Work-Family Conflict and Career Success: Mediated by Work Engagement and Moderated by Work-Family Support

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Abstract: Against the backdrop of China's three-child policy, work-family conflict has become a prominent issue affecting employees' career development. This study explores the relationship between work-family conflict, work engagement, work-family support, and career success, using a sample of 533 employees from various enterprises across multiple regions in China. The results indicate that (1) work-family conflict has a significant negative impact on career success; (2) work engagement plays a partial mediating role in the relationship between work-family conflict and career success; (3) work-family support negatively moderates the relationship between work-family conflict and work engagement and weakens the mediating effect of work engagement. Practical implications for human resource managers are proposed to balance employees' work and family life and promote their career success.

Keywords: Work-family conflict; Work engagement; Career success; Work-family support

1. Introduction

China's implementation of the three-child policy in May 2021 represents a pivotal demographic intervention amid accelerating population aging trends. Official statistics reveal that the national fertility rate plummeted to 1.3 in 2020, far below the replacement threshold of 2.1, while the proportion of citizens aged 65 and above is projected to exceed 20% by 2035. To counter this trajectory, the government has introduced complementary measures such as extended parental leave and childcare subsidies. However, these initiatives face systemic challenges in translating policy intent into tangible outcomes. The National Health Commission's 2022 National Fertility Intentions Survey uncovered a striking revelation: 68.3% of surveyed parents cited "work-family imbalance" as their primary barrier to additional childbirth, surpassing economic constraints and housing affordability. This paradox underscores a critical tension in contemporary China—while state policies aim to encourage population growth, workplace dynamics inadvertently perpetuate fertility hesitancy through rigid career expectations and

limited support systems.

The intensifying competition in China's labor market further exacerbates this dilemma. As urban professionals increasingly equate career advancement with social status and financial security, the psychological and temporal demands of professional success often collide with caregiving responsibilities. A 2023 study by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences found that 76% of dual-earner households in tier-1 cities reported experiencing "chronic work-family spillover", where unpaid domestic labor disproportionately falls on women, even among managerial-level employees. This phenomenon aligns with global labor trends but carries unique cultural dimensions in China, where Confucian values emphasize filial piety, and filial obligations often intensify intergenerational caregiving burdens. The resulting strain on career trajectories poses a paradox: while career success remains a key motivator for workforce participation, its pursuit may inadvertently suppress fertility decisions through time deprivation and emotional exhaustion.

Existing scholarship on work-family conflict (WFC) has predominantly focused on its antecedents (e.g., job demands, spousal support) and outcomes (e.g., burnout, marital strain), with limited exploration of its nuanced relationship with career progression. This study proposes a moderated mediation model that integrates work engagement as a psychological mechanism and work-family support as a contextual buffer. The implications of this research extend beyond academic discourse. Human resources managers can adopt hybrid work models and mentorship programs to help employees navigate competing priorities. By elucidating the engagement-driven pathways through which WFC shapes career trajectories, this study bridges theoretical gaps in boundary theory and offers actionable strategies for managing demographic transitions in rapidly urbanizing economies.

2. Research hypotheses

2.1. Definition of core concepts

Work-Family Conflict: Adopting the definition by Greenhaus et al. (1985), it refers to the bidirectional interference between work and family roles due to incompatible time, behavior, or pressure, including two dimensions: work interfering with family and family interfering with work [1].

Career Success: Based on Eby et al. (2003), it includes career satisfaction (subjective dimension) and career competitiveness (objective dimension), reflecting employees' psychological sense of achievement and internal/external competitiveness in the workplace [2].

Work Engagement: Referring to Schaufeli et al. (2002), it is a positive work state consisting of three dimensions: vigor, dedication, and absorption, reflecting employees' emotional investment and behavioral participation in work [3].

Work-Family Support: According to Li Yongxin et al. (2009), it is a four-dimensional construct comprising organizational support, leadership support, emotional support, and instrumental support, encompassing various support resources from both work and family domains [4].

2.2. Research hypotheses

Work-Family Conflict and Career Success: From the perspective of role stress theory, work-family conflict is a typical form of inter-role conflict that generates continuous psychological stress for individuals. As a chronic stressor, it consumes employees' limited time, energy, and emotional resources, which are essential for maintaining high work efficiency and pursuing career development [5]. When employees are caught in the tug-of-war between work and family roles, they may have to sacrifice work tasks to cope with family affairs or neglect family

responsibilities to meet work demands, both of which can lead to declines in work performance and a sense of frustration in career development. In the long run, this will further reduce their career satisfaction and weaken their competitiveness in the job market, ultimately hindering their chances of achieving career success. Therefore, this study proposes:

H1: Work-family conflict has a significant negative impact on career success.

Mediating Role of Work Engagement: According to the conservation of resources theory, individuals strive to obtain and maintain valuable resources, and the loss of resources triggers negative psychological and behavioral responses. Work-family conflict essentially represents a loss of personal resources, which will trigger role pressure and emotional exhaustion, thereby weakening employees' work engagement [6]. Work engagement, a positive, fulfilling work-related psychological state, comprises three core dimensions: vigor (high energy and resilience at work), dedication (strong involvement and a sense of significance at work), and absorption (full concentration and difficulty detaching from work) [3]. High work engagement enables employees to actively invest in their work tasks, continuously improve work quality and efficiency, and thus gain more opportunities for promotion and development, which, in turn, promotes career success. It can be inferred that work-family conflict will reduce work engagement by consuming resources and, in turn, affect career success through work engagement. Based on this, this study proposes:

H2: Work engagement mediates the relationship between work-family conflict and career success.

Moderating Role of Work-Family Support: Social support theory holds that social support can act as a "buffer" to alleviate the negative impact of stressors on individuals by providing material or spiritual resources. Work-family support, as a specific form of social support in the work-family interface, includes multidimensional resources such as organizational support, leadership support, emotional support, and instrumental support [4]. These support resources can help offset the resource loss caused by work-family conflict: for example, flexible working systems help employees balance work and family time; care and understanding from leaders reduce their psychological pressure; and organizational recognition of work-family balance enhances their sense of security. With sufficient work-family support, the negative impact of work-family conflict on work engagement will be weakened [7]. Furthermore, since work engagement mediates the relationship between work-family conflict and career success, the moderating effect of work-family support on the conflict-engagement relationship will further influence the strength of the entire mediating path. Specifically, when the level of work-family support is high, the mediating effect of work engagement will be weaker; when the support level is low, the mediating effect will be stronger. Therefore, this study proposes:

H3: Work-family support negatively moderates the relationship between work-family conflict and work engagement.

H4: Work-family support moderates the mediating effect of work engagement between work-family conflict and career success, and the higher the level of work-family support, the weaker the mediating effect.

Based on the above hypotheses, this study constructs a moderated mediation model, with work-family conflict as the independent variable, career success as the dependent variable, work engagement as the mediating variable, work-family support as the moderating variable, and gender, age, and education level as control variables.

3. Research methods

3.1. Research sample

An electronic questionnaire survey was conducted among employees from various enterprises (state-owned,

foreign-funded, private, and public institutions) in Chongqing, Guangdong, Beijing, and other provinces or cities. A pre-survey with 55 questionnaires was conducted to optimize wording, and the formal survey was conducted from January to February 2024. A total of 556 questionnaires were collected, and 533 valid samples were obtained after excluding invalid ones, with an effective rate of 95.8%. Sample characteristics: 52.5% male, 47.5% female; 54.0% aged 21–30; 75.6% with a college or bachelor's degree.

3.2. Measurement

All scales adopted a 5-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree).

Work-Family Conflict: Greenhaus et al. (1985) scale, 10 items, Cronbach's α=0.91.

Career Success: Eby et al. (2003) scale, 11 items, Cronbach's α=0.90.

Work Engagement: Simplified UWES scale by Schaufeli et al. (2002), 9 items, Cronbach's α=0.88.

Work-Family Support: Li et al. (2009) scale, 30 items, Cronbach's α=0.95.

Control Variables: Gender (0=male, 1=female), age, education level (1=high school and below, 5=doctoral and above).

3.3. Data analysis methods

SPSS 24.0 and AMOS 23.0 were used for reliability and validity tests, correlation analysis, and regression analysis. The PROCESS plug-in (Model 4 and Model 7) tested mediating and moderated mediating effects using 5000 Bootstrap samples.

4. Research results

4.1. Reliability, validity, and correlation analysis

Cronbach's α coefficients of all variables exceeded 0.8, indicating good internal consistency. Confirmatory factor analysis showed the four-factor model had optimal fit indices (x^2/df=1.15, IFI=0.99, CFI=0.99, RMSEA=0.02), confirming convergent and discriminant validity. Work-family conflict was significantly negatively correlated with work engagement (r=-0.43, $P<0.001$) and career success (r=-0.44, $P < 0.001$). Work engagement was significantly positively correlated with career success (r=0.57, $P < 0.001$), providing preliminary support for hypotheses.

4.2. Hypothesis test

Main Effects: Work-family conflict negatively affected career success ($\beta = -0.43$, $P < 0.001$) and work engagement ($\beta = -0.42$, $P < 0.001$). Work engagement positively affected career success ($\beta = 0.56$, $P < 0.001$).

Mediating Effect: After adding work engagement, the effect of work-family conflict on career success decreased to $\beta = -0.24$ ($P < 0.001$). Bootstrap test confirmed a significant indirect effect (Effect = -0.19, 95% CI [-0.24, -0.15]), indicating partial mediation.

Moderating Effect: The interaction term of work-family conflict and work-family support positively affected work engagement (β=0.25, $P < 0.001$). The negative impact of conflict on engagement was weaker in the high-support group ($\beta = -0.15$) than in the low-support group ($\beta = -0.65$).

Moderated Mediating Effect: Bootstrap results showed mediating effects of -0.30 (low support), -0.18 (medium support), and -0.07 (high support), with a significant difference index (0.12, 95% CI [0.08, 0.15]).

5. Discussion and implications

Work-family conflict has a significant negative impact on career success, with bidirectional conflict reducing employees' career satisfaction and competitiveness. Work engagement partially mediates the relationship between conflict and career success, as conflict indirectly hinders career success by weakening work vigor, dedication, and concentration. Work-family support negatively moderates the conflict-engagement relationship and weakens the mediating effect of work engagement, with multi-dimensional support providing the strongest buffer.

Practically, this study suggests that human resources managers convey the value of balance through system publicity and case sharing, alleviating employees' psychological pressure; establish communication mechanisms to clarify supervisors' responsibilities for employees' family support and strengthen communication between enterprises and employees' families; enhance instrumental support to provide flexible leave for family emergencies and organize family-oriented team-building activities to balance work and family.

Limitations include convenience sampling, cross-sectional design, and self-reported data. Future research should expand sample coverage, adopt longitudinal tracking, and introduce additional variables (e.g., career resilience) to enrich the model.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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