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AN INVESTIGATION ON THE SELF-LEVEL DIFFERENCES IN THE RELATIONSHIPS OF WORK-FAMILY
CONFLICT AND STRESS AMONG HOSPITALITY EMPLOYEES

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Abstract

The field survey was conducted to test the hypothesized moderating role of chronic self regulatory focus on the relationships between work – family conflict (WFC) and challenge/hindrance stress. 287 hotel employees provided valid responses, showing that chronic promotion-focused individuals perceive WFC as challenge stressors while chronic prevention-focused individuals view WFC as hindrance stressors. The results suggest implications for increasing the effectiveness of family-friendly policies and management.

Key Words: Chronic regulatory focus, Work-family conflict, Challenge/hindrance stressors

Introduction

Inter-role interferences between work and family domains (i.e., work-family conflict; WFC) has been identified as an important work-place stressor resulting in a host of counter-productive outcomes (Siegel, Post, Brockner, Fisherman, & Garden, 2005). Long work hours, irregular and inflexible work schedules, heavy workloads, and low wages characterize the hospitality industry leading to WFC (Karatepe & Uludag, 2008). Inconclusive relationships between stressors and job outcomes (Kossek & Ozeki, 1998) have been attributed to an incomplete accounting of individual differences and possible mediating processes (Eby, Casper, Lockwood, Bordeaux, & Brinley, 2005). Understanding “the process of stress appraisal as combining and integrating challenge and hindrance appraisals” would better explain the stressor-performance relationships (Gilboa, Shirom, Fried, & Cooper, 2008, p. 255).

Work-family conflict (WFC) is “a form of inter-role conflict in which the role pressures from the work and family domains are mutually incompatible in some respect” (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985, p. 77). WFC has been differentiated into two interdependent dimensions: work interfering with family (WIF) and family interfering with work (FIW) (Frone, Russell, & Cooper, 1992a). Both WIF and FIW influence individuals’ job attitudes resulting in high stress levels (Byron, 2005). However, researchers stated that individual characteristics may critically moderate the relationship between WFC and work stress appraisals (Allen, Herst, Bruck, & Sutton, 2000). Extending this argument, we identify individuals’ chronic self-regulatory focus as an important moderator.

Higgins and colleagues (Higgins, 1997) proposed that individuals have chronic tendencies to adopt certain self-regulatory (promotion or prevention) strategies in their daily experience. Chronic promotion-focused employees may perceive WIF & FIW as different levels of challenge/hindrane stress from chronic prevention-focused individuals. Some individuals are more likely consider WFC as challenge stressors permitting them balance or enrichment in both work and family domains, while others tend to view WFC as hindrance stressors and as obstacles to personal growth and work accomplishment. We propose that individuals' chronic regulatory focus will influence their perception of WFC (both WIF and FIW) as either challenge or hindrance stressor: (Hypothesis 1a) hospitality employees with high chronic promotion focus will have different magnitudes of the relationships of WIF/FIW to challenge stress; (Hypothesis 1b) hospitality employees with high chronic prevention focus will have different magnitudes of the relationships of WIF/FIW to challenge stress; (Hypothesis 2a) hospitality employees with high chronic promotion focus will have different magnitudes of the relationships of WIF/FIW to hindrance stress; and (Hypothesis 2b) hospitality employees with high chronic prevention focus will have different magnitudes of the relationships of WIF/FIW to hindrance stress.

Method

Forty employees were randomly selected from a list of all employees provided by the human resource department in each of eight hotels. The employees were informed that the research was for academic purposes and their participation was voluntary and confidential. 287 employees returned valid surveys (response rate = 90.0%). Fifty four percent of the subjects were female, most respondents (88%) were younger than 40 years, and the average number of dependents (child, parents, relatives) was 1.14 ($SD = 1.70$). Work-family conflict was measured with eleven items of Grandey et al.'s (2005) inventory on a seven-point anchored with 1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree. The general regulatory focus measure (GRFM; Lockwood, Jordan, & Kunda, 2002) with eighteen items (nine to measure chronic promotion focus and nine for chronic prevention focus) was employed to identify individuals' preferred regulatory focus. Participants' perceptions of challenge/hindrane stress were measured with eleven items (Cavanaugh, Boswell, Roehling, & Boudreau, 2000).

Results

Participants' average level of WIF ($M = 4.15$, $SD = 1.42$) is greater than that of FIW ($M = 2.38$, $SD = 1.14$). This finding is consistent with previous results and supports the theoretical notion that among hospitality employees family boundaries are more permeable than work boundaries (Frone, Russell, & Cooper, 1992b). Cronbach's α values range from .73 to .83 exceeding the suggested cut-off of .70 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). In the hierarchical regression analysis, the study first examined the main effects of WIF, FIW, chronic promotion focus (CPM), and chronic prevention focus (CPV) on challenge and hindrance stress respectively. Except CPM's effects ($B = .23$, $p < .01$) and WIF's impacts ($B = .12$, $p = .01$) on challenge stress, other main effects were not significant. Next, the two-way interaction terms (i.e., WIF \times CPM, WIF \times CPV, FIW \times CPM and FIW \times CPV) were included. Except the impacts of two interaction terms, WIF \times CPV ($B = -.07$, $p < .01$) and FIW \times CPV ($B = .10$, $p < .01$), other effects were not significant. The Simple Slope Analyses were conducted to further demonstrate the moderating effects of chronic prevention focus on the relationships of WIF & FIW to challenge stress. First, WIF had marginally significant effects on challenge stress for employees with high chronic promotion focus but not individuals with low chronic promotion focus. That is, for hospitality employees with high chronic promotion focus, greater WIF would lead to less challenge stress, which was not supported for individuals with low chronic promotion focus. Thus, Hypothesis 1a was partially supported. Second, hospitality employees with low prevention focus had stronger positive relationships of WIF to challenge stress than individuals with high prevention focus. That is, hospitality employees with low chronic prevention focus are more likely to perceive WIF as challenge stress than individuals with high prevention focus. Third, hospitality employees with low prevention focus had stronger negative relationships of FIW to challenge stress than individuals with high prevention focus. That is, hospitality employees with low chronic prevention focus are less likely to perceive FIW as challenge stress than individuals with high prevention focus. Thus, Hypothesis 1b was supported. Finally, because of the insignificant results of HRA and SSA analysis, the moderating roles of chronic promotion and prevention focus were not demonstrated when hindrance stress was the dependent variable. Therefore, Hypotheses 2a & 2b were not supported.

Discussion and Implications

Adopting the two-dimensional – challenge and hindrance – view of stress (Cavanaugh et al., 2000) we found the self-level differences in the relationships of WFC to these two types of stress. Specifically, chronic prevention focus plays stronger moderating effects than chronic promotion focus on the relationships between WIF/FIW and challenge stress. First, work and family role demands are non-negotiable and hospitality employees are responsible to fulfill. They are subsequently more likely to regard the interferences between work and family as challenges to balance rather than barriers to avoid. The effects of WIF/FIW on challenge stress rather than hindrance stress were consequently salient in the present study. In addition, the sense of responsibilities leads hospitality employees to avoid mistakes or failures in work and family role demands. When facing the interferences between work and family domains, hospitality employees are more likely to feel stressful to regard these interferences as their potential threats to fulfill responsibilities rather than opportunities to demonstrate personal abilities.

Managers may have to pay special attention to this difference and in the absence of being able to select individuals based on their preferred self-regulatory mode they may have to develop policies that are supportive of both. However, the results of this study indicate that this may not be effective in helping all employees manage their WFC. Human resource managers should recognize that employees may be different in their self-regulation strategies and develop policies aimed at assisting each group of individuals. For example, to support chronic prevention-focused individuals managers have to help them segment work and family role demands and help them to avoid the negative work-family spillovers.

A number of limitations should be taken into account when the findings are implied. The responses were collected without regard to differences in time and relied on self-reports. The R^2 values of the regression analyses were also relatively low (all R^2 values $\leq .15$), suggesting the present model can be improved. Finally, the current study collected the responses from eight hotels which may not be representative of the whole population and may bias the results.

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