

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The importance of external social support for workplace-related stress as we grow older

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Abstract

Objectives: For older employees, a mismatch between work and nonwork roles can lead to work–family conflict (WFC) and stress. This paper examines whether the availability of social support from outside the workplace can assist these employees in coping with the stress-related consequences of WFC.

Methods: This study used data from Waves 16 (Time 1) and 17 (Time 2) of the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey ($N = 2867$). Sociodemographic characteristics were measured using age, sex and employment tenure. A moderated regression model was applied to the older employees in this sample using stress, WFC with external social support as the moderator. Analysis was additionally undertaken for the different aged employee cohorts, younger than 30 years and middle-aged (30–50).

Results: We found that external social support dampened the effect of WFC on employee stress for older employees. This effect was more powerful for older employees than for younger employees. Interestingly, older employees reported the same levels of external social support as employees between 30 and 50, but less than that of employees younger than 30 years.

Conclusions: Following our hypothesised relationships based on conservation of resources (COR), selection, optimisation with compensation (SOC) and socio-emotional selectivity theories (SST), this paper demonstrates that older employees benefit significantly from external social support. As external social support increased among older employees, the negative effect of WFC on stress decreased. However, this effect was only significant for employees up to the 68th percentile. Overall, this effect was less powerful for both groups of younger employees. Consistent with SOC and SST, older employees possessed different social motives (less reported external social support). Employer and government strategies assisting employees to develop social networks outside the workplace may provide significant benefits to organisations in addition to employees.

KEYWORDS

aged, employment, middle aged, psychological distress, social support, work-life balance

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1 | INTRODUCTION

The late-career stage is a period of significant personal change. In the work sphere, changes in physical and mental health become more apparent and, together with adjustments in the nonwork environment such as responsibilities for ageing relatives and grandchildren, older employees may perceive reduced person–environment fit and a mismatch between work and nonwork roles, leading to work–family conflict (WFC).¹ Consequently, older employees may re-assess the fit of their personal resources in and outside the work environment, which may influence their decision to continue working.¹ This is because the juggling required because of WFC may diminish the individual's personal resources,² and the required repeated psychological effort may increase stress, increasing the chance of early retirement.³ Consequently, for older employees to remain engaged in the workforce, it is important to understand age-related individual factors that can decrease WFC and stress to maintain person–environment fit.¹ Here, we investigate the effect of external social support—friendships and social networks located outside the workplace—in assisting employees in better coping with the stress implications of WFC, and whether this effect is different between older workers and younger workers.

We applied conservation of resources (COR) theory⁴ to explain how older employees assess their work role, given their personal capacities and ability—their resources—to fulfil work and nonwork responsibilities. Conservation of resources theory contends that individuals will seek to acquire, maintain and protect their valued resources against threats. Resources are defined as 'those objects, personal characteristics, conditions or energies that are valued by the individual'.² Threats to a resource typically trigger stress. When a loss occurs in one resource, individuals will compensate by investing in other resources.² This loss–compensation dynamic has been discussed throughout the ageing literature.⁵ As individuals age, they experience gains and losses⁶ in available resources, such as their physical, cognitive and emotional capabilities. Consistent with COR theory, when older individuals find their resources inadequate, they may draw on social support to acquire the resources they need, rekindle dwindling resources or obtain respite from stressful conditions to give them time to recover resources or the capacity to exploit their resources.³

Social support is defined as the 'various forms of aid and assistance supplied by family members, friends, neighbours, and others'.⁷ Social support is both a resource and a facilitator in gaining, maintaining and protecting other resources. In the work sphere, the literature shows work-derived social support ameliorates the negative

Policy impact

External social support is a critical resource to reduce WFC and robust human resource management policies are essential to enable older employees to build social networks. Specifically, community and volunteering programs, social events and flexible work scheduling can accommodate nonwork interests, thereby reducing stress and improving work engagement.

Practice impact

Organisations need to develop programs that support older employees' social connections outside the workplace, to promote well-being and enhance work engagement. By assisting older employees to engage with organisations such as sporting clubs and strengthening ties with friends, organisations can help older employees acquire social support, developing greater workplace resilience and facilitating career longevity.

effect of WFC and burnout.⁸ In this paper, we are interested in resources from outside the workplace. Individuals with wider social networks and regular social involvement experience a better quality of life.⁹ This external social support can provide emotional and instrumental resources or assist employees in better recuperating from workplace-originated stress.⁹ For instance, an older employee who is struggling to care for ageing parents while working full-time may proactively draw on nonwork sources of social support to compensate for the time-resource strain by asking a family member, friend or neighbour to assist with the caring duties or paying someone to take on some of the care. However, if there is insufficient external social support available, they may take unplanned leave, quit or retire from the workforce altogether. Proactive compensating behaviour, such as drawing on social support, has been shown to have a positive influence on the intention to remain at work.¹⁰

Older employees with greater workplace-derived social support experience less work burnout; improved well-being, physical health and mood; and fewer negative attitudes about ageing, as well as delayed retirement.¹¹ Accordingly, increasing workplace-originated social support at work has been a focus of late-career human resource interventions.¹² However, external social support has been minimally researched.¹³ In organisation studies, social support is almost exclusively conceptualised as workplace-derived social support,¹⁴ while in studies that

have considered external sources of social support are often limited to support provided by a partner or family,¹² overlooking friends.¹⁵ This is a problem because, increasingly, people are entering older age uncoupled or without children.³

Age-related differences in social behaviour and goals can be better understood by considering two lifespan theories: the selection, optimisation with compensation theory (SOC) and socio-emotional selectivity theory (SST).^{16,17} Consistent with COR's focus on the reallocation of resources following resource threat, SOC argues that older workers respond to a reduction in resources (such as physical and cognitive decline) by seeking to maximise gains and minimise losses.¹⁷ In the context of relationships, older workers can be expected to more precisely select their resources and optimise their use, prioritising close personal relationships at the expense of less close relationships. Socio-emotional selectivity theory develops this insight by explaining how different age cohorts may optimise relationships differently. Socio-emotional selectivity theory predicts the changes in social behaviour across three social motives—emotional regulation, self-concept and information seeking, due to age.¹⁶ While each motive is present throughout the lifespan, their importance differs. Of relevance here, as we age, awareness that time—as an employee, and more importantly, one's own life—is running out triggers a move from knowledge-based goals to more immediate emotional-based goals. Consequently, older people are more likely to reduce superficial social relationships and cultivate close social partners¹⁸ and interactions that are friendly and that aid their emotional well-being.¹⁹ This change in social motivation often leads older individuals to prune their social networks, resulting in a smaller number of social resources to draw on.¹⁶ This process has been confirmed in a longitudinal study that observed an increase in the size of social networks in young adulthood and a decline steadily throughout later life.²⁰ In that study, the reduction in social networks was primarily among fringe partners—distant friendships or casual acquaintances—while the remaining social contacts were associated with positive emotions.²⁰

We extend the literature by examining two aspects of the impact of external social support on the mental health and well-being of older employees, focussing on workplace-related stress. This understanding can better inform theorising about the motivations of older employees and the development of interventions to support career longevity. The first is whether employees' externally derived social support, such as family, partners, friends and neighbours, is tied to older employees' experience of WFC and stress, and if so, whether this linkage differs for older cohorts of employees compared with younger cohorts.

Finding evidence of a relationship between external social support, WFC and stress that differs across the lifespan can help clarify linkages between the experience of WFC and stress, and theories of adult social development that have argued that social goals change over time.¹⁶ Second, extant research on retaining older employees typically focusses on workplace sources of support, such as managers and colleagues, and spouse-derived support, and ignores other relationships, such as with friends and neighbours, which may also be important sources of external social support. We demonstrate the practical importance of these friendship relationships to the quality of life of older employees.

Drawing from COR, SOC and SST, we expect that older employees will have lower levels of external social support than their younger counterparts as a consequence of the change in social motivation towards present emotional goals and the pruning of social contacts that do not serve these goals. Furthermore, we expect that the ameliorating effect of older employees' external social support on their WFC will be stronger than that of younger employees as older employees will draw more strongly on a smaller number of meaningful relationships. While younger cohorts will likely have a perception of more external social support, the type of support provided may not be useful to reduce WFC. Thus, we expect that external social support will have a more powerful buffering effect for older employees than for younger employees.

Accordingly, we will examine the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1. External social support will dampen the effect of work–family conflict on employee stress more for older employees (those over 50) with more external social support than for older employees with less external social support.

Hypothesis 2. The effect of external social support will dampen the effect of work–family conflict more for older employees (those over 50) than for employees under 50.

Hypothesis 3. Older employees (those over 50) will report having less social support than younger (that is, those who are less than 50 years old).

This study adds to the workforce ageing literature by examining the effect of external social support for the management of WFC among older employees. Studies have suggested that achieving work-life balance may assist in retaining older employees in the workforce

for longer⁸ but have not extended to identifying external factors that may ameliorate WFC. Finally, using a broad definition of social support expands the extant research on work- and externally derived social support to include a broader social network including friends and neighbours.

2 | METHODS

2.1 | Sample

This study used data from Waves 16 (2016, Time 1) and 17 (2017, Time 2) of the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) data collection. The HILDA data set provides a nationally representative longitudinal data set based on annual collection of social, economic, health and labour market data from 2001.²¹ An appropriate exemption was obtained from the relevant university ethics committee at the University of Adelaide. This research was undertaken following the guidelines of Australian Code for Responsible Conduct of Research 2018.²²

2.2 | Measures

2.2.1 | Stress

HILDA provides a measure for respondent stress perceptions (variable *qpdk10s*) computed from the unweighted mean of the 10-item Kessler Psychological Distress Scale collected at Time 2. This scale is a 'global measure of psychosocial distress, based on questions about people's level of nervousness, agitation, psychological fatigue, and depression in the past four weeks'.²³ A sample item used to compute this measure is 'In the past 4 weeks, about how often did you feel hopeless?'

2.2.2 | Work–family conflict

Employee work–family balance was measured at Time 1, using a 16-item scale (variable *SCQ:4Ea-p*). As this scale combines positive, negative and neutral work–family balance items, factor analysis was performed to identify the negative WFC factor (details of this factor analysis can be obtained from the authors). An eight-item factor representing negative work–family balance consequences was identified, which explained 16.6% of variance (alpha 0.83). A sample item is '[B]ecause of the requirements of my job, my family time is less enjoyable and more pressured'.

2.2.3 | External social support

We used HILDA's 10-item social support scale (variable *SCQ:B17a-j*) at Time 1. A sample item is 'When I need someone to help me out, I can usually find someone' (alpha 0.87).

2.2.4 | Sex

Male respondents coded as 0 and female respondents coded as 1.

2.2.5 | Age

Respondent age was measured at Time 1 by the HILDA variable *phage1*. This variable was recoded to include employees who were 16 years or older, who were continuously employed with the same employer over the two waves, and classified into three groups: younger employees, between 16 and 30 years old at Time 1 ($n=281$); middle-aged employees, who were between 30 and 50 years of age ($n=2097$); and older employees, who were at least 50 years old ($n=489$).

2.2.6 | Tenure

This was measured using the HILDA variable *qjbempt*, which asked respondents how many years they had been employed by their current employer.

2.3 | Procedure

2.3.1 | Data

The data set was analysed using IBM SPSS 28.²⁴ Data met the usual tests for data suitability.

2.3.2 | Control variables

We controlled for sex and tenure. Social role theory²⁵ suggests that women develop and use social connections differently to men. As employees' experience of the workplace, such as workplace stress or the availability of workplace resources, may change over time, we controlled for tenure.

2.3.3 | Common method bias

In this data set, common method bias is likely to be minimal as independent and dependent variables were

collected 12 months apart, and the variables were collected through a combination of interviews and self-completed questionnaires.

3 | RESULTS

Table 1 reports on the descriptive statistics for this data.

Hypothesis 1 proposed that external social support would buffer the negative effect of work-life conflict on employee stress for older employees, and this effect would have a greater buffering effect than for younger employees (Hypothesis 2). We tested this through moderator regressions for each of the age groups. The results are reported in Table 2, using Hayes²⁶ PROCESS Model 1 with 1000 percentile bootstrap samples.

As can be seen in Regression 1 in Table 2, external social support buffers the negative effect of WFC on employee stress for older employees ($b = -0.80$, $SE = 0.16$, $p < 0.001$). At low levels of external social support, at the 16th percentile, the simple slope was statistically significant ($b = 1.97$, $SE = 0.29$, $p < 0.001$) and remaining significant until the 64th percentile ($b = 0.41$, $SE = 0.21$, $p = 0.05$). Hypothesis 1 is supported.

For younger employees, those younger than 30 years, a direct effect existed ($b = -5.52$, $SE = 1.38$, $p < 0.001$), but no moderating effect ($b = 0.65$, $SE = 0.36$, $p = 0.07$) was found. For employees between 30 and 50, both a direct effect ($b = -1.03$, $SE = 0.36$, $p = 0.004$) and a significant interaction effect (interaction term $b = -0.22$, $SE = 0.09$, $p = 0.02$) were detected. Johnson–Neyman analysis indicated that external social support had a moderating effect for all levels of external social support. At low levels of external social support (at the 16th percentile), the simple slope was statistically significant ($b = 1.20$, $SE = 0.15$, $p < 0.001$), as well as at high levels at the 84th percentile ($b = 0.77$, $SE = 0.13$, $p < 0.001$).

Thus, external social support has a greater dampening effect for the older cohort than for the middle-aged cohort. Figure 1 depicts the simple slopes for employees in the 30–50, and over 50 cohorts, at high and low levels of external social support. Hypothesis 2 is supported.

Hypothesis 3 proposed that older employees would have lower levels of external social support than younger employees. A one-way ANOVA showed a statistically significant difference in external social support among the three groups: $F(2, 7920) = 3.18$, $p = 0.04$. Student–Newman–Keuls post hoc analysis revealed that the youngest group, those younger than 30 years, had a greater level of external social support ($M = 5.68$, $SD = 0.98$) than middle-aged ($M = 5.59$, $SD = 1.02$) and older employees ($M = 5.60$, $SD = 1.01$). Middle-aged and older employees had statistically equivalent external social support. Hypothesis 3 is partly supported.

4 | DISCUSSION

This study demonstrates that older employees' external social support buffers the experience of WFC and stress in the workplace. However, this buffering effect is only significant up to the 68th percentile of support. Further research is needed to examine this finding. This may be explained by the burden of reciprocity, whereby assistance provided needs to be paid back at some point.²⁷ Older employees may have significant nonwork responsibilities and any support received will create an unwanted additional burden in future.

We also found that the interaction effect of external social support and WFC on stress was non-existent for the youngest group of employees, existent for employees between 30 and 50 years and strongest for employees over 50 years of age.

Older employees reported statistically equivalent levels of external social support to that of employees between 30 and 50 but possessed less social support than younger employees. This is generally consistent with SOC and SST propositions on how social motivations change over the lifespan, with older individuals focusing on a smaller number of emotionally meaningful relationships. This contrasts with younger people, who seek to develop their social connections with a view to a future pay-off.²⁷ Consistent with COR, SOC and SST,

TABLE 1 Descriptive statistics.

	M	SD	Min	Max	1	2	3	4	5
1. Stress	15.36	5.73	10	50					
2. Work–family conflict	3.44	1.14	1	7	0.30***				
3. External social support	5.61	1.01	1	7	−0.40***	−0.36***			
4. Sex	0.50	0.50	0	1	0.02	−0.00	−0.02		
5. Age	41.04	8.97	16	80	−0.07***	−0.07***	−0.04*	−0.15***	
6. Tenure	8.89	7.41	1	60	−0.08***	−0.02	0.05**	−0.06**	0.31***

Note: $n = 2867$. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

TABLE 2 Moderating role of external social support on the work–family conflict and employee stress relationship for different age cohorts.

	Older employees: Over 50 years		Middle-aged employees: 30–50 years		Younger employees: younger than 30 years	
	(1)		(2)		(3)	
	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>b</i>	SE
Constant	4.54	3.64	17.93***	2.17	48.31***	
Tenure	0.01	0.02	−0.05***	0.02	−0.18***	
Sex	0.07	0.45	0.21	0.22	0.44	
WFC	5.41***	0.92	2.19***	0.54	−3.61	2.10
ESS	1.14	0.61	−1.03**	0.36	−5.52**	1.38
WFC × ESS	−0.80***	0.16	−0.22*	0.09	0.65	0.36
						8.36
Simple slopes						0.08
ESS at 16th %	1.97***	0.29	1.20***	0.15		0.77
ESS at 84th %	0.06	0.24	0.77***	0.13		
<i>R</i> ²	0.26		0.20		0.22	
<i>F</i>	33.45***		104.68***		15.61***	
<i>N</i>	489		2097		281	

Note: Dependent variable: Stress.

Abbreviations: ESS, External social support; WFC, Work–family conflict. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

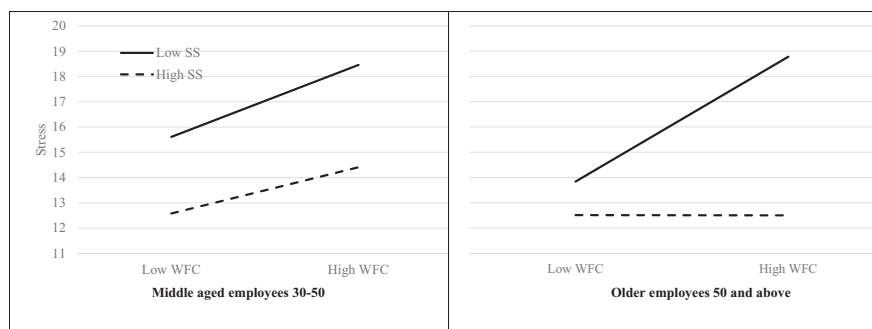


FIGURE 1 Moderation effect of external social support on the work–family conflict and stress relationship for middle-aged and older employees.

this suggests the perceived availability of support from family and friends creates positive emotional states^{19,28} in older individuals, which buffer the negative effects of WFC and stress.

We note that these data were collected pre-COVID-19, and that COVID-19 may challenge this general theory. There is evidence of increased reliance on friendship networks during the lockdown period.²⁹ We would expect the buffering effect to have been more important for all age groups during the difficult lockdown and recovery periods. Younger people may have activated their existing resources to a greater extent than indicated in these data. Older people may have been more likely to draw more heavily on their smaller networks. Further,

did employee social support levels and usage during the COVID-19 years revert to pre-COVID-19 levels or remain post-COVID-19? Was any change attributable to ongoing behavioural change or from lingering COVID-19-related mental health issues? Research should also examine the differences between those who worked from home during COVID-19, and those who did not, against those who remain at home, have hybrid-working arrangements or fully returned to the office.

Prior work on late-career decision-making has highlighted the importance of work-derived social support¹¹ and overlooks the potential of external social support as an important resource for career longevity. Our study expands theorising in this area by providing evidence that

external social support is a valued resource that performs a role in buffering WFC and stress in older employees.

5 | CONCLUSIONS

This study presents important insights for human resource practice around the ageing workforce because it highlights the need to broaden interventions to aid older employees to build and maintain external social support as a valued resource. This will be particularly important for employees who are not partnered or who are without close family. Our findings are similar to those in a UK panel study that found that older people are relying more on nonfamily members for social support.³⁰ Possible interventions are community and volunteering programs, social events and flexible work scheduling to accommodate nonwork interests. Encouraging and facilitating older employees to build their networks through engagement with organisations, such as sporting clubs and religious groups, as well as strengthen their ties with friends and neighbours can open the opportunity for acquiring social support in the late-career stage and be an added means (in addition to work-derived social support) to facilitate career longevity.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

No conflicts of interest declared.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from Australian Government Department of Social Services. Restrictions apply to the availability of these data, which were used under license for this study. Data are available from <https://dataverse.ada.edu.au/dataverse/DSSLongitudinalStudies> with the permission of Australian Government Department of Social Services.

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