

## **Work-Family Psychological Contract as a Mediator in the Relationships between Work-Family Factors and Organizational Commitment**

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### **Abstract**

*Psychological contracts evolve or change over time as a result of changing needs of employees and employers. The dynamic changing demography of the workforce results in employees' psychological contract with employer pertaining to employer's assistance in managing employees' work and family roles. This paper presents a conceptual model on the mediating role of work-family psychological contract in the relationships between work-family factors and affective organizational commitment. The model is developed based on the psychological contract theory as well as previous research findings. The proposed model has applied the global psychological contract concept to a more specific concept namely work-family psychological concept.*

**Keywords:** Family supportive organizational perceptions (FSOP), family supportive supervisor, temporal flexibility, job autonomy, work-family psychological contract, affective organizational commitment

### **1 Introduction**

Changes in the demographic make-up of the workforce have been the primary impetus to the increased focus on work and family issues (Aminah & Zoharah, 2008). This is because the increase of female representation in the workforce means that more couples are juggling both work and family roles (Perrewe, Treadway & Hall, 2003). Consequently, human resource practices in public and private organizations are increasingly seeking to support their employees in balancing their work and family responsibilities in an effort to reduce the possible threat of work-family interference that may lead to negative organizational outcomes (Allen, 2001; Poelmans, Chinchilla & Cardona, 2003).

Previous research have shown that employees are not able to handle work and family roles successfully because of perceptions of insufficient time and energy which could affect their organizational commitment (Haar & Spell, 2004; Rothbard, Phillips, & Dumas, 2005; Wang & Walumbwa, 2007). Researches have shown that employees' organizational commitment is derived from their perception of the extent to which the employer is committed to and supportive of them (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002; Zhang & Liu, 2011; DeConinck, 2011), in assisting them to balance the demands of work and family life. Work-family policy implementation is a promising intervention for increasing employee commitment towards organization (Kelly, Kossek, Hammer, Durham, Bray, Chermack, Murphy & Kaskubar, 2008; Wood & De Menezes, 2010).

Organizational commitment is vital because it portrays the overall effectiveness and success of the organization (Allen & Meyer, 1996). In this paper, organizational commitment is defined as the degree to which an employee feels a sense of loyalty to the organization.

The approach taken here captures affective organizational commitment which is the strongest and most consistent predictor of organizationally desired outcomes such as employee retention (Allen et al., 2003; Meyer & Smith, 2000; Rhoades et al., 2001). An employee who is affectively committed strongly identifies with the goals of the organization and desires to remain as part of the organization (Rutherford, Park & Han, 2011), and increase their job performance (Rutherford, Park & Han, 2011). Consequently, a continued concern of the organization is to understand processes leading to employees' affective commitment to organization (Neininger et al., 2010). In dealing with employees who have both work and family responsibilities, many organizations around the world have adopted work-family policies (Poelmans et al., 2003; Blair-Loy & Wharton, 2004; Richmana et al., 2008; Yanadoria & Katob, 2009; Mätzke, 2010). Work-family policy is a program that helps employees to integrate work and family responsibilities more successfully (Haar & Spell, 2004; Rothbard, Phillips, & Dumas, 2005), and this policy could affect employees' organization commitment (Blair-Loy & Wharton, 2004; Bashir & Ramay, 2008; Kelly *et al.*, 2008).

Despite the importance of work-family policy in Malaysia, there is no legislative pressure put by the Malaysian Government on employers to provide work-family policy (Ministry of Woman Development, Family and Society, 2009). According to Aminah (2007) organizations in Malaysia are still at the early stage of work-family policy development, and such work-family employment practice is still very new and not very common in Malaysia (Subramaniam & Silvaratnam, 2010). The Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development, Malaysia (2009), based on a survey in the private sector, reported that only 13.3 percent out of the 60 organizations studied provided childcare centers at the workplace and 1.7 percent practices the work from home mode of working. Aminah and Zoharah (2008) did a study on 90 organizations and found that the government has been more generous than the private organizations in terms of providing family-friendly facilities. Zoharah and Aminah (2009) also reported that since 2001, the number of childcare centers at the workplace in the public sector has increased by 154 percent whereas in the private sector, the number has increased by only 36 percent. A nationwide survey by Subramaniam and Silvaratnam (2010) indicated that only 16 percent of the respondents in private organizations reported working in family-friendly organizations.

The absence of a strong regard for legal contracts in terms of work-family policies suggests that such an exchange relationship may depend on psychological mechanisms rather than formalisms arising from laws. Employees and their employer may engage in a new type of psychological contract pertaining to employer assistance in integrating employees' work and family roles. Rousseau (2004) conceptualized psychological contract as an individual's belief regarding the terms and conditions of a reciprocal exchange agreement between the focal person and another party. Past research on psychological contracts has focused on certain core areas of the exchange relationships, and has neglected a diverse range of other possible aspects in work life (Conway & Briner, 2005). Rousseau (1995) suggests that those with family responsibilities may negotiate new psychological contracts that include family responsive benefits. Although there are several research on psychological contract, the psychological contract was studied as a global concept.

For example, Taylor, DelCampo and Blancero (2009) studied the work-family related issues and psychological contract fairness and the contract was studied as a global concept, not specific to work-family programs. In addition, the violation of the psychological contract has received much attention and research into fulfillment of the contract has been neglected (Smithson & Lewis, 2004). Based on the above argument and the existing gap in research on psychological contract on work-family issues, this paper have included work-family psychological contract (WFPC) in the proposed model. WFPC is defined as an individual's belief regarding the terms and conditions of a reciprocal exchange agreement in integrating work and family roles between the focal person and another party. It will provide useful mechanism to understand what employees expect from the job and work environment in their efforts to handle work and family responsibilities.

## **2. Psychological Contract Theory**

Psychological contract theory relies on the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960) that may be a useful mechanism in explaining consequences on employee attitude and behavior. Psychological contract theory (Rousseau, 1995) suggests that women and those with family responsibilities may negotiate new psychological contracts that include family responsive benefits. Rousseau (1995) also notes that human resource practices play an important role in the psychological contracting process between employees and employers.

In this paper, family supportive organizational perceptions, family supportive supervisor, temporal flexibility and job autonomy can be seen as human resource practices that can play an important role in the psychological contracting process between employees and employers. This theory could explain the mediating effect of WFPC on the relationship between family supportive organizational perceptions (FSOP), family supportive supervisor, temporal flexibility and job autonomy, and affective organizational commitment. In essence, this theory involves the exchange of tangible and intangible resources governed by the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960). The norm of reciprocity is to guide behavior such that an individual is obliged to return favorable treatment received from a donor, and it is this mechanism that strengthens the relationship over time (Gouldner, 1960). It seems that organizations that provided family supportive organizational perceptions, family supportive supervisor, temporal flexibility and job autonomy as a treatment that enhance positive psychological contract and thus increase the employees' organizational commitment.

Psychological contract theory suggests that employees' perception of organization support influences psychological contract fulfillment (Morrison & Robinson, 1997; Coyle-Shapiro & Conway, 2005). Since Allen's (2001) operational definition of FSOP is grounded on perception of organization support, hence it can be expected that FSOP could influence psychological contract fulfillment. Thus, FSOP may create a positive evaluation bias whereby employees believe that their employer has fulfilled its obligations regarding work-family issues that may lead to organizational commitment. Employees with a supportive supervisor may be more likely to believe that the fulfillment of promises will be achieved (Zagenczyk, Gibney, Kiewitzn & Restubog, 2008). Therefore, employees with family supportive supervisor may be more likely to perceive contract fulfillment and consequently employees are more likely to have greater commitment to their organization. Parzefall (2008) found that there is an impact of perceived supportive supervisor fulfillment of psychological contract on employee perceptions of the form of reciprocity underlying the exchange relationship. Therefore, it can be concluded that family-supportive supervisor is only one of a number of agents responsible for fulfilling promises pertaining to work-family related issues, whose support could lead to employee organizational commitment.

Perceptions of temporal flexibility and job autonomy in the workplace could increase employee loyalty due to positive feelings associated with working for an organization that visibly cares about the well-being of its employees. Since psychological contract refers to "beliefs that individuals hold regarding promises made, accepted, and relied upon between themselves and another" (Rousseau and Wade-Benzoni, 1994) (p. 466), it is the perception of whether the employees have temporal flexibility and job autonomy that drives the psychological contracting process. In line with this theoretical perspective, perceptions of temporal flexibility and job autonomy may result in increased attachment to the organization. This is because employees perceive the organization's offering of temporal flexibility and job autonomy as representing the organization's concern for work and family. Temporal flexibility and job autonomy also allows individuals to feel that they have increased control over their lives due to the opportunity to work during times more suited to personal needs and the freedom in scheduling their work. Hence, an exchange of commitments takes place, with the employer committed to fulfill organizational obligation (temporal flexibility and job autonomy) in helping employee integrate work and family roles and the employee loyal to the organization (affective organizational commitment).

### **3. Literature Review**

#### **3.1 Family Supportive Organizational Perception and Organizational Commitment**

Allen (2001) defined family supportive organizational perception as a global construct that encompasses the work-family policies and practices offered by an organization, the totality of which convey a message regarding the organization's interest in helping employees achieve a viable balance between work and family life. Allen (2001) argued that employees who perceive a high level of organizational family support are more likely to feel obliged to "repay" the organization in terms of affective commitment. Muse et al. (2008) found that the perception of organization support in balancing work and family responsibilities contribute to affective commitment. The increase in employees' perceived levels of work-family support provided by their organization leads to the increase in affective commitment (Aminah & Zoharah, 2010).

#### **3.2 Family Supportive Organizational Perception and Work-Family Psychological Contract**

This study incorporates an area of research not previously examined, namely the direct effect of FSOP on the employee's perception of fulfillment of the WFPC. FSOP is a global perception of employees regarding the extent the organization is family-supportive (Allen, 2001).

Allen (2001) had drawn FSOP from the perceived organizational support literature. Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison and Sowa (1986) defined perceived organizational support as employees “global beliefs concerning the extent to which the organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being” (p. 501). Literature suggested that perceived organizational support should influence psychological contract fulfillment/breach (Morrison & Robinson, 1997; Coyle-Shapiro & Conway, 2005; Dulac et al., 2008).

Furthermore, employees in supportive relationships give the employer the benefit of the doubt when evaluating the degree to which they believe obligations have been fulfilled (Aselage & Eisenberger, 2003; Coyle-Shapiro & Conway, 2005; Jepsen & Rodwell, 2010). Coyle-Shapiro, Morrow and Kessler (2006) examined the effect of client perceived organizational support on organizational commitment and found that the effect was positive. Dulac et al. (2008) examined the relationship between POS and psychological contract breach and violation. They found that POS had a negative effect on psychological contract breach. Meanwhile, Taylor et al., (2009) found that there was a significant positive relationship between the availability of work-family support and psychological contract fairness. In this paper, FSOP refers to employee’s perception of employer’s support of work and family related issues at the workplace that may create a positive evaluation bias of employees’ beliefs regarding employer’s fulfillment of WFPC.

### **3.3 Family Supportive Supervisor and Organizational Commitment**

Psychological contract theory suggests that exchange occurs based on the notion that good treatment will be reciprocated in the future (Rousseau, 1995). Thus, employees who are given good treatment by their supervisor are likely to reciprocate with more favorable attitudes toward their employer (Meyer & Allen, 1991). Since supervisors act as agents of facilitation of positive attitudes, a family supportive supervisor should facilitate positive attitudes of employees toward the organization (Thomas & Ganster, 1995). These signals elicit attitudinal and presumably, behavioral responses such as increased employees’ affective commitment (Rousseau & Aubé, 2010). One reason for the link between supervisor support and organizational commitment is that supportive supervisor practices signal supervisor’s concern for employees (Thomas & Ganster, 1995). Consistent with this, employees who have immediate supervisors who are supportive of their needs to manage their family lives are more committed to their employer (Dawley *et al.*, 2008; Lapalmea *et al.*, 2009; O’Neill, *et al.*, 2009; Casper, Harris, Taylor-Bianco & Wayne, 2011). Thus empirical evidence seems to support the relationship between family supportive supervisor and affective organizational commitment.

### **3.4 Family Supportive Supervisor and Work-Family Psychological Contract**

A family-supportive supervisor is defined as a supervisor who is sympathetic to the employee’s desire to seek balance between work and family and who engages in efforts to help the employee accommodate his or her work and family responsibilities (Thomas & Ganster, 1995). This study argues that a supportive relationship with the supervisor may ameliorate the negative effects of psychological contract breach experienced by an employee. As a result, employees may maintain positive perceptions of their relationships with their organizations. A supportive supervisor has been suggested as one of the single biggest factors contributing to employee perceptions in the workplace (Bass, Avolio, Jung, & Berson, 2003) A supportive supervisor could have an important influence on employee work attitudes and behaviors through family-friendly programs (Casper, Harris, Taylor-Bianco & Wayne, 2011). This is because a supervisor, as an agent who delivers organization promises, may be more likely to fulfill the promises they have made to employees (Zagenczyk et al., 2008).

### **3.5 Temporal Flexibility and Organizational Commitment**

Temporal flexibility is the variation in the number of hours worked and the scheduling of the work (Clark, 2001). An individual is given the opportunity to have discretion in his or her work schedule. Norms about the number of hours employees are expected to work and norms about employees’ use of time (e.g., whether or not employees are expected to take work home) are important aspects of organizational culture that may affect employees’ behavior (Thompson et al., 1999). The impact of temporal flexibility on employees may show that affective organizational commitment may occasionally be enhanced. The increased employee commitment that accompanies flexible scheduling may result from enhanced perceptions of resolving work-family issues. A review of literature on families shows that flexible scheduling may decrease individuals’ perceptions of work-to-family interference (Haar, 2008; Zhang & Liu, 2011). Although one may suppose that increased family time and decreased conflict would increase organizational commitment, there is little or no evidence which shows that temporal flexibility directly impacts affective organizational commitment.

### **3.6 Temporal Flexibility and Work-Family Psychological Contract**

Perceptions of flexible work hours in the workplace may increase employee's believe that organization fulfill their obligation. Since psychological contract refers to beliefs that individuals hold regarding promises made, accepted, and relied upon between themselves and another (Rousseau and Wade-Benzoni, 1994), it is the perception of whether the person has flexible work hours that drives the psychological contracting process. Individual may perceive the offering of temporal flexibility as representing the organization's concern for work and family. Employees may see this as an aspect of the psychological contract since their ability to balance multiple responsibilities is congruent with individual values about work and family (i.e. 'this organization cares about people') (Scandura & Lankau, 1997). Based upon the idea that temporal flexibility represents an aspect of the contract between employees and employers it is expected the perception of temporal flexible is related to WFPC.

### **3.7 Job Autonomy and Organizational Commitment**

Job autonomy is "the degree to which the job provides substantial freedom, independence and discretion in scheduling work and in determining the procedures to be used in carrying it out" (Hackman & Oldham 1975, p. 162). In its most general form, job autonomy influences employees' perceptions of their authority to initiate, perform, and complete tasks (Xie & Johns 1995). Autonomy may be especially important to employees since it provides them the freedom to perform their work independently. Job autonomy is capable of stimulating high levels of commitment to organization (Ahuja, Chudoba & Kacmar, 2007), specifically affective commitment which reflects employee's willingness to maintain membership in organization and work to help accomplish organizational goals (Meyer & Allen, 1991). It is evident from the study of Galletta, Portoghese & Battistelli (2011) on attractive working environment characteristics that autonomy perceived by workers is among the most important factors related to retention strategies. Driven by these findings, it is likely that employees who have more control over their work would be more committed to their organizations.

### **3.8 Job Autonomy and Work-Family Psychological Contract**

Integrative negotiating styles may help in psychological contract fulfillment by employers (Rousseau, 2004). Psychological contract is an indicator for satisfaction with the negotiated results, that is employment relationship satisfaction. Evaluations on psychological contract are defined as the degree to which employees feel that the employer fulfills expectations and promises made about the job. Several studies suggest that high levels of job autonomy stemming from high quality of work are related to high levels of job satisfaction (Fahr, 2011; Wilkens & Nermerich, 2011). Therefore, it is probable that employees with high job autonomy, compared to those with low job autonomy, will experience high psychological contract fulfillment. Oeij (2006) found that higher job autonomy was linked to less psychological contract breach. Based on these findings, one would expect that employees' with greater freedom to make their own decisions at the workplace would have stronger beliefs that the organization will fulfill the promises regarding their work-family issues.

### **3.9 Work-Family Psychological Contract and Organizational Commitment**

Employees may form a set of expectations regarding organization's obligation toward fulfillment of their psychological needs in balancing work and family responsibilities. According to Rousseau (1995) psychological contract refers to an individual's beliefs about what is expected of them and what they can expect from their employer. In this paper, the most important aspect of the psychological contract is the role of met expectations or fulfillment. It appears that, when employees perceive that their expectations have been met, they feel more obliged to commit to their organizational expectations. Sturges, Conway, Guest and Lieffooghe (2005) conducted a study in a U.K.-based new-media organization, which examined the role of psychological contract in explaining the relationships between career management activities and outcomes, including organizational commitment. They focused on the role of the psychological contract as a key mediating variable, in the associations between organizational career management activities and commitment. They found that psychological contract plays a key role in influencing employees' organizational commitment. Meanwhile, McInnis, Meyer and Feldman (2009) examined the relationship between psychological contract and affective commitment and found that psychological contract which deals with fulfillment of promises contributed to affective commitment. Parzefall (2008) found that the perception of contract fulfillment has a significant relationship with affective commitment. Thus it seems reasonable to view that WFPC would contribute to affective organizational commitment.

#### 4. Conclusion

Previously, studies on psychological contract have focused on traditional contents such as pay, promotion and training. The present study will contribute to the psychological contract theory and work-family literature by introducing the WFPC as a potential mechanism through which work and family related factors affect employees' affective organization commitment. This model would help in providing a greater understanding of the mechanisms by which WFPC, work-family related organization factors namely family supportive organizational perception and family-supportive supervisor, and temporal flexibility and job autonomy are linked to employees' affective organizational commitment. In line with these theoretical reviews, the model is developed based on the psychological contract theory (Rousseau, 1995), as well as previous research findings, Figure 1 present the conceptual model.

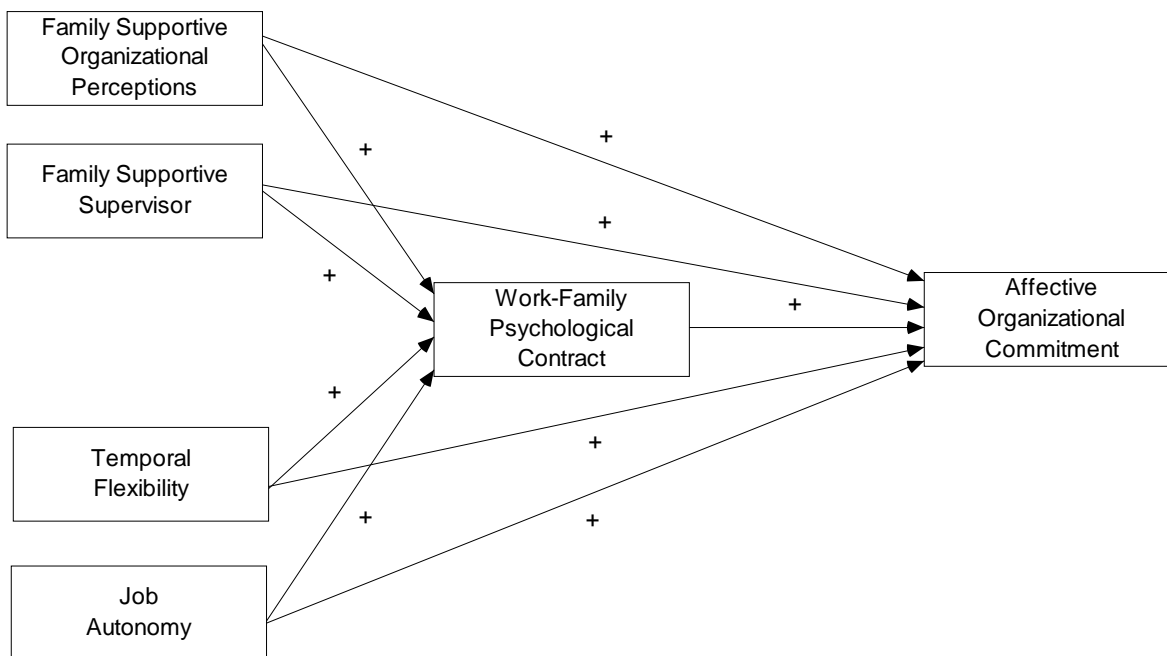


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of Work-Family Psychological Contract as a Mediator in the Relationships between Work-Family Factors and Organizational Commitment

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