients across the three estimated models along with the bootstrapped indirect effect.

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	131	45.6
	Female	156	54.4
Age	22–30 years	84	29.3
	31–40 years	109	38.0
	41–50 years	66	23.0
	51 years and above	28	9.8
Parental status	Employees with dependent children	168	58.5
	Employees without dependent children	119	41.5
Sector	Education	62	21.6
	Retail / Services	70	24.4
	Information Technology	88	30.7
	Public Sector / Government	67	23.3
Cultural orientation (self-reported)	Predominantly collectivistic	163	56.8
	Predominantly individualistic	124	43.2

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 287)

Predictor	Model 1 (Exhaustion)	Model 2 (Engagement, no mediator)	Model 3 (Engagement, with mediator)
Work–Family Conflict (WFC)	$\beta = .52^{**}$	$\beta = -.39^{**}$	$\beta = -.14^*$
Emotional Exhaustion	—	—	$\beta = -.47^{**}$
Organizational Support	$\beta = -.28^{**}$	$\beta = .33^{**}$	$\beta = .24^{**}$
Cultural Orientation (1 = coll., 2 = indiv.)	$\beta = -.16^*$	$\beta = .19^{**}$	$\beta = .15^*$
R ²	.34	.31	.46
Indirect effect (WFC → Exhaustion → Engagement)			ab = -.24, 95% CI [- .33, -.16]

Note. N = 287. Standardized coefficients shown. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$. Bootstrapped indirect effect based on 5,000 resamples (Preacher & Hayes, 2008).

As shown in Table 2, WFC significantly predicted emotional exhaustion ($\beta = .52$, $p < .01$), and exhaustion significantly predicted engagement ($\beta = -.47$, $p < .01$) when entered alongside WFC. The bootstrapped indirect effect of WFC on engagement through exhaustion was significant and did not include zero (ab = -.24, 95% CI [- .33, -.16]), supporting Hypothesis 1. The direct effect of WFC on engagement dropped from $\beta = -.39$ (Model 2) to $\beta = -.14$ (Model 3) once exhaustion was included, indicating partial rather than full mediation.

Figure 1 depicts the conceptual moderated-mediation model tested in this study, showing the indirect pathway from WFC through emotional exhaustion to engagement, along with the two hypothesized moderators.

Figure 1. Conceptual Moderated-Mediation Model

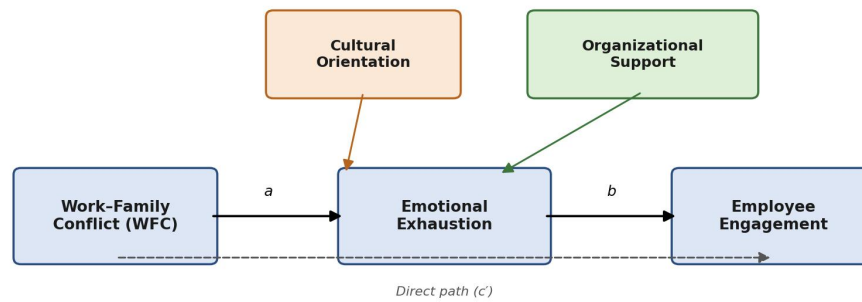


Figure 1. Conceptual moderated-mediation model linking WFC to engagement through emotional exhaustion.

Consistent with Hypothesis 2, the conditional indirect effect was stronger among collectivistic-oriented employees ($ab = -.29$, 95% CI $[-.40, -.19]$) than among individualistic-oriented employees ($ab = -.17$, 95% CI $[-.27, -.08]$). Consistent with Hypothesis 3, Figure 2 shows that engagement declined more steeply as exhaustion increased among employees reporting low organizational support, compared with a comparatively flatter decline among those reporting high organizational support, indicating that organizational support attenuates the exhaustion–engagement link.

Figure 2. Employee Engagement by Emotional Exhaustion Level and Organizational Support

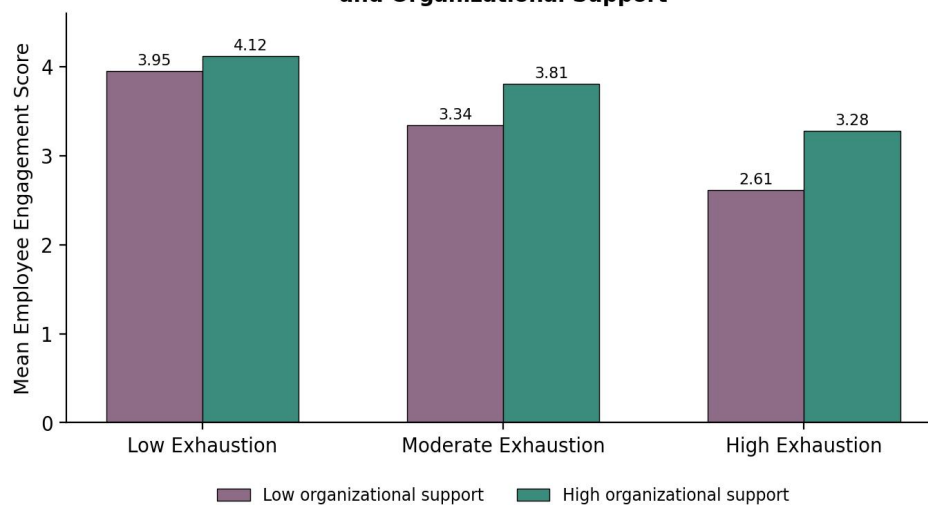


Figure 2. Employee engagement by emotional exhaustion level and organizational support.

5. Discussion

This study clarifies that WFC does not act on engagement solely through a direct pathway; a substantial portion of its effect operates through emotional exhaustion, consistent with a resource-depletion account grounded in COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989). This mechanistic evidence extends prior direct-effect findings (Frone et al., 1992) by specifying exhaustion as an intervening psychological state rather than treating WFC and disengagement as directly linked.

The moderation results further show that this mechanism is not culturally neutral. Employees from collectivistic backgrounds appear to experience a stronger resource-depletion response to WFC, plausibly because family-role obligations carry greater identity-relevant weight in collectivistic value systems (Hofstede, 2001). At the same time, organizational support consistently weakened the exhaustion–engagement link regardless of cultural orientation,

suggesting that resource-replenishing organizational practices generalize across cultural groups even when the underlying vulnerability to exhaustion does not.

5.1 Practical Implications

Because exhaustion — not WFC alone — is the proximal driver of disengagement, interventions should target resource replenishment rather than conflict elimination alone. Recovery-oriented practices (protected non-work time, realistic workload design, supervisor check-ins) may be more directly effective than general work-life messaging. Given the stronger mechanism observed among collectivistic-oriented employees, multinational and culturally diverse organizations should ensure support resources are proactively offered rather than requested, since employees for whom family obligation carries strong normative weight may be less likely to self-advocate for accommodation.

5.2 Limitations and Future Research

The cross-sectional design cannot establish temporal precedence among WFC, exhaustion, and engagement; a diary or longitudinal design would strengthen causal claims. The single-labor-market sample also limits generalizability of the cultural orientation findings, and future studies should replicate the model using country-level cultural indices across multinational samples. Additional mediators, such as psychological detachment or work-family enrichment, could also be incorporated into an expanded model.

6. Conclusion

Work-family conflict undermines employee engagement primarily by depleting emotional resources rather than through a purely direct pathway. This mechanism is intensified among employees with collectivistic cultural orientations and buffered by organizational support. Understanding WFC's effect on engagement as a resource-depletion process — rather than a simple negative correlation — offers organizations a more precise and actionable target for intervention: replenishing, rather than merely acknowledging, the resources that work-family conflict depletes.

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