

## Work-Family Conflict, Spouse Conflict, and Adolescent School Performance

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**[Abstract]** The article aimed at examining the relationship between work-family conflict and spouse conflict and adolescent school performance, and at investigating the role of spouse conflict as a mediator in the relationship of work-family conflict and adolescent school performance in China. The article uses data from 305 Chinese junior middle school students and their parents. The results showed that parents' perceptions of their own family-to-work conflict, their own work-to-family conflict, and their partner work-to-family conflict all significantly correlated to spouse conflict, and spouse conflict significantly correlated to adolescent conflict with parents, teachers, classmates, and final grades in term examinations. Linear regressions revealed that work-family conflict was significantly associated with spouse conflict; spouse conflict was significantly associated with adolescent conflict; and adolescent conflict was significantly associated with final school grades. Further research should pay more attention to the transmission mechanisms, like spouse conflict, to better understand the impact of work-family conflicts on individual mental health and behaviors.

**[Keywords]** work-family conflict; spouse conflict; school performance; family resilience

### Introduction

The work-family conflict is “a form of inter-role conflict in which role pressures from the work and family domains are mutually incompatible in some respect” (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985, p.77). It is a bidirectional phenomenon consisting of two concepts: work-to-family conflict (WFC) and family-to work conflict (FWC) (Choi & Kim, 2012). WFC occurs when work interferes with family life, and FWC occurs when family life interferes with work (Frone, Yardley, & Markel, 1997). Previous studies have revealed a variety of work, non-work and health related consequences associated with work-family conflict, including job performance and job satisfaction (Hoobler, Hu, & Wilson, 2010), turnover intentions (Karatepe & Uludag, 2008), life satisfaction (Zhao, Qu, & Ghiselli, 2011), negative emotions (e.g., depression, anxiety, resentment, frustration, and anger) (Greenhaus, Allen & Spector, 2006), psychological strain (Kalliath, Hughes & Newcombe, 2012), sleep (Lallukka, Arber, Laaksonen et al., 2013) and other the health outcomes (cholesterol, body mass and physical stamina) (Van Steenbergen & Ellemers, 2009).

The literature also documented relationships between work-family conflicts and family-related outcomes, although limited, such as partner relationships (Kalliath, Hughes, & Newcombe, 2012), parent-child interactive behaviors (i.e., educational, recreational, and passive activities) (Cho & Allen, 2012), and children's mental health (Strazdins, OBrien, Lucas, & Rodgers, 2013). Given the challenges families face nowadays, work and family issues have received the greatest research attention (Bianchi & Milkie, 2010), and researchers have called for future research on the association of work-family conflict with family-related outcomes, especially children's school performance, children's career choices, and spouse and children's life satisfaction, psychological strain, and negative emotions (Eby, Casper, Lockwood, Bordeaux, & Brinley, 2005; Tsionou & Konstantopoulos, 2015).

The present study examined first the relationship between parents' work-family conflicts and spouse conflicts and adolescent school performance using data collected in one Chinese junior middle school. Based on the literature, it was expected that parents' work-family conflict positively related to spouse conflict and negatively related to adolescent school performance. Second, spouse conflict was investigated

as a mediator. According to the family resilience framework (Patterson, 2002), a family's resources or capabilities allow it to evaluate imposing demands and to cope with them. Work-family conflict, thus, might alter family environments through its association with parents' mental health and parent-child interactions and influence children's health and well-being (Grzywacz & Bass, 2003; Strazdins et al., 2013).

## Method

### Sample and Procedures

Participants were students in grades 7, 8 and 9 (i.e. junior middle school students) in one public school in Hangzhou city, Zhejiang province. Among the students in the school, 81% come from migrant families. The 12 teachers in charge of classes (four classes per grade) were organized to collect data after the term examination in February 2015. They distributed each student a set of questionnaires, including a student questionnaire and a parent questionnaire that surveyed the information on both spouses and the family. Students were excluded from the database when they or their parents did not complete the questionnaires.

The final sample consisted of 305 students. Among them, 43.3% (132/305) parent questionnaires were filled in by the mother, 38.4% (117/305) by the father, and 18.4% (56/305) did not report who filled in the parent questionnaire. The ANOVAs showed no significant difference whether mother or father filled in the parent questionnaire in their own WFC ( $F_{1,247}=3.48, p=.06$ ) and their own FWC, partner WFC, spouse conflict, and adolescent conflict with parents, teachers, and classmates ( $F_{1,247}=.006\sim 2.11, \text{all } ps>.15$ ). The characteristics of the final sample are shown in Table 1. The final sample did not differ from students who were excluded in final grades. ( $M_{\text{sample}}=327.02, SD_{\text{sample}}=79.46, M_{\text{excluded}}=311.08, SD_{\text{excluded}}=90.82, F_{1,383}=2.40, p>.12$ ).

Table 1  
*Characteristics of Students and their Parents by Grade*

	Grade 7 (n=111)		Grade 8 (n=96)		Grade 9 (n=98)	
	n / M	% / SD	n / M	% / SD	n / M	% / SD
Gender_student						
Female	49	44.1%	50	52.1%	49	50%
Male	62	55.9%	46	47.9%	49	50%
Number of children in family						
One-child	50	45.0%	45	46.9%	47	48.0%
Two or more children	43	38.7%	46	47.9%	38	38.8%
Age						
Mother	39.38	3.24	40.06	4.83	40.96	3.85
Father	41.92	3.50	42.92	5.40	43.52	4.29
Education_mother						
Technical secondary school/lower	45	40.5%	40	41.7%	45	45.9%
High middle school	27	24.3%	28	29.2%	29	29.6%
Bachelor	17	15.3%	8	8.3%	6	6.1%
Education_father						
Technical secondary school/lower	40	36.0%	36	37.5%	44	44.9%
High middle school	31	27.9%	36	37.5%	31	31.6%
Bachelor	23	20.7%	10	10.4%	7	7.1%
Master/higher	2	1.8%				

### Measures

**Work-family conflict.** Six items were adopted from an EU-Project, "Family Life and Professional Work: Conflict and Synergy" ([www.eu-projekt-famwork.org](http://www.eu-projekt-famwork.org)), to assess the person's perception of his/her own FWC, own WFC, and partner WFC, both time- and strain-based (Carlson, Kacmar, & Williams, 2000). Example items are "My situation at home makes it hard for me to fulfil my professional commitments (arriving on time, managing daily tasks, working overtime, etc.)," "My professional work keeps me from

spending as much time with my family as I would like to do,” and “Professional work keeps my partner from spending as much time with the family as my partner would like to do.” A 4-point rating scale was used with two end poles, “rarely” to “always.” The internal consistency of this questionnaire in the present study was  $\alpha=.88$ .

**Spouse conflict.** Nine items taken from the Schneewind and Wunderer’s (2001) study and one open question (others) were used to assess different life areas, e.g., professional work, family work division, and children's upbringing and discipline, with regard to their conflictiveness within the relationship during the past one month. A 4-point rating scale was used with two end poles, “very little” to “very much.” The internal consistency of this questionnaire in the present study was  $\alpha=.91$ .

**Adolescent school performance.** Students’ school performance was estimated with final marks in the term examination (February 2015), including four courses in Chinese, mathematics, English, and science (120 points per course). The performance was also estimated with adolescent conflict, using eight items to assess students’ conflict experiences with parents, teachers, and classmates in daily life areas (e.g., chores, friend making, spending money, dressing, differences of opinion, annoying behaviour etc.). A 5-point rating scale was used with two end poles, “not at all” to “severely.” The internal consistency of this questionnaire in the present study was  $\alpha=.89$ .

### Data Analysis

ANOVAs were used to examine student gender, grade, parents’ highest education level, and one-child family difference in work-family conflict ( FWC, WFC, partner WFC), spouse conflict, and adolescent school performance (final marks and adolescent conflict with parents, teachers, and classmates). Hierarchical linear regressions were used to test the influence of work-family conflict (the mean score of six items) on spouse conflict and adolescent school performance (Baron & Kenny, 1986), with spouse conflict, adolescent conflict (the mean score of eight items), and final marks being dependent variables, respectively. To test the mediation hypothesis, work-family conflict and all nine control variables of student gender, grade (2 dummy variables), mother age, father age, mother education (2 dummy variables), and father education (2 dummy variables) were entered in Step 1 (Grzywacz & Bass, 2003), and spouse conflict was then entered in Step 2 to assess the change in the associations between parents’ work-family conflict and adolescent school performance. All analyses were carried out using SPSS 22.

### Results

As shown in Table 2, three grades differed significantly in spouse conflict, adolescent conflict with parents, and final marks. Further analyses revealed that the seventh grade reported significantly less spouse conflict and adolescent conflict with parents than the eighth and ninth grades, while the latter two did not differ significantly in the two variables. The seventh grade reported significantly higher final marks than the eighth and ninth grades, while the latter two did not differ significantly.

Table 2  
*Means (M) and Standard Deviations (SD) of Variables by Grade*

	Grade 7 (n=111)		Grade 8 (n=96)		Grade 9 (n=98)		F	P
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
Work-family conflict								
Family-to-work conflict	1.59	.76	1.51	.63	1.51	.74	.39	.68
Work-to-family conflict	1.68	.83	1.60	.72	1.53	.79	1.02	.36
Partner work-to-family conflict	1.67	.80	1.71	.85	1.69	.83	.05	.95
Spouse conflict	1.47	.45	1.67	.52	1.61	.46	4.91	.008
Adolescent school performance								
Conflict with parents	1.78	.66	2.07	.75	1.99	.59	5.26	.006
Conflict with teachers	1.56	.68	1.74	.70	1.68	.65	1.99	.14
Conflict with classmates	1.73	.71	1.90	.75	1.76	.72	1.53	.22
Final mark	345.33	68.28	310.78	75.76	322.18	90.62	5.28	.006

The ANOVAs showed significant student gender difference only in FWC, with male students' parents reporting significantly higher FWC than female students' parents ( $M_{\text{male}}=1.63$ ,  $SD_{\text{male}}=.79$ ,  $M_{\text{female}}=1.44$ ,  $SD_{\text{female}}=.61$ ,  $F_{1,303}=5.94$ ,  $p=.02$ ). There was a significant mother education level difference in WFC ( $F_{2,242}=4.77$ ,  $p=.009$ ) and spouse conflict ( $F_{2,240}=6.15$ ,  $p=.002$ ). Further analyses revealed that mothers with technical secondary school or lower education reported significantly more WFC than mothers with middle high school education and bachelor education, while the latter two did not differ significantly. Mothers with bachelor education reported significantly less spouse conflict than mothers with technical secondary school or lower education and middle high school education, and the latter two did not differ significantly.

The ANOVAs also showed significant father education level difference in WFC ( $F_{2,257}=6.63$ ,  $p=.002$ ), partner WFC ( $F_{2,257}=4.55$ ,  $p=.01$ ), spouse conflict ( $F_{2,257}=3.98$ ,  $p=.02$ ), and final marks ( $F_{2,257}=4.39$ ,  $p=.01$ ). Further analyses revealed that fathers with technical secondary school or lower education reported significantly more WFC than fathers with middle high school education and bachelor education, while the latter two did not differ significantly. Fathers with bachelor or higher education reported significantly less partner WFC and less spouse conflict than fathers with technical secondary school or lower education and middle high school education, and the latter two did not differ significantly in the two variables. The students of fathers with bachelor or higher education got significantly higher final marks than those students of fathers with technical secondary school or lower education and middle high school education, and the latter two did not differ significantly. There was no significant difference between families with one child and families with two or more children in all the variables ( $F_{1,247}=.78\sim 3.12$ , all  $ps>.08$ ). The correlations between these variables were shown in Table 3.

Table 3  
Correlations between Variables (n=305)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1.Family-to-work conflict	1						
2.Work-to-family conflict	.58**	1					
3.Partner work-to-family conflict	.54**	.66**	1				
4.Spouse conflict	.21**	.13*	.19**	1			
5.Conflict with parents	.03	.04	.05	.29**	1		
6.Conflict with teachers	.04	-.001	.06	.19**	.57**	1	
7.Conflict with classmates	.06	.05	.04	.15*	.45**	.59**	1
8.Final mark	-.08	-.08	-.07	-.20**	-.11	-.21**	-.13*

Note: \* $p<.05$ , \*\* $p<.01$ .

The results of regression analyses of spouse conflict, adolescent conflict, and final marks are presented Table 4. In the final marks regression, work-family conflict and control variables were entered in Step 1, spouse conflict was entered in Step 2, and adolescent conflict was entered in Step 3. In Model 2, work-family conflict ( $B=2.30$ ,  $\beta=.02$ ,  $t=.26$ ,  $p=.79$ ) and spouse conflict ( $B=-12.58$ ,  $\beta=-.07$ ,  $t=-.95$ ,  $p=.34$ ) both failed to be significant predictors of final marks. Table 4 presented the results in Model 3.

Table 4

*Regressions of Spouse Conflict, Adolescent Conflict (model 2) and final marks (model 3) (n=189)*

	Spouse conflict		Adolescent conflict		Final marks	
	<i>B</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>Beta</i>
Gender	.13	.14	-.05	-.04	13.91	.09
Grade_8	.18	.17*	.12	.09	-30.83	-.18*
Grade_9	.25	.25**	.05	.04	-14.82	-.09
High middle school_M	-.26	-.26**	-.30	-.25**	-3.60	-.02
Bachelor_M	-.36	-.25**	-.29	-.16	12.71	.05
High middle school_F	.19	.20*	.27	.23*	-7.00	-.04
Bachelor_F	.21	.16	.54	.33**	29.96	.13
Age_M	.01	.08	.01	.05	2.28	.12
Age_F	-.01	-.11	.01	.09	-.26	-.02
Work-family conflict	.10	.15*	.02	.02	2.75	.02
Spouse conflict			.26	.21**	-5.65	-.03
Adolescent conflict					-26.88	-.19*
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.15**		.15**		.11*	
$\Delta R^2$			.04**		.03*	

Note: M=mother, F=father; \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ .

### Discussion and Implications

To answer the call for future research on the association of work-family conflict with family-related outcomes, especially children's school performance (Eby et al., 2005; Tsionou & Konstantopoulos, 2015), the present study examined first the relationship between parents' work-family conflict, spouse conflict, and adolescent school performance, and then tested the mediating role of spouse conflict in the relationship between work-family conflict and adolescent school performance, using data collected in one Chinese junior middle school.

As expected, the parents' FWC, WFC, and partner's WFC all positively correlated with spouse conflict, and family-work conflict turned out to be a significantly positive predictor of spouse conflict in regression analysis when demographic characteristics were controlled, supporting the influence of work-family conflict on family-related outcomes, such as partner relationship, which has been found in previous studies (e.g., Kalliath, Hughes, & Newcombe, 2012). The linear regression also resulted in a significantly positive association between spouse conflict and grade 8, grade 9, and the father high middle school education; however, a significantly negative association between spouse conflict and mother high middle school and mother bachelor education levels, suggesting more spouse conflicts in families with the eighth and ninth grade students, high middle school education of the father, and technical secondary school or lower education level of the mother.

Inconsistent with expectations, the parents' work-family conflict was not significantly associated with adolescent conflict or final marks in the present study. The current data, thus, provided no support for the direct association between work-family conflict and adolescent school performance. Due to the lack of significant association between work-family conflict and adolescent school performance, the mediation hypothesis of spouse conflict was not supported in the present study. However, the current data still showed a significant impact of spouse conflict on adolescent school performance. Correlations revealed significantly positive relations between spouse conflict and adolescents' conflict with parents, teachers, and classmates. Spouse conflict also turned out to be the significantly positive predictor of adolescent conflict after other variables were controlled in the linear regression. Adolescents tend to report higher amounts of conflict with parents, teachers, and classmates when their parents report more spouse conflict within their relationship. Adolescents' final marks in school were negatively correlated to spouse conflict. With other variables controlled, final marks were not significantly associated with spouse conflict, but significantly associated with adolescent conflict.

Taken together, the current data indicate the direct impact of work-family conflict on partner relationships and the indirect relationship of work-family conflict and adolescent school performance. These findings are consistent with the family resilience framework (Patterson, 2002), supporting the idea that family environment change is associated with family members' health, well-being (e.g., Bianchi & Milkie, 2010; Menaghan, 1991; Perry-Jenkins et al., 2000; Strazdins et al., 2013), partner relationships, and children's school performance. It highlights the necessity of investigating the potential transmission mechanisms, such as parent mood, spouse conflict, and parent-child interactions in families, through which work-family conflict influences the well-being of relationships and individuals in family, school, work, and other life areas (Perry-Jenkins, Repetti, & Crouter, 2000; Strazdins, Clements, Korda, Broom, & D'Souza, 2006).

There are some limitations in the present study, and these results, thus, need to be corroborated in further studies. One limitation is the selection of the sample. Our sample is not a representative sample of the population. The students were recruited from three grades (all four classes per grade) in one junior middle school in Hangzhou. The majority of the students were from migrant families that usually have lower social status. Most students in the school go to vocational schools rather than colleges after graduation. These findings should thus be generalized with caution to those adolescents not meeting the above mentioned criteria. Limitations also exist concerning the assessments of spouse conflict and adolescent conflict. Future study should use improved measures and collect data from both parents to better examine the relationship between these variables, especially the mediation relationship.

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