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Work–family conflict and social undermining behaviour: An examination of PO fit and gender differences

Kristin L. Scott[1]*, Amy Ingram[1], Thomas J. Zagenczyk[1] and
Mindy K. Shoss[2]

[1]Clemson University, Clemson, South Carolina, USA
[2]St. Louis University, St. Louis, MO, USA

In this study, we develop and test a novel theoretical model that addresses the relationship between work–family conflict (WFC), sex, PO fit perceptions (PO fit) and social undermining behaviour. Drawing on the source attribution perspective and role theory, we hypothesize that WFC is positively associated with social undermining behaviour at a later point in time and this relationship is explained in part by diminished PO fit perceptions. Furthermore, we argue that female employees reporting high levels of WFC are more likely to engage in undermining behaviour relative to men when PO fit is considered as a mediating variable. Specifically, we assert that PO fit is depleted to a larger extent for female than for male workers and, subsequently, is associated with higher levels of undermining behaviour. In a sample of over 300 full-time working adults employed across a variety of occupations, we found support for each of our predictions. Implications for research and practice are addressed.

Practitioner points

- Work–family conflict contributes to co-worker-directed social undermining behaviour because it weakens person–organization fit perceptions – especially among women.
- Organizational leaders can create a stronger sense of community among employees, offer avenues for support as well as resources that can help workers cope with the difficulties associated with WFC.
- Leaders implementing interventions should try to maintain a sense of 'fit' and belongingness within the organization and let workers know they are valued even in the face of high levels of work-related demands and challenges.

Work-life balance remains painfully elusive for many workers. A 2010 survey of 1,043 Americans conducted by the Society for Human Resources Management revealed that 89% of employees believed that work-life balance was a problem, 54% indicated that it was a significant problem, and 43% did not feel that their employer was doing enough to address this issue. These results are notable because when the demands of one's work role encroach upon one's family role, defined as work–family conflict (WFC; Kossek & Ozeki, 1998), employees experience career dissatisfaction, burnout, turnover, absenteeism, hostile behaviour at home and physical health, and mental well-being

Correspondence should be addressed to Kristin L. Scott, Clemson University, 101 Sirrine Hall, Clemson, SC 29634, USA (email: kscott3@clemson.edu).

(Allen, Herst, Bruck, & Sutton, 2000; Amsted, Meier, Fasel, Elfering, & Semmer, 2011; Casper, Eby, Bordeaux, Lockwood, & Lambert, 2007; Eby, Casper, Lockwood, Bordeaux, & Brinley, 2005; Mesmer-Magnus & Viswesvaran, 2005).

The prevalence of WFC and its negative outcomes is a concern to researchers and practitioners. Although the extant literature provides a framework for understanding the consequences of WFC in general (e.g., Amsted *et al.*, 2011; Eby *et al.*, 2005), there is a surprising lack of research that examines the within-domain (i.e., workplace) effects of WFC – specifically whether WFC can spur negative workplace behaviours that are harmful to co-workers. Accordingly, we explore the relationship between WFC and social undermining behaviour, defined as actions intended to gradually hinder a target's success in the workplace (Duffy, Ganster, & Pagon, 2002). Our work responds to calls for further research on the source attribution perspective (Shockley & Singla, 2011), which suggests that WFC causes workers to contemplate the reasons for WFC and generally blame the domain responsible for conflict and associated undesirable outcomes (i.e., work is the perpetrator, family is the victim). Thus, this perspective provides a framework for exploring the link between WFC and social undermining.

Our study differs from previous work in two ways. First, unlike most research on WFC, we depart from the domain specificity perspective (Frone, 2003). Domain specificity contends that conflict in one domain (WFC, family-to-work conflict, or FWC) has negative implications for behaviours and attitudes in the other domain, but does not account for the within-domain implications of conflict (Shockley & Singla, 2011). These meta-analytic findings show that workers' perceptions of WFC (or FWC) have stronger within- than cross-domain effects on outcomes. Second, we do not consider the potential influence of FWC (i.e., family-to-work conflict) on workplace undermining behaviour as it is a cross-domain factor and, therefore, inconsistent with our theoretical focus. Also, organizational leaders presumably have more control over work-related factors than family-related issues (Byron, 2005). In addition, although some studies differentiate between different forms of WFC (e.g., time, strain, behaviour), we focus on aggregate WFC to test our contention that the collective experience of WFC causes employees to re-evaluate their PO fit and subsequently influences social undermining behaviour.

A second contribution is that our research model identifies a set of predictor variables that illustrate for whom and why employees are likely to engage in social undermining behaviour. Studies of workplace aggression in general and social undermining in particular have focused on reactions to undermining (Aquino & Thau, 2009), but paid less attention to the antecedents of undermining behaviour (for exceptions, see Duffy, Ganster, Shaw, Johnson, & Pagon, 2006; Duffy, Scott, Shaw, Tepper, & Aquino, 2012). Efforts to develop interventions to prevent its occurrence will likely be fruitless without a comprehensive understanding of why it occurs (Aquino & Thau, 2009).

Third, we demonstrate why WFC is related to undermining behaviour and how this relationship differs for male versus female workers. We argue that WFC is likely to influence the degree to which an employee identifies with and believes that he or she is compatible values- and identity-wise with the company, formally known as person-organization fit, or P-O fit (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005). WFC represents incongruence between an employee's ability to meet both work and family demands and, thus, is a type of inter-role conflict, where demands from work and family domains are incompatible to some degree (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). Such conflict diminishes PO fit because it harms the employee–employer value-based relationship that is vital to maintaining a positive work role identity. Lack of perceived fit contributes to social undermining behaviour because it causes employees to perceive that the bond between

them and their employer is weakened (i.e., PO fit will mediate the relationship between WFC and social undermining).

Moreover, although men are typically more aggressive than women (Eagly & Steffen, 1986), we contend that WFC→PO fit→undermining relationship will be stronger among female workers because they tend to be more protective of their family role. As a result, they will be more likely to react negatively to WFC (Carlson & Kacmar, 2000; Grandey, Cordeiro, & Crouter, 2005). Thus, we contribute to research that explores the differential reactions of men and women to WFC. We elaborate on our predictions below and test our model (see Figure 1) in a sample of more than 300 full-time working adults employed across a variety of positions and industries.

Literature review and hypotheses development

Source attribution theory

Employees experiencing WFC conflict tend to feel that their work-related demands make it difficult or impossible to attend to family concerns (Amsted *et al.*, 2011). The source attribution view suggests that WFC not only drains resources across work and family domains, but also influences thoughts, feelings and behaviours within the same domain as the source of conflict (Shockley & Singla, 2011). WFC triggers an interpretive process wherein workers contemplate the reasons for this negative experience (Harvey & Weary, 1984). Employees tend to blame the domain responsible for the conflict and any undesirable outcomes associated with it – thus generating negative within-domain perceptions and attitudes. In the case of WFC, work interferes with family, causing employees to attribute this conflict to actors and occurrences in the work domain and thus experience negative work-related attitudes and perceptions. Drawing on this reasoning, we contend that WFC is likely to give rise to aggressive behaviours in the form of social undermining behaviour. We expound on our reasoning in the following section.

WFC and social undermining

Social undermining behaviour is a subtle but insidious form of workplace aggression that includes actions such as taking credit for another's work, withholding information, or slander. As such, it is one of a constellation of constructs within the workplace aggression literature that are 'conceptually distinct but operationally similar' (Hershcovis, Reich, Parker, & Bozeman, 2012, p. 2). For example, social undermining differs from incivility because it comprises only intentional behaviour and, therefore, the motive to harm is not
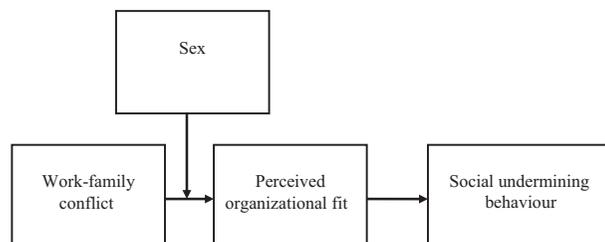

Figure 1. Proposed theoretical model of employee social undermining in response to work–family conflict (WFC) via PO fit perceptions.

ambiguous as with uncivil behaviour (Duffy *et al.*, 2006), although both are considered a form of non-violent mistreatment. We focus on social undermining directed towards co-workers as opposed to supervisor-, subordinate-, or organization-directed deviance because: (1) peers in similar positions in the organizational hierarchy (i.e., co-workers) are often targets of undermining because employees typically refrain from retaliating against those in higher level positions (i.e., supervisors) who can formally sanction them for their actions (Aquino, Tripp, & Bies, 2001; Barling, Dupré, & Kelloway, 2009); (2) co-workers may share some blame for WFC as they can perpetuate norms to stay late, respond to emails after hours, etc.; and (3) the above two points may be especially true when the source of conflict is non-specific as with WFC (Marcus-Newhall, Pedersen, Carlson, & Miller, 2000). Thus, we speculate that employees experiencing WFC will engage in high levels of social undermining behaviour directed towards co-workers as they struggle with the frustration and stress associated with this conflict.

Although WFC is widely acknowledged as an occupational stressor (Amsted *et al.*, 2011; Eby *et al.*, 2005; Hart & Cooper, 2001), there is little evidence to indicate whether it contributes to antisocial behaviour in the workplace. This omission is surprising because a great deal of research has linked organizational stress with aggressive behaviour (Fox, Spector, & Miles, 2001; Schat & Kelloway, 2005). The source attribution perspective predicts that employees will respond to WFC with frustration and dissatisfaction directed towards the work domain. Given that attitudes and beliefs about a situation influence how individuals behave within that context (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980), it stands to reason that employees will also respond to WFC with negative behaviour at work. Stress-invoked aggression may not only provide an outlet for venting hostility or anger, but can also afford employees a sense of control over a frustrating situation even if they cannot directly control the stressor itself (Bennett, 1998; Fox & Spector, 1999; Greenberg, 1990).

Accordingly, we argue that a likely response to WFC is for employees to engage in social undermining, as this behaviour is subtle, occurring over time, and less likely to be noticed by organizational authorities (Duffy *et al.*, 2002). As a result, employees may be able to 'get away' with undermining more easily than other forms of aggression. In addition, we believe that in organizations where WFC exists, co-workers could share in the some of the blame for perpetuating a 'work intense' environment that stimulates WFC. Co-workers are amongst the most salient features of one's organization (Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008) and set the norms that might allow WFC to persist. For example, co-workers may acquiesce to management's demands that cause conflict (e.g., working after hours) and, therefore, could be held responsible for allowing these policies to prevail. Moreover, co-workers are important sources of role information (Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008; Morrison, 2002) and thus may communicate and create norms and that threaten work–family balance:

    Hypothesis 1:   WFC will be positively related to social undermining behaviour.

WFC, P-O fit, and social undermining

We also explore PO fit as a mechanism that may explain why WFC is associated with social undermining. PO fit reflects the shared similarity between a person's self-concept and their image of the organization (Kristof, 1996) and captures the extent to which employees perceive that their values, goals, desires, and preferences align with those of the organization (Kristof-Brown *et al.*, 2005). While we are unaware of research that has explored the relationship between PO fit and WFC, some ancillary studies support this

idea. Research shows that PO fit is bolstered by employee perceptions that their company 'matches' their own interests and characteristics across a broad spectrum of factors (c.f., Edwards, Cable, Williamson, Lambert, & Shipp, 2006). Goal congruence and shared values between workers, supervisors and the organization is central to establishing strong perceptions of PO fit (Chatman, 1989; Erdogan, Kraimer, & Liden, 2002; Vancouver & Schmitt, 1991).

Along these lines, shared ideologies concerning work-life issues have the potential to influence PO fit as well. Work and family enrichment scholarship suggests that employers can create a meaningful bond with their employees by embracing the idea that workers manage multiple life roles (e.g., employee, spouse, parent, caretaker) and offering policies and practices that recognize the 'whole' employee (e.g., Carlson, Kacmar, Wayne, & Grzywacz, 2006; Greenhaus & Powell, 2006; McNall & Nicklin, 2014; Wayne, Randel, & Stevens, 2006). Such practices allow organizations to better align employer–employee values concerning work-life matters and presumably diminish WFC. Thus, it stands to reason that WFC is likely to be damaging to PO fit: WFC represents incongruence between an employee's ability to meet both work and family demands. The presence of WFC suggests that employees perceive that work demands are excessive or overwhelming to employees, or at least are incompatible with their family situation (hence the conflict). Consistent with the source attribution perspective that maintains that WFC has within-domain implications on employee beliefs and attitudes, we reason that this discrepancy damages workers' shared identity with their organization and thus diminishes PO fit.

We further posit that the lack of perceived fit will result in social undermining because of the weakened bond between the employee and employer. The loss of identification with the employer and increased undermining behaviour can be informed by integrating research on social identity and ingroup/outgroup behaviour with the source attribution perspective. According to Tajfel (1974), individuals feel a sense of belonging and loyalty in groups with whom they identify and thus tend to engage in supportive, prosocial behaviours. By contrast, studies demonstrate that weakly shared identities often breed aggressiveness or hostility (e.g., Epstein, 1966). Studies of PO fit disparities appear to corroborate this evidence: High levels of shared PO fit prompt cooperation but weakly shared PO fit can spark self-interested behaviour and competition (Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994; Johnson & Yang, 2010). Indeed, Cable and Judge (1997) found that PO fit perceptions were more highly correlated with employees' behavioural choices than were their actual fit levels, while meta-analytic findings show that low PO fit translates into lower organizational commitment and loyalty and greater stress and anxiety (Kristof-Brown *et al.*, 2005).

In a similar vein, we believe that low levels of PO fit will perpetuate social undermining behaviour when WFC is high. WFC is associated with co-worker-directed undermining behaviour because employees reflect upon this disparity and conclude that their personal values and needs are not in sync with those of their organization, thus damaging to PO fit perceptions. Once PO fit perceptions are weakened, the perceived loss of shared identity and weakened bond with the organization (including those who work there) further stimulates undermining behaviour as workers are more inclined to focus on self-interested behaviour by directing their frustration towards colleagues.

> *Hypothesis 2:* The positive relationship between WFC and social undermining behaviour will be mediated by PO fit.

Moderating role of sex

We further contend that this mediated relationship will be stronger for female than for male employees – or that WFC is more damaging to PO fit perceptions for women than for men. As a result, women will exhibit higher levels of undermining behaviour via PO fit than men (i.e., a first stage moderated mediation model). Past research has suggested that women tend to engage in *indirect* or passive aggression such as social undermining, while men are more likely to exhibit direct or overt aggression (Archer, 2004). However, the literature is currently silent on why this occurs.

To build our argument, we integrate our overarching theoretical framework – the source attribution perspective – with identity and role theories. Meta-analytic tests of the source attribution perspective suggest that women engage in source attribution (i.e., blame the work domain for WFC) more so than men (Shockley & Singla, 2011). Identity and role theory help us to understand why this happens and how. Identity theory suggests that individuals maintain a number of role identities that represent important aspects of the self within society (Stryker, 1968, 1987). While individuals may occupy the same role and therefore possess the same identity (e.g., employee), a particular role can hold different levels of importance across individuals. As a result, people with the same identity may think or behave differently because of the various values they place on the particular role (Callero, 1985; Thoits, 1991). Furthermore, individuals are more likely to defend a highly relevant identity because their self-worth more strongly hinges on it as compared to a weak role identity (Hoelter, 1983).

Work role identity tends to be stronger for men than for women (Bem, 1993; Galinsky, Aumann, & Bond, 2009; Gutek, Searle, & Klepa, 1991). Specifically, gender role theory suggests that men and women internalize social and cultural norms and expectations about their gender and are socialized to enact gendered behaviours (Eagly, Karau, & Makajhani, 1995). Cultural and societal norms portray men as more agentic, assertive, independent, and achievement-orientated, whereas women are more communal, friendly, unselfish, interdependent, expressive, and relationship-oriented (Eagly & Mladinic, 1989). These predefined gender roles, which stem from masculine and feminine stereotypes, support the traditional gendered division of labour where there is 'women's work' – in the form of unpaid labour – inside the home and paid 'men's work' outside the home. Further, because strong cultural norms influence gender roles, men and women then internalize these roles and integrate them into their identities (Kidder, 2002; Wood & Eagly, 2012). Doing so ultimately perpetuates their identification with work and domestic roles. Men tend to place more value on and are protective of the work role identity and are, therefore, less likely to blame it for conflict (Livingston & Judge, 2008). In terms of WFC, this would suggest that men are less likely to fault the work domain for restricting their ability to meet family or personal obligations and WFC. Further, some studies show that women are more affected by WFC than men (e.g., Bacharach, Bamberger, & Conley, 1991; Bolino & Turnley, 2005; Kossek & Ozeki, 1998).

In addition, women experience higher levels of WFC (e.g., Frone, Russell, & Cooper, 1992; Gutek *et al.*, 1991), perhaps because they balance work and family roles to a greater degree than men (Parasuraman & Greenhaus, 1993), whereas men are more readily able to sacrifice family-related aspects of their lives to achieve greater job-related success (Tenbrunsel, Brett, Maoz, Stroh, & Reilly, 1995). As a result, women are more likely to blame the work domain for the WFC. Thus, female employees experiencing WFC may no longer identify with their organization as strongly and will experience lower levels of PO fit relative to men. Thus, the mediated effect of WFC on social undermining behaviour via PO fit perceptions will be stronger for female employees than for male workers.

Hypothesis 3:   Gender will moderate the positive relationship between WFC and social undermining via PO fit perceptions. That is, the positive relationship will be stronger for female than for male employees.

Method

Sample and procedure

We conducted a two-wave study using Study Response, a non-profit academic service at Syracuse University that matches researchers with more than 95,000 individuals willing to participate in surveys. This tool was designed to provide social scientists with a means of conducting web-based surveys with large, diverse samples. Study Response participants volunteer to be contacted for participation (Stanton & Weiss, 2002), and samples collected with this tool have been used in several recently published studies (e.g., Harris, Anseel, & Lievens, 2008; Piccolo & Colquitt, 2006). A number of researchers have encouraged the use of online recruitment in psychological research due to evidence of comparable validity and reliability of results and the greater diversity of these samples as compared to more traditional sources of data collection (e.g., employees in a single organization; college students; Barger, Behrend, Sharek, & Sinar, 2011; Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011; Lian, Ferris, & Brown, 2012).

To participate, individuals needed to be at least 18 years or older and employed. At Time 1, we received 607 completed surveys. Approximately 8 weeks after the Time 1 survey, we collected a second wave of data targeting all 607 participants who completed the initial survey. A total of 391 employed respondents completed the Time 2 survey with a participation rate of 64%. Participants were 54% female and 77% Caucasian with age ranging between 19 and 73 years (mean was 41 years). Participants were employed in various occupations including finance, retail, food service, education, healthcare, etc. Missing data on key variables reduced the sample size for analysis to 342. We collected data for WFC, gender, PO fit, and all of our control variables, with the exception of OCBO, at Time 1. We collected OCBO and social undermining behaviour at Time 2.

Measures

All measures, excluding demographics, were on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) unless otherwise noted. Except for reverse-coded items, higher scores indicated greater magnitudes of the study variables. Some study variables were shortened due to space limitations.

Work–family conflict

At Time 1, WFC was measured with three items from Netemeyer, Boles, and McMurrian's (1996) WFC scale that asks participants to rate the extent to which they believed several statements about themselves and their organization to be true. Sample items included 'The demands of my work interfere with my home and family life' and 'The amount of time my job takes up makes it difficult to fulfil family responsibilities' ($\alpha = .87$).

Sex

At Time 1, gender was measured by asking participants, 'Are you . . . Female or Male?' Females were coded 1, and males were coded 2.

PO fit

This variable was measured at Time 1 with Netemeyer, Boles, McKee, and McMurrian's (1997) 4-item scale that asks participants to rate the degree to which they felt their values and concerns were a close fit with those of the organization. Sample items included, 'I feel that my personal values are a good fit with this organization' and 'This organization has the same values as I do with regard to concerns for others' (α = .89).

Social undermining

At Time 2, participants were asked to rate how often (1 = not at all; 5 = all the time) they engaged in social undermining behaviour directed at their colleagues. This construct was assessed using Duffy *et al.* (2002) 13-item social undermining scale. Samples items were 'Belittled another team member's ideas,' 'Spread rumors about a member of my group' and 'Gave a team member the "silent treatment"' (α = .92).

Controls

We controlled for age, ethnicity, and education level (1 = high school diploma or equivalent; 7 = PhD) as well as occupational status (Nam & Boyd, 2004) and procedural justice (Colquitt, 2001). However, none of the controls significantly influenced our results, so they were dropped from the analyses to preserve degrees of freedom.

Analysis and results

We checked for response and self-selection bias using a logistic regression analysis. We coded participants who completed both surveys as 1 and those who did not participate at Time 2 as 0. These dichotomies were entered as the dependent variables and participants' gender, occupation, age, education level, race, perceived exclusion, and being envied as predictors. Only age was a significant predictor in the regression analysis: Older subjects were more likely to have participated in our study. Accordingly, we controlled for this variable, but as noted above, its inclusion did not change our pattern of results, so it was dropped from the model. In addition, we did not find any significant difference between participants and non-participants for either data collection period (i.e., Time 1 or Time 2). We present descriptive statistics, variable intercorrelations, and scale reliabilities in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations among variables

Study variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4
1. WFC (T1)	2.35	.94	(.87)			
2. Sex (T1)[a]	1.46	.50	.16**			
3. PO fit (T1)	3.75	.85	−.27**	−.11*	(.89)	
4. Social undermining (T2)	1.98	.77	.40**	.21**	−.32**	(.92)

Note. WFC, work–family conflict.
n = 342. Coefficient alphas are presented in parentheses along the diagonal.
[a]Sex is coded as female = 1 and male = 2.
*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.

Table 2. Hierarchical regression and indirect effect results of WFC and social undermining

	PO fit (T1)		Social undermining (T2)	
	B	*SE*	*B*	*SE*
WFC (T1)	−.65***	.15	.27***	.04
Sex (T1)[a]	−.09	.09		
PO fit (T1)			−.21***	.05
WFC*Gender	.27**	.10		
Total R^2	.10***		.20***	
Mediation test				
Indirect coefficient		.05*		
Confidence interval		0.02–0.09		

Moderated mediation test	Women	Men
Indirect coefficient	.08*	.02
Confidence interval	0.04–0.14	−0.001 to 0.06

Note. WFC, work–family conflict.
n = 342. Reported coefficients are unstandardized. Number of bootstrap resamples = 5,000.
[a]Sex is coded as female = 1 and male = 2.
*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.

Results of our regression outcomes and our mediated and moderated indirect effects are presented in Table 2. The regression computations revealed a positive and significant relationship between WFC and social undermining behaviour (B = .27; p < .001), thus supporting Hypothesis 1. In its entirety, our model reflects Edwards and Lambert's (2007) *first stage moderation model*. That is, PO fit mediates the relationship between WFC and social undermining behaviour (Hypothesis 2) and gender moderates the path from WFC to PO fit (Hypothesis 3). Following their recommendations to test our predictions, we used Hayes's (2012) PROCESS macro (Model 4) for SPSS to test our mediation prediction that included 95% bias-corrected and bootstrapped confidence intervals using 5,000 bootstrap samples. As expected and in support of Hypothesis 2, PO fit mediated the relationship between WFC and social undermining (B = .05; SE = 0.01; CI = 0.02–0.09; p < .05).
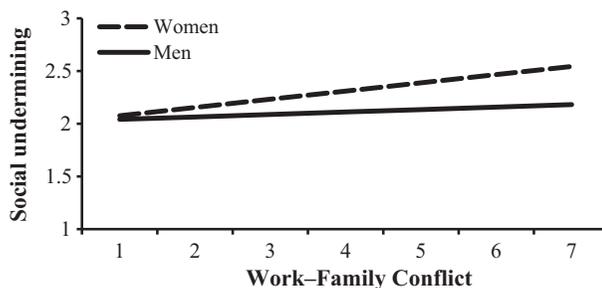

Figure 2. The interactive effect of work–family conflict (WFC) and sex on social undermining behaviour via PO fit.

We then used Hayes' (2012) PROCESS macro (Model 7) to evaluate (1) the mediating effect of PO fit between WFC and social undermining and (2) the moderating role of sex on the relationship between WFC and PO fit and their joint effects on social undermining behaviour (i.e., a moderated mediation model). Predictors were mean-centred for these calculations (Aiken & West, 1991). The WFC–gender interaction was statistically significant ($B = .27$; $p < .01$). We explored the nature of the interaction on the indirect effect of WFC via PO fit on social undermining behaviour and found that WFC was negatively related to PO fit for female employees ($B = -.08$, $SE = 0.03$, CI = 0.04–0.14) but not for male employees ($B = .02$, $SE = 0.02$, CI = -0.001 to 0.06). Thus, Hypothesis 3 was supported. A plot of the interactive effect of WFC and gender via PO fit perceptions on social undermining behaviour is illustrated in Figure 2.

Discussion

Applying a novel perspective to the study of WFC, we draw on the source attribution, social identity, and social role literatures to inform our understanding of why and when WFC is associated with social undermining behaviour in the workplace. Our results support the notion that workers experiencing WFC engage in greater social undermining behaviour and this relationship is explained by workers' perceived lack of fit with their organization. Further, our results highlight the importance of sex differences, demonstrating that when women who experience WFC are more likely to believe that they do not fit with the organization and engage in undermining behaviour.

Our findings contribute to the literature in several ways. First, we add to the nascent body of work showing the profound consequences of WFC by being among the first to link WFC to aggressive workplace behaviour. Only in identifying such relationships and offering an explanation for them can we begin to devise plans to address them and mitigate their undesirable effects. To this end, we integrated the source attribution perspective with theory and findings from the PO fit literature that offer a plausible explanation as to why workers might undermine their colleagues in the face of WFC. Our results suggest that the inherent incompatibility between employees' work and family life is damaging to PO fit perceptions. In turn, we found that diminished PO fit perpetuates undermining behaviour likely because workers' sense of identity, loyalty, and commitment is weakened as a result.

We also contribute to the literature on gender differences and aggression that, in the past, have produced mixed results. Scholars have reasoned that cultural norms and related expectations concerning sex roles and aggression (i.e., men are to be dominant while women are to be peacemakers) tend to influence men to display overt or more hostile aggression (Restubog, Scott, & Zagenczyk, 2011). Alternatively, the dominant societal discourse about women portrays females as passive and non-aggressive (Eagly & Steffen, 1986). Indeed, social acceptance of direct male aggression and non-direct aggression of women generally stems from the norms surrounding prescribed social roles of women (i.e., social role theory). According to this theoretical perspective, there are norms associated with gender-based social roles that specify that men tend to occupy masculine positions associated with leadership and financial security while women's roles typically viewed as being communal, subordinate, and caretaking of household members. Thus, the male gender roles are more likely to include norms towards aggression (Eagly & Steffen, 1986), while women are likely to engage in alternative forms of aggression to satisfy social norms and roles. In support of this rationale, our study shows that, under

certain conditions, women are more likely to engage in social undermining, a subtle, indirect forms of workplace aggression. However, future studies might investigate what other factors enhance this relationship. For example, are there times where men are more likely to engage in social undermining than women?

Limitations

As with any study, there are inherent limitations associated with our research design and sample that should be considered when interpreting our results. First, our measure of social undermining was self-reported by the participant. Self-report measures have drawn criticism from scholars because they are subject to self-bias, social desirability, or common method effects. That being said, recent meta-analytic work examining counterproductive workplace behaviour (CWB; a type of workplace aggression) provides ancillary evidence to suggest that 'there is little tangible value of other-ratings of CWB (and by extension, multisource ratings) beyond self-ratings. Other-ratings and self-ratings have mostly similar patterns and magnitudes of relationships with other variables, and other-ratings often do not account for appreciable incremental variance over self-ratings' (Berry, Carpenter, & Barratt, 2012, p. 625). While we acknowledge our self-reported measure of social undermining is a potential limitation of our work because we cannot entirely rule out these effects, the findings of Berry *et al.* (2012) bolster confidence in our results to some extent. Moreover, we utilized a multiwave design to minimize common method bias and bolster confidence in the overall strength of our proposed model. Specifically we collected social undermining behaviour separate from the predictor variables to determine whether the effects of WFC and diminished PO fit (as moderated by sex) would affect employee undermining behaviour at a later point in time. Indeed, our results did support this proposed model. However, causal relationships cannot be determined from this methodological approach. Thus, future research is warranted to empirically assess directionality of this set of relationships. Second, we utilized a narrow measure of WFC that does not distinguish between time-based, strain-based, and behaviour-based conflict as do some other WFC scales. Unfortunately, physical space limitations prevented us from employing a more detailed and potentially more substantive measure of WFC. However, our study provides a meaningful baseline for exploring additional research on the link between WFC and workplace aggression and we encourage future researchers to build on our work using these expanded measures that capture multiple dimensions of WFC. Third, our sample consisted of full-time workers across various organizations and professions. As we noted earlier, this is a methodological strength such that there are a lack of WFC studies that have accounted for potential differences in WFC levels across a range of occupations. That being said, our results may not generalize to organizational settings and is another potential limitation of our study design.

Practical implications and future research

A solid body of research has pointed out the damaging effects of workplace aggression (e.g., Baron & Neuman, 1996; Hershcovis & Barling, 2010; Hershcovis *et al.*, 2007). Our study provides new evidence to show that WFC contributes to co-worker-directed social undermining behaviour. Further, we were also able to demonstrate that one important reason that WFC is linked to social undermining behaviour is due to weakened PO fit perceptions – particularly among women. With this knowledge, organizational leaders can take steps to build a stronger sense of community among employees, offer avenues for

support as well as resources that can help workers cope with the difficulties associated with WFC. The goal of intervention efforts should be to try and maintain a sense of 'fit' and belongingness within the organization and let workers know they are valued even in the face of high levels of work-related demands and challenges.

Given that this study is among the first to explore WFC and aggression, there are numerous avenues for future research. Clearly, there are other potential explanatory variables that could shed light on employees' aggressive reactions to WFC. One potential approach is to investigate whether emotional responses such as anger, distress, guilt, or despair mediate this relationship and, if so, whether these reactions differ for men and women. A sizeable volume of literature suggests that men tend to behave more aggressively than women in the workplace (e.g., Haines, Marchand, & Harvey, 2006; Hershcovis *et al.*, 2007). Therefore, WFC may directly influence undermining or other aggressive responses among men – or perhaps feelings of anger perpetuate this response for male employees. More work is needed to answer these unresolved questions.

Another important direction for future research is to further explore the aggressive response of workers to weakened PO fit perceptions. In particular, what conditions mitigate or exacerbate this response? Do telework, flextime, or other alternative work-life policies quell this relationship? Can organizations devise reward, recognition, or incentive programs to help repair damaged PO fit perceptions? Further, do men and women differ in their preference for incentive or reward policies such that certain organizational interventions designed to combat these issues may be effective for men but not women and vice versa?

In sum, our study is among the first to examine the link between WFC and social undermining behaviour and to investigate how these reactions differ among male and female employees. We hope our research provides a platform for additional scholarly work exploring the factors associated with WFC and workplace aggression. In particular, we suggest that future studies continue to examine this complex web of relationships and take steps towards devising and implementing practical solutions that can help organizations mitigate WFC concerns and reactions across a broad and diverse range of occupations.

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