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## Public Health

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## Original Research

# Work, family, and personal characteristics explain occupational and gender differences in work–family conflict among Japanese civil servants

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## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 8 March 2017

Received in revised form

19 July 2017

Accepted 21 August 2017

Available online 14 November 2017

## Keywords:

Japan

Work–family conflict (WFC)

Gender

Occupation

The Japanese civil servant study (JACS)

## ABSTRACT

**Objectives:** A high level of work–family conflict (WFC) is an important risk factor for physical and mental health problems. Although individual work-related factors for WFC have been extensively studied, relatively little is known about whether occupation and gender affect WFC and how such effects might be generated.

**Study design:** Cross-sectional study.

**Methods:** This study surveyed 3053 civil servants aged 20–65 years working in a local government in the west coast of Japan in 2003. Logistic regression analyses were used to examine whether there are occupational and gender differences in WFC and to clarify the factors underlying these differences.

**Results:** WFC was higher in professional and technical workers compared with other occupations for both men and women, with age-adjusted odds ratios (ORs) for these workers of 1.29 in men and 2.58 in women. In men, occupational differences in WFC disappeared after adjusting for work and family characteristics (OR = 1.15). In women, significant occupational differences remained in the final model, but after adjusting for work characteristics the adjusted OR for professional and technical workers was reduced to 1.69. Women were more likely than men to experience high WFC (OR = 2.52). After controlling for work characteristics, the gender difference was considerably reduced (OR = 1.68).

**Conclusions:** Work characteristics play a fundamental role in the difference in WFC between not only occupational but also gender differences. Stressful work characteristics among professional and technical workers and among women in all work roles should be addressed to reduce occupational and gender differences in WFC in Japan.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.puhe.2017.08.010>

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## Introduction

Work–family conflict (WFC) has been defined as ‘a form of inter-role conflict in which the role pressures from the work and family domains are mutually incompatible in some respect’.<sup>1</sup> Double-income households have continued to increase since 2005 and now include the majority of Japanese couples<sup>2–4</sup> and this trend is seen worldwide even in other developed countries. Japan has the most advanced aging society in the world where elderly people aged 65 years or over accounted for more than 26% of the population in 2015.<sup>5</sup> In the future, a decline in the labor force is predicted from the increasing aging population and the diminishing number of children.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, Japan is trying to promote child-rearing support and strengthen the social infrastructure, aiming at a society where one can continue working while rearing children and providing nursing care.<sup>7</sup> Considering this social background, it is important for each individual as well the society to cope with WFC and reconcile work and life. Researching the effect of Japan's current WFC and future WFC changes on the aging society are very meaningful for other developed country to overcome the common agendas in world, the aging of society.

Research has suggested that a high level of WFC may cause stress-related health outcomes such as burnout, fatigue, poor self-assessed health, and psychological strain.<sup>8–12</sup> Therefore, a high level of WFC is an important risk factor for physical and mental health problems. Furthermore, reconciliation work and non-work elements raise the satisfaction of workers and improve the productivity of the entire organization.<sup>9,13</sup> It is important for not only an individual's physical and mental health but also for social organization.

A growing body of evidence suggests that work characteristics are associated with higher WFC, with work variability, working weekends, shift work, long working hours, high job involvement, and greater work demands relating to high levels of WFC.<sup>9,14,15</sup> Although, in general, work characteristics such as working hours, variability, and job demands differ greatly with the type of work, relatively little is known about occupational differences in WFC. Addressing occupational differences in WFC may allow more efficient improvement of the work environment.

Evidence about gender differences in WFC is controversial. Several meta-analyses have found no gender differences in WFC,<sup>9,15,16</sup> but a study has shown that gender acts as a moderator of WFC and that women experience higher WFC than men in the same occupational position; the study indicated that the lack of gender difference in WFC was artificial.<sup>17</sup> Our previous study of Japanese civil servants showed that women had higher WFC and worse mental health than men.<sup>18</sup> The factors contributing to such gender differences are not yet fully understood.

The objective of the present study was to determine the following: (1) whether there are occupational differences in WFC; (2) whether there are gender differences in WFC; and (3) the degree to which differences in work, family, and personal characteristics explain these differences. By clarifying these characteristics, it becomes clear to know what kind of features such as family background, workplace environment, and

individual characteristics should be interfered with and what kind of workplace needs to be paid attention to for WFC. The main reason for studying WFC was that clarifying occupational and gender differences not only furthers our understanding of the work–life balance but also has the potential to contribute to recommendations for effective improvements to the work environment and support.

## Methods

### Participants

The study population comprised the participants in the Japanese civil servants study (the JACS Study) phase II, which was conducted in collaboration with the Whitehall II Study (of British civil servants) and the Helsinki Health Study (HHS).<sup>19,20</sup> Phase II, conducted in January and February 2003, included all civil servants aged 20–65 years working in local government in the west coast of Japan at the time of the survey. The survey was administered via a postal questionnaire returned to the researchers in sealed envelopes. The questionnaire items were selected from the Whitehall II Study and translated into Japanese.

A total of 4272 participants (response rate: 79.2%) responded and any questionnaire in which a respondent failed to answer one or more questions related to the variables used in this study was excluded from the analysis, resulting in data from 3053 participants (2071 men and 982 women) being included in the final analysis. Those included and excluded did not differ significantly in health outcomes.

The Japanese civil servants study was associated with the annual health checkups regulated by Japan's Industrial Safety and Health Law. The contents and ethical aspects of the study were approved by an ad hoc committee of the civil service, comprising an ordinary member of the Safety and Health Committee as well as labor and personnel representatives. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and all participated voluntarily. The Institutional Review Board of the University of Toyama approved the study.

### Work–family conflict

Eight items related to work-to-family and family-to-work conflicts were selected from the US National Study of Midlife Development.<sup>21</sup> Each shows the strength of the interference and responsibilities to the home from work and vice versa. Previous studies have proposed that work-to-family and family-to-work conflict scores can be summed,<sup>21,22</sup> so the answers to these eight items were summed to give a total WFC score. The highest quintile was used as a cutoff point to divide the participants into two groups for analysis: high WFC and low WFC. In this population, Cronbach's alpha was 0.82, indicating high internal consistency.

### Work characteristics

The participants' occupations were classified into four categories in alignment with the major occupation groups of the Japanese census: clerical workers, administrative workers,

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