

Work-family conflict and Employee Loyalty: Exploring the Moderating Effects of Positive Thinking Coping

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Abstract

This paper extends the job-related outcomes predicted by work-family and family-work conflict by exploring employee loyalty. Employee loyalty is defined as active behaviours, whether through voice or actions, that express pride and support in the organisation. Despite the importance of employee loyalty, it is a seldom explored outcome in the work-family field. With a sample of 203 New Zealand Government department workers, conflict of both types (work-family and family-work) was found to be negatively associated with employee loyalty. Furthermore, positive thinking coping was explored as a moderator of these negative relationships. Positive thinking coping was found to have significant moderating effects, with respondents with low levels of positive thinking having lower levels of employee loyalty than those with higher positive thinking when both types of conflict increased. The implications for future outcome related studies of work-family conflict are discussed.

Keywords

Work-family conflict, employee loyalty, positive thinking coping, moderating effects.

Introduction

Work-family conflict (WFC) is defined as “a form of interrole conflict in which the role pressures from the work and family domains are mutually incompatible in some respect” (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985: 77). Work-family conflict research has emerged out of changes in the workplace over the past half a century, including longer working hours, more women in working, working mothers and working parents and the importance of dual-career couples (Haar, Roche, & Taylor, 2012; Haar, 2006a, 2008). This is further exacerbated with technology, where organisations can intrude on employees’ afterhours, for example through smartphones and emails. This has prompted France to adopt new legislation that allows employees to ignore emails outside standard work hours (French workers earn ‘right to disconnect’, 2017). Thus, the ability to sufficiently juggle work and family roles is difficult and ultimately leads to greater WFC (Haar, 2006a). Ultimately, the pressures on employees to juggle these roles has led to Haar (2007) stating that “balancing work and family issues have become increasingly important for both employees and employers, and are a universal worldwide phenomenon” (p. 69).

Employee loyalty – despite decades of downsizing – has still been found to be an important factor in the performance of individuals and ultimately their firms. Yee, Yeung,

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and Cheng (2010) noted that many researchers focused on the links between employee attributes, such as loyalty, and job performance of the employee (Hunter & Thatcher, 2007; Meyer, Becker, & Vandenberghe, 2004). Thus, a loyal employee is likely to expend additional effort and perform better than co-workers with less loyalty. Yee et al. (2010) notes that the links between employee loyalty and firm performance are understudied and while some researchers have explored employee attitudes and firm performance linkages (e.g., Sun, Aryee, & Law, 2007), Yee et al. (2010) found empirical evidence that employee loyalty was part of a path model to influencing firm performance. Thus, employee loyalty builds service quality, which in turn influences customer attitudes and behaviours, and ultimately firm performance (*ibid*). Thus, employee loyalty is an important construct to be exploring.

The present paper explores the links between work-family conflict and employee loyalty and makes a number of contributions. First, work-family and family-work conflict are tested towards employee loyalty and found to be significant influences. Second, positive coping strategies are tested and supported as a way for employees to buffer the detrimental influence of conflict on employee loyalty. Overall, the present study provides insights into not only how work and family roles can be detrimental to an important outcome like employee loyalty, but how employees can cope with the role interference to minimise the detrimental effects.

Work-Family Conflict

The WFC literature has established the methodology of exploring conflict from both the work and the family roles. Earlier studies focused on a single-directional approach to conflict, where workplace issues interfering with the home was the sole focus. However, this earlier approach has been criticised as being a limitation (Frone, Russell, & Cooper, 1997) because it cannot be assumed that relationships from one domain (e.g. workplace) are similar for the other domain (e.g. family). In response, WFC studies have established work-family conflict (WFC) and family-work conflict (FWC) as the acceptable norm (Kossek & Ozeki, 1998). For the present study, WFC is defined as conflict from the workplace interfering with the home, while FWC is conflict from the home interfering with the workplace, and Haar et al. (2012) highlighted the importance of testing both dimensions of conflict towards work outcomes.

A major focus of the WFC literature has been to explore what influence conflict from employees two central roles (work and family) has on outcomes. While a number of studies have included life satisfaction (for a review see Kossek & Ozeki, 1998), and psychological distress (e.g. Frone, 2000), the dominant focus has been on job-related outcomes. Of particular interest has been job satisfaction (Mesmer-Magnus & Viswesvaran, 2005; Adams, King, & King, 1996; Kossek & Ozeki, 1998) and turnover intention (Mesmer-Magnus & Viswesvaran, 2005; Anderson, Coffey, & Byerly, 2002).

The focus on job-related outcomes has been important because understanding that family issues interfering into the workplace can reduce job-related outcomes has undoubtedly influenced the adoption of work-family practices into the workplace (Haar & Spell, 2004). Further, understanding that employees with workplace issues interfering with their

family lives may be more likely to leave an organisation, or be less satisfied and less productive, may also encourage organisations to address workloads and job design issues. Consequently, the importance of WFC studies on job-related is well established. However, while many job attitudes have been explored, employee loyalty appears to have been neglected as a potential outcome of work-family conflict (see Mesmer-Magnus & Viswesvaran, 2005; Eby, Casper, Lockwood, Bordeaux, & Brinley, 2005). This paper considers whether WFC will have a negative influence on employee loyalty, and whether how employees cope with general workplace issues helps reduce the negative influences of WFC. This focus is important because while many organisations discourse the importance of a loyal workforce, few studies have explored how this outcome may be influenced by conflict.

Employee Loyalty

Rusbult, Farrell, Rogers, and Mainous (1988) defined employee loyalty as “passively but optimistically waiting for conditions to improve-giving public and private support to the organisation, waiting and hoping for improvement, or practicing good citizenship” (p. 601). Haar (2006b) defined employee loyalty “as giving public and private support for the organization” (p. 1944). Thus, employee loyalty might be shown by publicly wearing an organisational-branded article of clothing, and privately by sticking up for the organisation when someone criticises it. Similar to Niehoff, Moorman, Blakely, and Fuller (2001), the present study takes an active and applied focus towards employee loyalty, and defines employee loyalty as active behaviours, whether through voice or actions, that express pride and support in the organisation.

It is important to note that loyalty and organisational commitment while similar are distinct constructs. According to Jaros, Jermier, Koehler, and Sincich (1993), loyalty and organisational commitment are both attitudes about an organisation and a set of behaviours. These authors noted the faithfulness towards an organisation (employee loyalty) does not have to be related to a deep emotional attachment to the organisation (organisational commitment). Consequently, an employee might exhibit employee loyalty to their organisation by speaking positively about it; however, they may not be committed to the organisations values.

Social exchange theory is about a relationship of mutually contingent, tangible and intangible exchanges (Dyne & Ang, 1998). Haar (2006b) states that: “Social exchange theory suggests that employees who value benefits received from their organization, such as pay, fringe benefits or working conditions, will reciprocate with more positive work attitudes” (p. 1944).

Similarly, those who receive detrimental influences – such as greater WFC – are likely to result in lower employee loyalty. Lambert (2000) described social exchange theory as recognising conditions under which an employee may feel obligated to reciprocate to their organisation when they personally benefit from an action (e.g. pay rise, value practice etc.). This employer-employee exchange is conditional in nature, because it has not been established beforehand (Blau, 1964).

The related norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960) suggests this ‘give and take’ may produce benefits for both parties. Recently, studies have used social exchange theory and the related norm of reciprocity to explain why work-family practices elicit improved employee attitudes (Haar & Spell, 2004; Lambert, 2000). Similarly, social exchange theory has been used to explain employee loyalty (Roehling, Roehling, & Moen, 2001). Thus, employees who personally benefit from some action, resource, or reward, may reciprocate with increased loyalty. In effect, the felt obligation is repaid by exhibiting greater loyalty, such as frequent positive comments about the organisation to friends and families. Remembering that employee loyalty can ultimately influence firm performance through a process of enhanced service and customer satisfaction (Yee et al., 2010).

Schalk and Freese (1997) noted that employee loyalty links with a number of behaviours, including organisational citizenship, attendance and turnover. While social exchange theory has been used to explain positive attitudes linked to work-family practices, this paper suggests feelings of obligation and reciprocity may diminish as conflict from the office and home increase. While distinct from employee loyalty, organisational commitment has been explored as an outcome of work-family conflict (Good, Sisler, & Gentry, 1988; Good, Page, & Young, 1996; Eby et al., 2005). Shaffer, Harrison, Gilley, and Luk (2001) noted that organisational commitment is related to social exchange theory. Hence, there is some previous justification to exploring attitudes relating to social exchange theory (employee loyalty) as work-family conflict outcomes.

It might be expected that employees with increased workplace issues interfering in the home will be less likely to expound the virtues of the organisation. For example, an employee working over the weekend on some urgent work report might be less positive about the organisation and its workload to family and friends. Similarly, an employee with increased family issues interfering with the workplace might have less time for citizenship related behaviours, thus also reducing employee loyalty. The employee might also blame the organisation for failing to support their family issues, as such support is noted as having a positive influence (Haar & Roche, 2008; 2010).

While employee loyalty is a related solely to feelings from the work domain, a meta-analysis by Kossek and Ozeki (1998) found that both WFC and FWC consistently were negatively related to a work domain attitude (job satisfaction). As there is evidence that conflict from both the home and office can negatively influence job-related attitudes; the present study explores employee loyalty as an outcome for both types of conflict. The present study suggests that employees reporting greater interference from their work role into their family (and vice-versa) will report lower employee loyalty. Thus, the first hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1: WFC will be negative related to employee loyalty.

Hypothesis 2: FWC will be negative related to employee loyalty.

Positive Thinking Coping

In addition to the direct effects of WFC on employee loyalty, how employees generally cope with work situations is also explored as a potential moderating effect. It has been suggested that few WFC studies have considered moderation effects (Fu & Shaffer, 2000). Positive thinking coping, which is defined as recasting work situations positively (Armstrong-Stassen, 1998), was chosen as a potential moderator because active coping strategies, as opposed to inactive strategies, provide the best buffering effects (Jex, Bliese, Buzzell, & Primeau, 2001). This is because active coping strategies may allow employees to circumvent the stressor or amend its effects (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989). For example, an employee with a weekend work assignment (WFC) might recast the work as an opportunity to show their boss ‘what they can do’, thus putting a positive spin on the event, and perhaps telling disappointed family members that this is ‘a big opportunity’? This is distinct from other coping strategies such as acting with passive resignation (Armstrong-Stassen, 1998).

In effect, the interference of work into the home becomes nullified because the situation has become positive rather than negative. Similarly, when a family crisis interferes with work (FWC), the employee may recast the situation positively (e.g. ‘I’m a winner and I can handle this’) and thus buffer potential FWC effects. As such, it is expected that positive thinking coping will weaken the negative relationships between conflict and employee loyalty because an employee with higher positive thinking coping strategies casts themselves as being able to manage any situation positively, and thus they will minimise the detrimental influences of conflict. This leads to the last set of hypotheses.

Hypothesis 3: Positive thinking coping will weaken the negative relationship between WFC and employee loyalty.

Hypothesis 4: Positive thinking coping will weaken the negative relationship between FWC and employee loyalty.

Method

Sample and Procedures

Data were collected from a New Zealand Government department in the financial services sector. The 622 employees were spread over a wide geographical region. There were a total of 203 participants (32.6 per cent response rate) between the ages of 18 and 65 years, who responded to two matched surveys sent through the organisation’s Intranet. Two surveys were administered, with a four-week time lag, to reduce the possibility of common method variance. The first questionnaire contained demographics, criterion and moderating variables, while survey two contained the predictor variables. On average, the participants were 40.5 years old, Caucasian (88 per cent), married (81 per cent), female (75 per cent), parents (74 per cent) and union members (67 per cent). Average tenure was 12.6 years, with 73 per cent blue collar and 27 percent white collar. On average, respondents earned between \$30,000-\$40,000 and 40 per cent held some tertiary or university qualification.

Measures

WFC was measured using the 14-item Inventory of Work-Family Conflict (Greenhaus, Callanan, & Godshalk, 2000), with statements divided equally (7 each) between work and family interference, with anchors 1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree. WFC items included “After work, I come home too tired to do some of the things I’d like to do”, and “My job makes it difficult to be the kind of spouse, partner or parent I’d like to be”. FWC items included “My family takes up time I would like to spend working”, and “At times, my personal problems make me irritable at work”. The Cronbach’s alphas for these measures were respectable at $\alpha=.73$ (WFC) and $\alpha=.86$ (FWC).

Employee Loyalty was measured using seven items by Rusbult et al. (1988), coded 1=strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree. Sample questions are “I will speak highly of the organisation to friends” and “Employees shouldn’t criticise this organisation”. Exploratory factor analysis (principal components, varimax rotation) was conducted, and all seven items loaded onto a single component with an eigenvalue of 2.90, accounting for 41.4 per cent of the variance. This scale had a good reliability of $\alpha=.74$.

Positive Thinking Coping was a 4-item scale by Armstrong-Stassen (1998), coded 1=did not at all, 5= did this a great deal. Respondents were asked how they cope with general workplace situations. A sample item is “Tried to think of myself as a winner-as someone who always comes through”. A high score indicates a coping strategy based on being more positive. This scale had a good reliability of $\alpha=.76$.

A number of demographic variables that have been found to influence WFC were controlled for (Fu & Shaffer, 2000; Erdwins, Buffardi, Casper, & O’Brien, 2001; Major, Klein, & Ehrhart, 2002; Haar et al., 2012). These variables were gender (1=female, 0=male), marital status (1=married/de facto, 0=single), family size (total number of children), and total hours worked (on average per week).

Analysis

To examine the direct effects of WFC and FWC on employee loyalty (Hypotheses 1 and 2), and the potential moderating effects of positive thinking coping (Hypotheses 3 and 4), separate hierarchical regression analysis were conducted. Control variables (gender, marital status, family size, and total hours worked) were entered in Step 1. There were separate equations for WFC and FWC in Step 2. The potential moderator (positive thinking coping) was entered in Step 3, and the interaction effects (predictor multiplied by moderator) were entered in Step 4. Following Aiken and West’s (1991) recommendation, the centering procedure was used where interaction variables are z-scored. Consistent with Cohen and Cohen (1983) recommendations, regression coefficients for the control effects were obtained from Step 1 in each analysis, predictor effects were obtained from Step 2, moderator effects were obtained from Step 3, and interaction effects were obtained from Step 4.

Results

Descriptive statistics for all variables are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Correlations and Descriptive Statistics of the Study Variables

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Total Hours Worked	38.3	5.4	--				
2. WFC	2.5	.80	.09	--			
3. FWC	2.1	.61	.02	.67**	--		
4. Positive Thinking Coping	3.1	.70	.08	.04	-.02	--	
5. Employee Loyalty	4.4	.95	-.02	-.20**	-.20**	.05	--

N=203, *P< .05, **P< .01

Employee loyalty was significantly correlated to both WFC and FWC (both $r = -.20$, $p < .01$). This supports examining employee loyalty as an outcome of work-family conflict. Further, WFC was significantly correlated with FWC ($r = .67$, $p < .01$). While this correlation is high, it is below the threshold of concept redundancy (Morrow, 1983).

Results of the regressions for Hypotheses 1 to 4 are shown in Tables 2 and 3 below.

Table 2. Hierarchical Regression Analysis for WFC Predicting Employee Loyalty Moderated by Positive Thinking Coping

Variables	Employee Loyalty			
	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4
<i>Controls</i>				
Gender	.29**	.27**	.28**	.30***
Marital Status	-.07	-.11	-.12	-.12
Family Size	.20*	.20*	.21*	.21**
Total Hours Worked	.07	.09	.09	.06
<i>Predictor</i>				
Work-Family Conflict (WFC)		-.24**	-.25**	-.26***
<i>Moderator</i>				
Positive Thinking Coping			.08	.04
<i>Interaction Effect</i>				
WFC x Positive Thinking Coping				.24**
R ² change	.12**	.06**	.01	.05**
Total R ²	.12	.18	.18	.24
Adjusted R ²	.10	.15	.15	.20
F Statistic	4.71**	5.83***	5.05***	5.94***

*p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001 Standardised regression coefficients.

Table 3. Hierarchical Regression Analysis for FWC Predicting Employee Loyalty Moderated by Positive Thinking Coping

Variables	Employee Loyalty			
	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4
<i>Controls</i>				
Gender	.29**	.25**	.25**	.27**
Marital Status	-.07	-.09	-.09	-.08
Family Size	.20*	.20*	.21*	.23**
Total Hours Worked	.07	.06	.06	.04
<i>Predictor</i>				
Family-Work Conflict (FWC)		-.27***	-.27***	-.23**
<i>Moderator</i>				
Positive Thinking Coping			.06	.08
<i>Interaction Effect</i>				
FWC x Positive Thinking Coping				.20*
R ² change	.12**	.07**	.00	.04*
Total R ²	.12	.19	.19	.23
Adjusted R ²	.10	.16	.16	.19
F Statistic	4.71**	6.34***	5.38***	5.74***

*p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001 Standardised regression coefficients.

WFC was significantly and negatively related to employee loyalty ($\beta = -.24$, $p < .01$), which supports Hypothesis 1. Likewise, FWC was also significantly and negatively related to employee loyalty ($\beta = -.27$, $p < .001$), supporting Hypothesis 2. From Step 2, WFC accounts for 6 per cent of the variance of employee loyalty ($p < .01$), while FWC accounts for 7 per cent of the variance ($p < .01$). Positive thinking coping had a significant interaction effect on employee loyalty and WFC ($\beta = .24$, $p < .01$), as well as FWC ($\beta = .20$, $p < .05$). These findings support Hypothesis 3 and 4. Finally, amongst the control variables, gender ($\beta = .29$, $p < .01$) and family size ($\beta = .20$, $p < .05$) are significantly related to employee loyalty, indicating female respondents and those with larger families are more loyal towards their organisation.

To facilitate interpretation of the interaction effects for WFC and FWC, plots of the interactions are presented below. Plotting the interaction terms (Figure 1) illustrates those respondents with low WFC have similar levels of employee loyalty, although respondents with low positive thinking coping have slightly higher employee loyalty than those with high positive thinking coping. However, as WFC increases, respondents with low levels of positive thinking coping experience a significantly reduction in employee loyalty while respondents with high levels of positive thinking coping report a flat line (no decrease) in employee loyalty, supporting the hypothesis. Plotting the interaction terms (Figure 2) illustrates that similar to WFC, with respondents with low FWC having similar levels of employee loyalty irrespective of whether their reported use of positive thinking coping is high or low. However, as WFC increases, those with low levels of positive thinking coping experience a significant drop in employee loyalty, while those with high levels of positive thinking coping experience stable levels of employee loyalty, supporting the hypothesis.

Figure 1. Interaction Effects of Positive Thinking Coping towards WFC and Employee Loyalty.

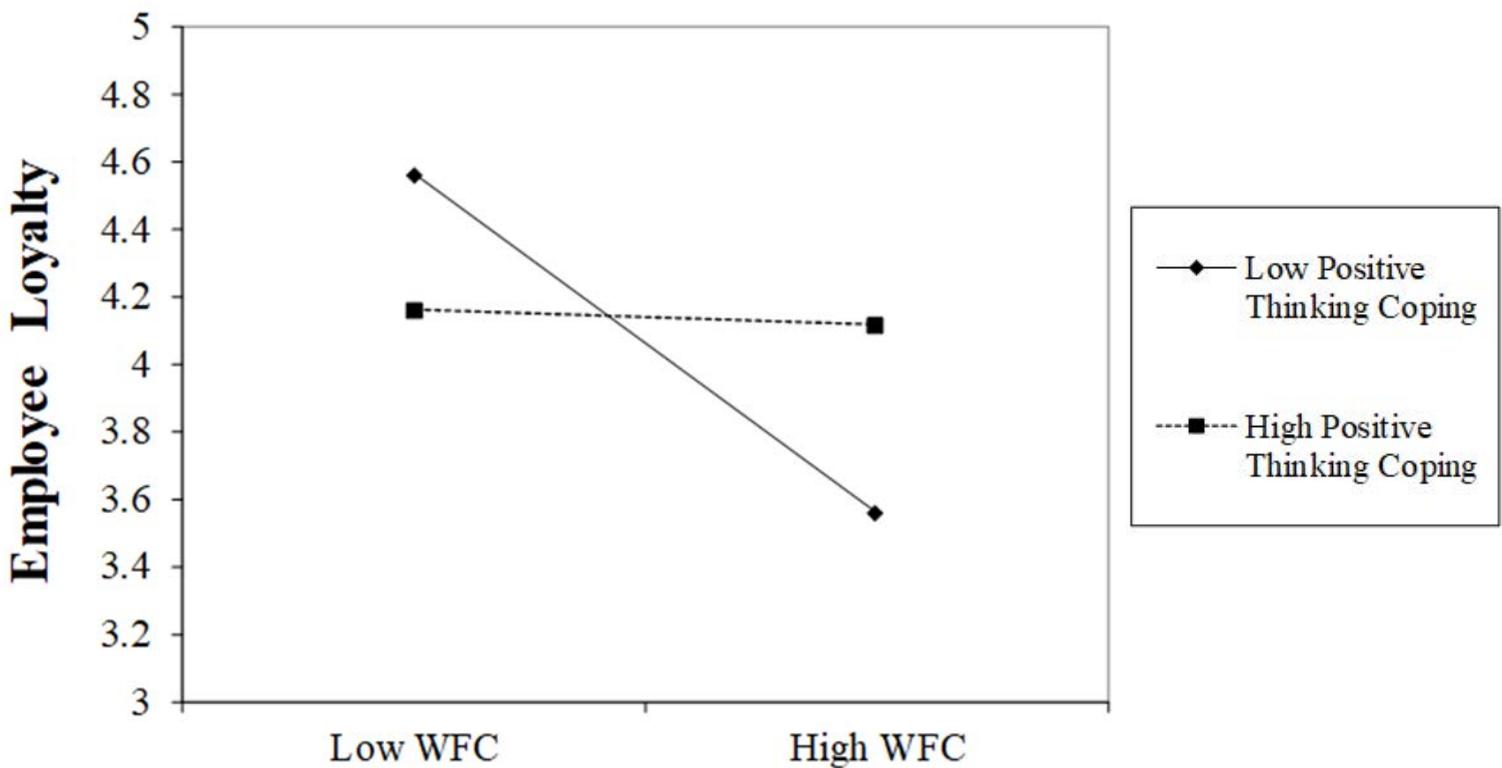
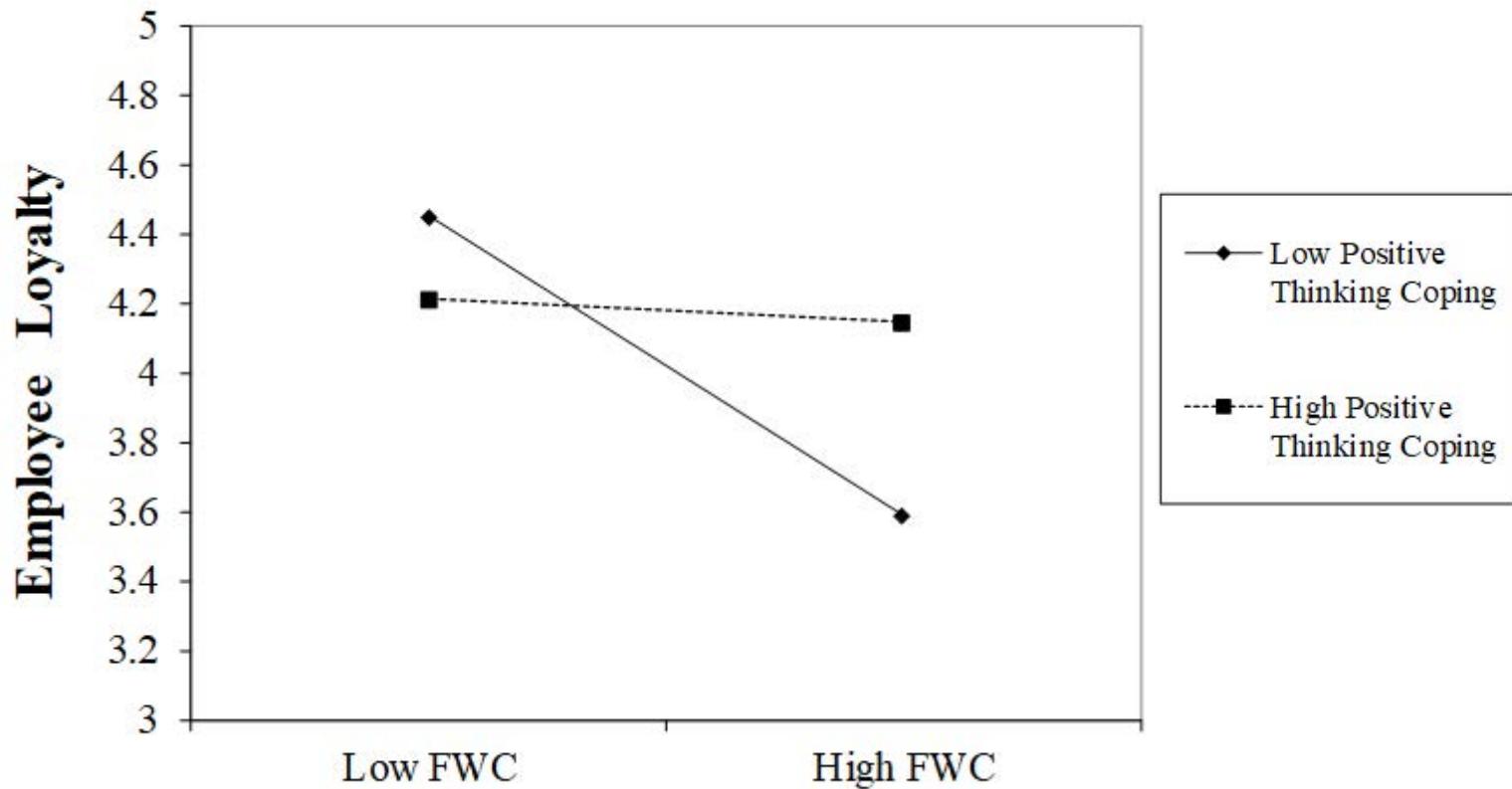


Figure 2. Interaction Effects of Positive Thinking Coping towards FWC and

Discussion

This paper sought to expand the job-related outcomes predicted by WFC. This was important because attitudes that explore employee loyalty or commitment to their organisation have not been well explored in the WFC literature. Furthermore, empirical evidence suggests that loyalty is not only related to job performance of employees but also their organisation (Yee et al., 2010). Overall, the findings support the notion that both directions of conflict (work-family and family-work) can be negatively associated with employee loyalty. Consequently, employee active behaviours, whether through voice or actions, that express pride and support in the organisation, are detrimentally influenced by conflict from the office and home.

Consequently, the extent of job-related outcomes predicted by WFC can be expanded to include employee loyalty. In the present study, the findings also indicate that WFC and FWC are relatively even predictors in strength, with similar variances accounted for by each (WFC=6 per cent, FWC=7 per cent). This is important because recent meta-analyses (Shockley & Singla, 2011) suggest work-family predictors might be best at predicting outcomes associated with the same source, thus WFC to work outcomes. However, there is evidence that in some unusual cases that FWC can be an important predictor of work

outcomes (e.g., Haar et al., 2012) so the influence on employee loyalty from both WFC and FWC is not unique.

What influence employee loyalty has on other job-related outcomes, including job satisfaction, turnover and performance is currently poorly understood. While employee loyalty has been linked with organisational citizenship behaviours, attendance and turnover (Schalk & Freese, 1997), empirical studies are somewhat limited. Since WFC influences employee loyalty (at least in the present organisational setting), more studies that explore the outcomes of employee loyalty are encouraged. This would allow a greater understanding of the role employee loyalty might play on other attitudes and behaviours. In this manner, a recent meta-analysis of perceived organisational support has highlighted its role as a major predictor of a number of job-related attitudes and behaviours (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). More studies of employee loyalty are required to allow such analyses, and further studies with respect to WFC would improve the generalisability of these findings. For example, Haar (2006b) found perceived organisational support was significantly correlated to employee loyalty. Consequently, if employee loyalty is found to be consistently a major predictor of job-related outcomes, then understanding the influence on WFC on this attitude becomes more important. Furthermore, it might allow for more sophisticated models to be tested such as work-family conflict predicting employee loyalty which, in turn, predicts turnover intentions or job performance.

The present study also supports the concept of positive thinking coping acting as a buffer of the negative influences of WFC on employee loyalty. Those using positive thinking coping for general workplace situations weakened the negative influences of WFC and FWC on employee loyalty at high levels of conflict. Therefore, employees who recast challenging and/or detrimental situations in a positive way are less likely to decrease their expressed pride and support in the organisation when conflict from either major domain (work and family) intrudes into the other. Of particular interest was the graphed interaction effect when conflict levels (WFC and FWC) increased. While those with low positive thinking suffer decreased employee loyalty, those who recast situations more positively maintained stable levels of employee loyalty for both WFC and FWC.

Perhaps these respondents are better able to manage their role conflict by dealing with it in an active and positive manner. For example, someone who manages situations by thinking of it as an opportunity to show what they can do may see that dealing successfully with family issues in the workplace will allow them to show how they are a good working parent. Consequently, their active behaviours in expressing pride and support in the organisation remains unchanged because they see themselves as a winner, who always comes through. This effect was support for both WFC and FWC providing an indication of the usefulness of this type of coping strategy for employees to utilise as well as work-family researchers.

Limitations

Like most studies, there are a few limitations that offer caution towards the findings. Of major significance is the limitation of WFC studies exploring employee loyalty as an outcome. In spite of this, employee loyalty has been noted as being related but different

from organisational commitment, which has been found to be significantly predicted by WFC. However, this finding encourages further studies to explore employee loyalty as an outcome of WFC. In addition, the use of a single government department limits the generalisability. Further studies, particularly in the private sector, are needed. As such, these findings should be viewed with caution until more evidence indicates generalisability.

A typical limitation of WFC studies is the use of self-report data. This limitation is somewhat tempered by collecting data at two time periods, with a four-week gap between collection of predictor and criterion variables. Consequently, the links found between WFC and employee loyalty are not likely to be influenced by common method variance, where answers given to one set of questions might influence other answers. This improves the overall strength of the findings in the present study. Finally, a comment must also be made regarding the high correlation between the work-family conflict measures (WFC-FWC, $r = .67$, $p < .01$). While the bi-directional separation of conflict has been established, these measures are typically significantly correlated but not to the extent found here. However, another study using this same measure (Haar & Spell, 2001) also found these variables highly correlated ($r = .70$, $p < .01$), and suggests the measure needs further refinement. That said, concept redundancy – where two constructs might actually be one – does not occur until $r > .75$ (Morrow, 1983), suggesting they are distinct constructs but perhaps needing further refinement to remove any overlap.

Conclusion

The present study supports the bi-directional examination of WFC towards employee loyalty, and expands the number of job-related attitudes that are detrimentally related to WFC. Furthermore, the findings offer new direction for the moderating effects of positive coping strategies. Overall, the present study finds that conflict occurring in one domain (office/home) and interfering with the other domain (home/office) is negatively associated with employee loyalty but that employees who use positive coping strategies more can buffer this negative influence. The present study should signal to researchers that employee loyalty is a worthy outcome for WFC studies, while employers should understand how employees deal with conflict from both the office and home may lead them to express less pride and support in their organisation. Researchers might also see the value in exploring positive coping strategies towards the detrimental influence of WFC. Overall, the present study highlights another outcome for WFC studies, and offers new directions for research.

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