



# Cross-domain negative effect of work-family conflict on project citizenship behavior: Study on Chinese project managers

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## Abstract

This research aims to examine whether and how the bidirectional work-family conflict—work-to-family conflict (WFC) and family-to-work conflict (FWC)—would influence project citizenship behavior (PCB) among Chinese project managers. We proposed hypotheses regarding the relationships between work-family conflict and PCB and the mediating effects of project commitment, which considered the role of national context. Data collected from 154 Chinese project managers were analyzed using structural equation modeling. It was found that FWC had negative relationships with all the three chosen PCBs, i.e., helping behavior, individual initiative, and relationship maintenance, and project commitment mediated these relationships. However, no negative influences of WFC on the three PCBs and project commitment were found. Further comparisons of effects of WFC and FWC on PCBs and project commitment indicated that Chinese project managers were less subject to the negative impacts of WFC. Overall, our results supported the cross-domain negative effect but rejected matching-domain negative effect of work-family conflict among Chinese project managers. We extend understandings of work-family conflict and PCB in the project context, and verify the importance of national context in interpreting work-family issues. Practical suggestions are also discussed regarding increasing project managers' PCB.

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## 1. Introduction

In temporary systems, including projects, groups of people often operate under constraints of complexity, uncertainty, and risk (Bakker, 2010; Huemann et al., 2007). Unforeseen, unique problems frequently occur in such environment (Flanagan and Norman, 1993; Munns and Bjeirmi, 1996). To tackle these un-routines, an exhaustive role definition in the project is almost unobtainable (Huemann et al., 2007). It thus requires project managers to engage in “extra-role” behavior (citizenship behavior thereafter), which is beyond formal requirements such as job description and formal contracts (Braun et al., 2013). Project managers, as the direct leaders of projects, are challenged with

how to utilize diverse participants and then to achieve objectives of project management (Olander, 2007); their citizenship behavior in intra- and inter-organization will be beneficial to cohesiveness across groups in the project (Braun et al., 2013). In addition, projects are in the course of outsourcing, offshoring, or virtual work (Braun et al., 2012, 2013). This trend decreases the capability of upper managers in organizations to control the projects and make advisable decisions, while simultaneously increases the autonomy and managerial importance of on-site project managers. All these indicate citizenship behavior of project managers is critical to successful management of projects (Braun et al., 2013; Ferreira et al., 2013).

Despite the pressing demand for citizenship behavior from project managers, they usually struggle in fulfilling demands coming from both family and work domains. That is, working in projects which are characterized by long working hours, inflexible schedule, and complex tasks (Liu and Low, 2011;

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Munns and Bjeirmi, 1996; Turner et al., 2008), project managers are particularly likely to experience high levels of work-family conflict. In permanent organizations, it is widely demonstrated that high work-family conflict can negatively alter work attitudes and jeopardize work performances (Allen et al., 2000; Amstad et al., 2011). Given this, such intensive work-family conflict experienced by project managers is likely to undermine their engagement in citizenship behavior. However, in temporary systems, little or no research has examined how work-family conflict and PCB connect to one another, although there is an increasing focus on work-family balance problems (e.g., Lingard et al., 2012; Liu and Low, 2011; Turner and Mariani, 2016; Turner et al., 2008) and on PCB (e.g., Braun et al., 2012, 2013; Ferreira et al., 2013).

With a focus on project managers in the general project context, our first purpose is to examine whether the bidirectional work-family conflict has both cross-domain and matching-domain effects on three different PCBs, i.e. helping behavior, individual initiative, and relationship maintenance. In particular, cross-domain effect hypothesis supports the effect of WFC on these behaviors (Li et al., 2013), whereas matching-domain effect hypothesis supports the effect of FWC (Shockley and Singla, 2011). Another critical issue is to figure out potential mechanisms in the effect of work-family conflict on PCBs. In this regard, we suggest that project commitment may serve as a mediator that helps to explain how work-family conflict can influence PCBs. Project commitment represents employees' desire to do what is needed to achieve project success (Hoegl et al., 2004). Research has found that commitment is closely associated with work-family conflict (Allen et al., 2000) and plays a key role in deciding employees' behaviors at work (Mowday et al., 1979). Issues about work-family balance and citizenship behavior have long been heavily explored in organizations. However, in the project context, less research has investigated them as well as their potential connections. Therefore, by examining the influence of work-family conflict on citizenship behavior among project managers, the present study will (1) contribute to the understanding of PCB, which is a quite new concept re-conceptualized by Braun et al. (2012) from organizational citizenship behavior (OCB), and (2) enrich work-family research in the project context.

Our second aim is to examine the role that national context plays in the relationships of work-family conflict with PCB and project commitment. Differences in the national context are closely related to work-family issues (Ollier-Malaterre and Foucreault, 2017; Spector et al., 2007; Yang et al., 2000; Zhang et al., 2012). With a particular concentration on project managers in an Eastern context (i.e. China), the present study can thus contribute to national context research in work-family issues. In particular, we argue that Chinese tend to prioritize work over family (Yang et al., 2000; Zhang et al., 2012), therefore the unfulfilling of family demands (lower priority) caused by WFC is likely to be less urgent and causes less stresses, compared to the unfulfilling of work demands (higher priority) caused by FWC (Spector et al., 2004; Wang et al., 2004; Lu et al., 2009; Li et al., 2013). That is, we aim to examine whether FWC would exert greater negative influences on

PCBs and project commitment than WFC. Overall, the clarification of whether and how work-family conflict will influence PCB can facilitate the development of managerial measures aimed to energize project managers to engage in citizenship behavior in projects, whereby the project effectiveness can be enhanced (Braun et al., 2013; Ferreira et al., 2013).

## 2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

### 2.1. Work-family conflict

Work-family conflict occurs when demands associated with work (family) roles are incompatible with demands associated with family (work) role (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985). There are three forms of work-family conflict: 1) time-based conflict, which occurs when time devoted to one role makes demands in another role difficult to fulfill (Carlson et al., 2000); 2) strain-based conflict, which occurs when stresses experienced in one role lead to fatigue, irritability, etc., limiting one's ability to fulfill the demands in the other role (Frone et al., 1992); 3) behavior-based conflict, which occurs when behaviors effective in one role are not effective or even counterproductive in the other role (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985).

Given the dynamic and intense working environment (Crawford et al., 2013), project managers may experience all these three forms of work-family conflict. First, as the project leader and coordinator, project managers need to handle numerous issues with both internal and external stakeholders (Mazur and Pisarski, 2015), and in many cases, face peaking workloads and uncertain client requirements (Liu and Low, 2011; Turner et al., 2008). Project managers thus are likely to encounter long working hours and inflexible schedule (Liu and Low, 2011; Turner et al., 2008) and then have insufficient time to fulfill family responsibilities. At that time, time-based conflict would occur. Second, because of the increasing complexity and uncertainty in projects (Rezvani et al., 2016), project managers need to handle many stressful tasks such as undertaking multiple roles (Turner et al., 2008) and rapid adjustment to changing requirements (Gustavsson, 2016). The dynamic project environment and the associated stressful tasks are likely to elicit strain-based conflict among project managers. Finally, in the workplace, project managers usually need to be motivated, self-regulated, emotionally resilient, and communicative (Ekrot et al., 2016; Rezvani et al., 2016). For example, in projects that are characterized by uncertainty and complexity (Liu and Low, 2011; Munns and Bjeirmi, 1996; Turner et al., 2008), project managers are likely to experience challenging events that may trigger negative emotions (e.g. anger, disappointment, and frustration) (Rezvani et al., 2016; Hassan et al., 2017). However, negative emotions of project managers can result in detrimental effects on project success (Rezvani et al., 2016; Hassan et al., 2017), thus, it is necessary for them to be emotionally resilient and to properly regulate their emotions when encountering adversities. However, family members are expecting project managers to be warm, emotional, and caring. The differences in behavioral requirements by family and work are hard to accommodate and behavior-based conflict

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