

## Support at work and home: The path to satisfaction through balance

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines social support (from both coworkers and partners) and its path to satisfaction through work–family balance. This study fills a gap by explaining how support impacts satisfaction in the same domain, across domains, and how it crosses over to impact the partner's domain. Using a matched dataset of 270 job incumbents and their partners, the findings reveal that work–family balance plays a mediating role in assisting social support's contribution to both job and family satisfaction. Evidence indicates that employees experience heightened work–family balance due to social support from partners and coworkers and that support and balance impact satisfaction in both the work and family domains. Implications of these findings and avenues for future research are discussed.

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Research in work–family balance has ‘exploded’ in recent years (Brough & Kalliath, 2009). Empirical findings demonstrate that work–family balance relates to job and family satisfaction, organizational commitment, and family performance (Carlson, Grzywacz, & Zivnuska, 2009). While evidence suggests that organizations stand to gain substantially from employees who achieve work–family balance, achieving this balance remains an elusive goal for many employees (Halpern, 2005). Exploring the mechanisms by which employees achieve more balance between the work and family domains led us to consider social support. We propose a framework that integrates social support with recent notions of work–family balance (Carlson et al., 2009) as well as job, marital and family satisfaction. We base this framework on the foundation of conservation of resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 2001) which proposes that employees actively seek to preserve, protect, and rebuild resources (i.e., conditions or energies valued by the individual). Using COR theory, we theorize that when employees receive social support from coworkers and partners, they acquire resources that help them balance work and family demands, which leads to heightened satisfaction in both the work and family domains.

Organizational research has shown the benefits of social support in the workplace (e.g., Bacharach, Bamberger, & Biron, 2010; Halbesleben, 2006; Karasek & Theorell, 1990; Van der Doef & Maes, 1999; Van Yperen & Hagedoorn, 2003) and particularly its buffering effect with respect to work–family conflict (e.g., see Michel, Mitchelson, Pichler, & Cullen, 2010 for a meta-analytic review). However, it is still unclear how social support from both the work and non-work domains fosters work–family balance and exhibits within domain and cross domain effects on satisfaction. Here is where our contribution lies. We contend that it is important to understand how both work-related and non-work-related resources such as social support help create balance (i.e., the accomplishment and negotiation of role-related expectations). In addition, better understanding the role that balance plays in the relationships between social support from both the work and family domains and satisfaction in each of those domains is also important. In other words, does work–family balance mediate the relationship between support and satisfaction at work and with the family? Therefore, the current study examines the role of balance in the support to

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satisfaction relationship. In particular, we seek to gain a better understanding of how both work-related and non-work related sources of support enhance work–family balance and contribute to satisfaction in both the work and non-work domains (see Fig. 1). Drawing on COR theory, we theorize that the resources of coworker support and partner support positively influence work–family balance, which influences job incumbent satisfaction with both job and marriage, and also crosses over to influence partner family satisfaction.

This research contributes to the literature in two ways. First, examining these cross domain effects enhances theoretical thinking by broadening research to include transmission of positive events from work to home and home to work (Westman, 2001; Westman, Vinokur, Hamilton, & Roziner, 2004). This study addresses these issues by examining whether support originating from different domains (coworker support and partner support) exhibits both within domain and cross domain effects via work–family balance. A second contribution is the examination of the possible crossover of coworker support through work–family balance to family satisfaction of the partner. We hypothesize that incumbents who build resources in the form of supportive coworkers and partners enhance their ability to balance work and family demands. The experience of work–family balance then relates positively to the job incumbent's own job and marital satisfaction and to the partner's family satisfaction, constituting a resource gain spiral (Hobfoll, 2001).

## 1. Theoretical foundations

COR theory argues that individuals strive to protect their own interests and attain pleasure. One mechanism used to attain this goal is the accumulation of resources that are likely to result in positive emotional states and attitudes. Social support is one such resource; as it accumulates, it can broaden an individual's resource pool and replace or reinforce other resources that are lacking (Hobfoll, 1985). Hobfoll (2001) identified a number of social support resources from both the work and family domains that individuals may strive to accumulate, such as “support from coworkers” and “understanding from my employer/boss” along with family-based resources including “help with tasks at home” and “intimacy with spouse or partner.” We build on these ideas by theorizing that these social support resources lead the incumbent to perceive his or her ability to successfully accomplish their role-related expectations in both the work and family domains.

Social support, which includes instrumental aid, emotional concern, provision of information, and appraisals that are intended to enhance the well-being of the recipient (House, 1981), is one mechanism that may help employees achieve balance through the accumulation of important resources. Social support has captured quite a bit of attention as a potential buffer from the ill-effects of work–family conflict. Since Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) initially proposed that social support might act as an antecedent of role stressors or as a moderator between role stressors and distress, scholars viewing the work–family domain as a source of role conflict have sought to empirically substantiate their claims. The results of these studies largely have been ambiguous and inconsistent. Recent meta-analytic results indicate that social support may be best viewed as an antecedent of role stress and subsequent work–family conflict (Michel et al., 2010). In contrast however, very little is known about the role of social support in relation to work–family balance and the accomplishment of role-related expectations that it embodies.

Extant research on work–family balance has largely used work–family conflict, work–family enrichment, or a combination of these two factors as a proxy for work–family balance. Recent study, however, indicates that these three concepts are theoretically and empirically distinct (Carlson et al., 2009). Both work–family conflict and work–family enrichment are concerned with how participation in one domain impacts one's performance in the other domain, either in a negative or positive way. In contrast with these areas of study, work–family balance offers an entirely different way of thinking about the intersection between work and family; instead of being concerned with how work and family impact each other, work–family balance is more process-oriented, focusing on how individuals *manage* multiple roles.

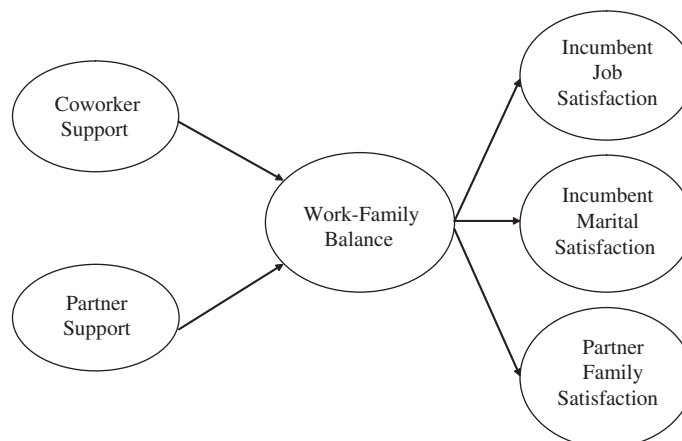


Fig. 1. Hypothesized model of full mediation between support and satisfaction.

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