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Family-to-Work Conflict and Job Satisfaction in Chinese Teachers: The Mediating Role of Emotional Exhaustion and the Differential Moderating Effects of Dual Filial Piety

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Abstract

Drawing on Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, this study examined the relationship between family-to-work conflict and job satisfaction, paying particular attention to the mediating role of emotional exhaustion and the boundary conditions of dual filial piety. We measured family-to-work conflict, dual filial piety, emotional exhaustion, and job satisfaction among 781 Chinese teachers. The results indicated that: family-to-work conflict significantly and negatively predicted job satisfaction; emotional exhaustion fully mediated the relationship between family-to-work conflict and job satisfaction; and the mediating effect of emotional exhaustion was moderated by reciprocal filial piety but not by authoritative filial piety. Specifically, reciprocal filial piety—rooted in affection and voluntary choice—functions as a vital “personal resource,”significantly buffering the resource-draining impact of conflict on emotional exhaustion. Conversely, the non-significant effect of authoritative filial piety highlights a societal transition, suggesting that rigid hierarchical obligations no longer serve as effective psychological resources to buffer the impact of family-to-work conflict in modern China.

Introduction

Contemporary employees increasingly navigate multiple roles across both work and family domains. Drawing on the spillover hypothesis, demands, emotions, and behaviors generated in one domain tend to transfer into the other, subsequently influencing an individual's emotional and behavioral states in the receiving domain (Tsukerman et al., 2020). For teachers, conflicts between work and family roles warrant particular attention (Li et al., 2024), as teaching is a profession characterized by substantial emotional, cognitive, and time demands (Zhu et al., 2021). In addition to core professional responsibilities, teachers are often required to engage in parent–school communication and undertake various administrative duties, resulting in sustained demands on their psychological resources. At the same time, teachers often assume multiple family roles. When family responsibilities and professional duties simultaneously compete for limited resources, including time, energy, and emotional capacity, conflicts between the two domains are likely to intensify. Previous research has shown that work–family conflict among teachers is closely associated with emotional exhaustion, job burnout, and lower job satisfaction (Hong et al., 2021; Li et al., 2021; Su & Jiang, 2023).

Work-family conflict functions as a significant stressor for individuals, precipitating a wide range of deleterious outcomes. Empirical research indicates that such conflict leads to reduced job satisfaction (Asbari et al., 2020; Y. Zhang et al., 2020) and decreased marital and family satisfaction (Arefin et al., 2021; Neto et al., 2021). Crucially, this conflict is frequently associated with psychological strain, particularly depression (Lee et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2023; Luo, 2025) and emotional exhaustion (H. Zhang et al., 2020), which in turn precipitate organizational withdrawal behaviors such as increased turnover intentions (Ribeiro et al., 2023; Yucel et al., 2023).

However, compared to their counterparts in other regions, Chinese teachers navigate a work-family interface characterized by distinct cultural dynamics. Filial piety, a central ethical norm with unique Chinese cultural characteristics, is often conceptualized as a dual-factor construct encompassing both reciprocal and authoritative aspects (Bedford & Yeh, 2019). This introduces a critical inquiry: when family roles conflict with

work roles, how do these specific filial obligations influence the work-family ecosystem? Specifically, do they exacerbate resource depletion mechanisms like emotional exhaustion, thereby further eroding job satisfaction?

Addressing this inquiry, the present study focuses on the relatively less-researched direction of family-to-work conflict as a primary predictor. Situated within the Chinese cultural context, we aim to investigate the impact of family-to-work conflict on job satisfaction, specifically examining the mediating role of emotional exhaustion and the moderating role of dual filial piety.

Family-to-Work Conflict and Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction acts as an evaluative state resulting from individuals' appraisals of their work or job experiences, manifesting as positive or negative emotional responses (Fauzi & Suryani, 2019; Judge et al., 2017). Assessing teachers' job satisfaction can help school administrators better understand teachers' occupational attitudes, enhance their enthusiasm for the teaching profession, and reduce the likelihood of professional disengagement and burnout (Hoque et al., 2023; Zong, 2016).

Prior research typically classifies the antecedents of job satisfaction into three domains: personal characteristics, the school environment, and work-related factors. Regarding personal characteristics, factors such as perceived workload balance, burnout, and overeducation have been identified as closely associated with job satisfaction (Inegbedion et al., 2020; Liu & Lo, 2018; Jones et al., 2025). In terms of the school environment, leadership styles and organizational climate are critical; these factors relate to employee turnover intentions and rates, thereby influencing job satisfaction (Li et al., 2025; Zhang et al., 2025). Furthermore, concerning work factors, and job autonomy have been found to exert significant and direct effects on teachers' job satisfaction (Jentsch et al., 2023; Toropova et al., 2021).

The Conservation of Resources (COR) theory posits that individuals possess a fundamental tendency to acquire, protect, and preserve valued resources. When individuals encounter family-to-work conflict, they are compelled to consume their existing resources to cope with these demands. According to the theory, when resources are continuously depleted without adequate replenishment, individuals experience psychological stress, which subsequently impairs both work and non-work outcomes, such as diminishing job and life satisfaction (J. Li et al., 2021). Empirical research corroborates this view, demonstrating a significant negative correlation between family-to-work conflict and job satisfaction (Hong et al., 2021). Specifically, when teachers shoulder excessive family responsibilities, they must reallocate time and energy from work to address family issues. This conflict becomes particularly pronounced when work tasks are challenging and complex, significantly undermining teachers' satisfaction across both family and work domains.

Consequently, we propose hypothesis H1: Family-to-work conflict negatively predicts job satisfaction.

The Mediating Role of Emotional Exhaustion

Emotional exhaustion refers to a state in which individuals are unable to effectively recover and regulate their emotional resources when confronted with prolonged stress, negative emotions, and excessive demands.

This condition results in sustained emotional depletion, characterized as “a feeling of being emotionally overextended and exhausted by work” (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Self-control depletion theory posits that tasks requiring high investment of self-control inevitably lead to the depletion of an individual's self-control resources, thereby weakening their subsequent capacity for self-regulation (Muraven, 2012). When family role demands excessively consume the resources required for work roles, exercising self-control becomes essential to minimize the interference of family-to-work conflict. However, this compensatory effort accelerates the depletion of self-control resources, causing teachers to psychologically experience emotional exhaustion and subsequently reducing their job satisfaction.

Based on this theoretical framework, we hypothesize that emotional exhaustion acts as a crucial mediating mechanism between family-to-work conflict and job satisfaction. First, the emergence of family-to-work conflict can exacerbate teachers’ emotional exhaustion. According to Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, the more conflict and demands individuals experience in one domain, the fewer resources they possess to satisfy requirements in another domain (Mostafa, 2022). Consequently, Consequently, attending to family demands may leave teachers with insufficient resources to meet their work responsibilities. When teachers fail to balance family and work relationships, family-to-work conflict becomes a latent source of pressure, negatively affecting their emotional states, triggering symptoms of occupational burnout, and intensifying turnover intentions. Prior research further supports the notion that family-to-work conflict exerts a significant negative impact on emotional exhaustion (Dukhaykh, 2023). Dealing with dual demands from family and work easily leads to the depletion of teachers’ emotional resources, diminishing their enthusiasm for both life and work.

Second, emotional exhaustion, as a core dimension of job burnout and a precursor to turnover tendencies, leads to decreased employee job satisfaction. In real-world teaching contexts, student demands, administrative pressures, and heavy instructional responsibilities substantially intensify this emotional burden, leading to reduced teacher enthusiasm and engagement and a greater intention to leave the profession (Hui et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2024). Research has identified significant negative associations between emotional exhaustion and job satisfaction. Specifically, when teachers experience high levels of emotional exhaustion, they tend to become strongly dissatisfied with the extrinsic characteristics of their work (such as working conditions and hours) (Anastasiou & Belios, 2020), and often prefer withdrawal or avoidance strategies as coping mechanisms for emotional fatigue (Reb et al., 2017).

Therefore, we propose hypothesis H2: Emotional exhaustion mediates the relationship between family-to-work conflict and job satisfaction.

The Moderating Role of Filial Piety

Social researchers broadly conceptualize filial piety as a concentrated expression of norms, values, and practices governing how children treat their parents, a definition that underscores its cultural normative content. The Dual Filial Piety Model (DFPM) further advances this understanding by viewing filial piety as a contextualized personality construction (Bedford & Yeh, 2019; O. Bedford & K.-H. Yeh, 2021; J. Li et al., 2021). This model delineates two distinct dimensions corresponding to the core attributes of filial piety across

historical developmental stages: the reciprocal principle and the authoritative principle (Yeh & Bedford, 2003).

Reciprocal filial piety (RFP) originates from genuine affection developed through daily positive interactions with parents. It typically manifests as voluntary support behaviors driven by love and care. In contrast, Authoritative filial piety (AFP) is founded on the hierarchical relationship between parents and children, mandating that children unconditionally obey parents and uphold the family reputation to secure social recognition (Guo et al., 2025). Importantly, these two types of filial piety are not mutually exclusive; rather, they coexist within individuals and exert distinct directional influences depending on the specific situational context (Yeh & Bedford, 2004).

Drawing on the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, individuals possess and strive to protect four types of resources, among which "personal characteristic resources" refer to traits that aid in resisting stress (Hobfoll, 1989). This study conceptualizes filial piety as a critical personal characteristic resource.

First, regarding Reciprocal Filial Piety, this dimension emphasizes mutual understanding and shared responsibility among family members. Such an intergenerational interaction model affords employees greater family support (O. Bedford & K.-H. Yeh, 2021). According to the social support buffering model, social support can effectively buffer the deleterious effects of stressful events on an individual's physical and mental responses (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Furthermore, robust social support assists employees in better managing the boundaries between work and family domains (Rodriguez et al., 2024). As a salient form of social support, family support derived from RFP may reduce family-to-work conflict (Cohen & Wills, 1985), thereby alleviating emotional exhaustion. Empirical research corroborates that individuals driven by internal motivations—such as compassion and respect toward parents—accumulate more psychological resources from caregiving and experience less fatigue, resulting in reduced work-family conflict (Bolger & Zuckerman, 1995; Leong, 2021). Teachers represent a group in the modern workplace that requires a high level of emotional investment. Consequently, we infer that reciprocal filial piety acts as a protective buffer, weakening the negative impact of family-to-work conflict on emotional exhaustion and job satisfaction.

Conversely, the operational logic of Authoritative Filial Piety aligns with the principle of "respecting elders" in Confucian ethics (Cao & Yeh, 2014). Under traditional cultural psychological contexts, this form of filial piety manifests as rigid ethical expectations and obedience to authority. When household and childcare responsibilities impede work duties, thereby causing resource depletion, the emphasis on hierarchical order inherent in AFP appears to exacerbate the teachers' mental burden. This pressure accelerates the loss of self-resources, generating negative emotions such as anxiety, tension, and depression. While some research suggests that increased responsibility might reduce the negative effects of role conflict (Grant & Langan-Fox, 2007; Wayne et al., 2004), in the context of high conflict, the cognitive load of unconditional obedience likely outweighs these benefits. Thus, authoritative filial piety may intensify the resource depletion process.

Therefore, we propose the following research hypotheses (H3 & H4):

H3a: Reciprocal filial piety moderates the negative relationship between family-to-work conflict and job satisfaction. Specifically, this negative relationship is weaker among individuals with higher reciprocal filial piety.

H3b: Authoritative filial piety moderates the negative relationship between family-to-work conflict and job satisfaction. Specifically, this negative relationship is stronger among individuals with higher authoritative filial piety.

H4a: Reciprocal filial piety moderates the positive relationship between family-to-work conflict and emotional exhaustion. Specifically, this positive relationship is weaker among individuals with higher reciprocal filial piety.

H4b: Authoritative filial piety moderates the positive relationship between family-to-work conflict and emotional exhaustion. Specifically, this positive relationship is stronger among individuals with higher authoritative filial piety.

The proposed research model, incorporating the hypothesized relationships among the study variables, is presented in Fig. 1.

Methods

Participants

Participants and Procedure Data were collected through Credamo, a professional online survey platform in China. In the first wave, we recruited 390 primary and secondary school teachers, and in the second wave, an additional 410 teachers were recruited using the same sampling criteria and survey procedures. We recruited 800 primary and secondary school teachers to participate in the survey. In total, 800 teachers participated in the study. To ensure data quality, we included attention check items and screened for patterned responses (e.g., straight-lining). After eliminating invalid questionnaires, 781 valid responses were obtained, yielding an effective rate of 97.6%.

Among the participants, the majority were female (69.3%) and under the age of 35 (83.9%). In terms of education, 84.0% held an associate or bachelor's degree. Regarding family characteristics, 90.8% were parents, indicating high relevance to family-related demands. Notably, considering the influence of China's One-Child Policy on family structure, we assessed sibling status: 76.1% of participants were non-only children (i.e., had siblings), while the remaining 23.9% were only children. These demographic characteristics indicate that the sample is predominantly female, relatively young, well-educated, and composed largely of parents and individuals with siblings, which is consistent with the typical demographic profile of teachers in China.The demographic characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Demographic information of participants (*N* = 781)

Gender		**Frequency**	**Percent(%)**
	Male	**240**	**30.7**
	Female	541	69.3
Age		M = 29.98	SD = 6.21
Parental Status	Yes	709	90.8
	No	72	9.2
Education	Junior college /undergraduate	656	84.0
	Postgraduate or above	125	16.0
Siblings	Has Siblings	594	76.1
	No Siblings	187	23.9

Measures

Family-to-Work Conflict

Five items from family-work conflict scale developed by Netemeyer and Boles (1996) were used to measure family-to-work conflict. A sample question is “Demands from my family interfere with my work.”. All items were rated using a five-point Likert scale from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree). The Cronbach’s α coefficient for the scale was 0.91.

Emotional Exhaustion

To measure the degree of emotional exhaustion among participants, was assessed by using the five-item emotional exhaustion scale evaluated by Penny et al. (2023), ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree). A sample item is “Work makes me feel physically and mentally exhausted.”. The Cronbach’s α coefficient for the scale was 0.96.

Filial Piety

Filial Piety Beliefs scale is from Yeh and Bedford (2003) scale. The scale consists of sixteen items, divided into authoritarian filial piety and reciprocal filial piety dimensions. Authoritarian filial piety consists of eight items: “When I disagree with my parents, I should follow their opinions,” etc. Reciprocal filial piety consists of eight items: “Pay close attention to my parents’ physical health,” etc. Sixteen items were rated using a six-point Likert scale from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 6 (Strongly agree). The Cronbach’s α coefficient for the total

scale of filial piety concept, the sub-scale of authoritative filial piety belief, and the sub-scale of reciprocal filial piety belief were 0.87, 0.87, and 0.93, respectively.

Job Satisfaction

According to Schriesheim (1980), the Job Satisfaction questionnaire consists of six items in total. Respondents were asked to give their opinion about their satisfaction with workload and pressure, leader relations, coworker relations, salary and rewards, promotion opportunities, and overall job. All items were rated using a five-point Likert scale from 1 (Very Dissatisfied) to 5 (Very Satisfied). The Cronbach's α coefficient for the scale was 0.91.

Data Processing and Analysis

Firstly, we conducted descriptive statistics and correlation analysis among all study variables. PROCESS models are appropriate to test moderation and mediation relationships. To assess the mediation effects of emotion exhaustion, we employed Model 4 of the PROCESS macro in SPSS. We used the bootstrapping method to test the significance of indirect effects, which generates 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals from 5000 resamples of the data. The effects are significant when the confidence intervals exclude 0. Then, Model 8 of the PROCESS macro was used to evaluate the moderator of filial piety in the association between family-to-work conflict and emotion exhaustion and in the association between family-to-work conflict and job satisfaction. In all analyses, participants' gender, age, children, education, siblings, parental age and parental educational level were included as covariates.

Results

Assessment of Common Method Variance

Given that the data were collected using self-report measures, common method variance (CMV) represents a potential threat to the validity of the findings. To address this issue, we conducted Harman's single-factor test. Specifically, an exploratory factor analysis without rotation was conducted on all measurement items constituting the key constructs (family-to-work conflict, filial piety, emotional exhaustion, and job satisfaction). The analysis yielded five factors with eigenvalues greater than 1.0. The first unrotated factor accounted for 21.56% of the total variance, falling well below the widely accepted critical threshold of 40% (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

Correlation Analysis of Variables

Correlation values are given in Table 2, which shows that: There is a significant positive relationship between family-to-work conflict and emotional exhaustion(r = 0.25, p < .01), between family-to-work conflict and authoritarian filial piety (r = 0.21, p < .01), but a significant negative relationship between family-to-work conflict and reciprocal filial piety (r = − 0.10, p < .01), between family-to-work conflict and job satisfaction (r = − 0.15, p < .01). There is a significant negative relationship between job satisfaction and emotional exhaustion (r = − 0.44, p < .01), but a significant positive relationship between job satisfaction and reciprocal filial piety (r = 0.15, p < .01), between job satisfaction and authoritarian filial piety (r = 0.22, p < .01).

Table 2
Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations for key variables

1.Family-to-work conflict	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
	2.521	**1.030**	**1.000**	**0.25****	**−0.102****	**0.205****	**−0.151****
2. Emotional exhaustion	3.609	1.557	0.245**	1.000	0.069	−0.040	−0.436**
3. Reciprocal filial piety	5.493	0.759	−0.102**	0.069	1.000	0.193**	0.152**
4. Authoritarian filial piety	3.148	1.036	0.205**	−0.040	0.193**	1.000	0.218**
5. Job satisfaction	3.409	0.847	−0.151**	−0.436**	0.152**	0.218**	1.000

Note. ** $p < 0.01$ (2-tailed); The coefficients are non-standardized

Mediating Effect Analysis of Emotional Exhaustion

Controlling for gender, age, children, education, siblings, parental age and parental educational level, we used SPSS macro PROCESS Model 4 to test emotional exhaustion's mediating role between family-to-work conflict and job satisfaction. Family-to-work conflict significantly and negatively predicted job satisfaction ($B = -0.14$, $p < 0.001$); when family-to-work conflict and emotional exhaustion simultaneously entered the regression equation, family-to-work conflict's predictive effect on job satisfaction became non-significant ($B = -0.06$, $p > 0.05$), while emotional exhaustion significantly and negatively predicted job satisfaction ($B = -0.22$, $p < 0.001$).

The mediating effect ab = − 0.09, Boot SE = 0.02, with a 95% confidence interval of [− 0.13, − 0.06], indicating that emotional exhaustion fully mediates the relationship between family-to-work conflict and job satisfaction, confirming hypothesis H2. The mediating effect accounted for 75% of the total effect (0.09/0.14 = 64%).

Moderating Effect Analysis of Filial Piety

Reciprocal Filial Piety's Moderating Effect Analysis

A moderated mediation model was tested using PROCESS Model 8 for SPSS, controlling for covariates. Table 3 presents the results, showing that the interaction between family-to-work conflict and reciprocal filial piety negatively predicted emotional exhaustion ($B = -0.26$, $p < .001$), and emotional exhaustion was a significant negative predictor of job satisfaction ($B = -0.23$, $p < .001$). These findings indicate that reciprocal filial piety moderates the association between family-to-work conflict and emotional exhaustion, thereby influencing job satisfaction; thus, H3a is supported.

However, the interaction between family-to-work conflict and reciprocal filial piety did not significantly predict job satisfaction ($B = 0.06$, $p > .005$), suggesting that reciprocal filial piety does not moderate the direct effect of family-to-work conflict on job satisfaction; therefore, H3b was not supported.

To further examine the moderating role of reciprocal filial piety, participants were divided into high and low groups baesd on $M \pm 1$ *SD*. Simple-slope tests were conducted, and the results are illstrated in Fig. 2. The

results demonstrated that when reciprocal filial piety was low (*M* − 1 *SD*), family-to-work conflict positively predicted emotional exhaustion significantly (simple slope = 0.63, $p < .001$). When reciprocal filial piety was high (*M* + 1 *SD*), family-to-work conflict remanined a positive predictor of emotional exhaustion, but with a weaker effect (simple slope = 0.30, $p < .001$). This pattern indicates that as reciprocal filial piety increases, the predictive effect of family-to-work conflict on emotional exhaustion weakens, supporting the view that the positive association between family-to-work conflict and emotional exhaustion is stronger among employees with low reciprocal filial piety than among those with higher levels.

Table 3
The Moderate Effect Test 1 (Model 8)

Predict Variables	**Regression Eq. 1 (Outcome Variable: Emotional exhaustion)**				**Regression Eq. 1 (Outcome Variable: Job satisfaction)**			
	B	**SE**	***t***	**95% CI**	***B***	**SE**	***t***	**95% CI**
Family-to-work conflict (X)	0.431	0.054	7.921***	[0.324, 0.538]	−0.044	0.029	−1.538	[−0.100, 0.012]
Emotional exhaustion (M)					−0.229	0.018	−12.49***	[−0.264, −0.193]
Reciprocal Filial Piety (U)	0.149	0.071	2.010*	[0.010, 0.289]	0.213	0.036	5.909***	[0.142, 0.283]
Interaction (X*U)	−0.258	0.073	−3.554***	[−0.401,−0.116]	0.058	0.037	1.557	[−0.015, 0.131]
R^2	0.123				0.238			
F	8.965***				18.458***			

Notes: Each variable of the model was normalized ***$p < 0.001$; **$p < 0.01$; *$p < 0.05$.

Authoritative Filial Piety's Moderating Effect Analysis

Using PROCESS Model 8 for SPSS and controlling for covariates, a moderated mediation model was tested. As presented in Table 4, the interaction between family-to-work conflict and authoritarian filial piety did not significantly predict emotional exhaustion ($B = 0.04$, $p > .05$). In contrast, emotional exhaustion significantly and negatively predicted job satisfaction ($B = -0.22$, $p < .001$). These findings indicate that authoritarian filial piety did not moderate the indirect path from family-to-work conflict to job satisfaction via emotional exhaustion; consequently, H4a was not supported. Moreover, the interaction between family - work conflict and authoritarian filial piety did not significantly predict job satisfaction ($B = -0.03$, $p > .005$), suggesting that authoritarian filial piety did not moderate the direct effect of family-to-work conflict on job satisfaction. Therefore, H4b was not supported.

Table 4
The Moderate Effect Test 2 (Model 8)

Predict Variables	Regression Eq. 1 (Outcome Variable: Emotional exhaustion)				Regression Eq. 1 (Outcome Variable: Job satisfaction)			
	B	**SE**	***t***	**95% CI**	***B***	**SE**	***t***	**95% CI**
Family-to-work conflict (X)	0.400	0.056	7.099***	[0.289, 0.510]	−0.087	0.029	−2.995***	[−0.143, −0.030]
Emotional exhaustion (M)					−0.215	0.018	−11.951***	[−0.250, −0.179]
Authoritative Filial Piety (U)	−0.089	0.055	−1.631	[− 0.197, 0.018]	0.192	0.027	7.038***	[0.138, 0.245]
Interaction (X*U)	0.041	0.039	1.048	[−0.036,−0.118]	−0.031	0.020	−1.570	[−0.069, 0.008]
R^2	0.106				0.252			
F	7.522***				19.899***			

Notes: Each variable of the model was normalized ***$p < 0.001$; **$p < 0.01$; *$p < 0.05$.

Discussion

Family-to-Work Conflict and Job Satisfaction

This study corroborates the detrimental impact of family-to-work conflict on job satisfaction (Orellana et al., 2023; Rhee et al., 2020). Unlike prior studies that predominantly focused on work-to-family conflict, this research underscores the unique mechanism of family-to-work interference. Consistent with the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, navigating the friction between family and work domains necessitates a continuous expenditure of psychological resources. According to the resource loss spiral perspective, when family demands consume an individual's limited energy, they enter a state of resource deficit, leaving insufficient resources to meet work obligations or maintain positive work attitudes (Hong & Liu, 2024; Li et al., 2021). Our findings confirm that family-to-work conflict acts as a significant trans-domain stressor, eroding the psychological resources required for maintaining job satisfaction.

The Mediating Role of Emotional Exhaustion

The mediation analysis elucidates the “black box” mechanism: family-to-work conflict impairs job satisfaction primarily by triggering emotional exhaustion. This finding integrates Conservation of Resources (COR) theory with Self-Control Depletion Theory. Specifically, managing family interruptions during work requires significant cognitive and emotional labor, which constitutes a rapid drain on the limited pool of self-

control resources (Muraven, 2012). Unlike explicit behavioral failures, this form of resource depletion often manifests as an internal physiological and psychological drain, making emotional exhaustion a proximal outcome of conflict.

Specifically, when teachers struggle to cope with family demands intruding into the workplace, they experience a “net loss” of internal resources. In professional settings, this depletion manifests as burnout or emotional exhaustion (Junça Silva & Guarda, 2026; Liu et al., 2024; Mao et al., 2020). The imbalance between family and work obligations creates a vicious cycle: unvented emotional distress from family affairs spills over into the workplace, diminishing work enthusiasm and motivation (Al-Alawi et al., 2021; Li et al., 2021). Thus, emotional exhaustion serves as the critical psychological bridge connecting family-initiated resource loss to work dissatisfaction.

The Moderating Role of Filial Piety

A unique contribution of this study is the examination of filial piety within the Chinese cultural context. The results revealed a nuanced pattern: reciprocal filial piety moderated the first stage of the mediation model (Family-to-Work Conflict → Emotional Exhaustion), whereas authoritative filial piety did not demonstrate significant moderating effects.

Regarding Reciprocal Filial Piety (RFP), findings show that for teachers with higher levels of RFP, the positive relationship between family-to-work conflict and emotional exhaustion is significantly weakened. This aligns with the COR perspective (Hobfoll, 1989): individuals strive to employ existing personal resources to offset loss. RFP, characterized by genuine affection and personal choice rather than mere obligation, functions as a robust “personality resource”(Sun et al., 2023). When facing resource depletion from conflict, individuals high in RFP can access a reservoir of family social support and psychological resilience derived from positive parent-child interactions. This sense of “oneness” with the family (Yuan et al., 2024) enhances tolerance for family intrusions, thereby halting the resource loss spiral and reducing the likelihood of emotional exhaustion.

Interestingly, RFP did not moderate the direct relationship between conflict and job satisfaction. We interpret this null result through the lens of Chinese collectivist culture, which shapes how individuals allocate resources. In this context, teachers prioritize family welfare and often view their social activities—including employment—as means to fulfill family responsibilities (Guo et al., 2017). Due to this “family-first” value inertia, work is often perceived instrumentally. Consequently, even when family matters interfere with work roles, high-RFP individuals strive to meet family needs first, accepting the interference as a necessary resource investment rather than allowing it to diminish their evaluation of the job itself. Furthermore, this can be explained by the resource gain perspective. Research suggests that actively undertaking elderly care responsibilities can equip individuals with specific skills and cognitive perspectives (Leong, 2021). These abilities, formed through role practice, possess cross-situational characteristics and can transfer to the workplace, enhancing occupational competence. Thus, for teachers with high reciprocal piety, the resource depletion from conflict might be neutralized by the functional resource gains obtained from voluntary caregiving, rendering the interaction effect on job satisfaction non-significant.

Finally, regarding the non-significant moderating role of Authoritative Filial Piety (AFP), contrary to the expectation that AFP might act as a demand exacerbating stress, we found no significant interaction. Two plausible explanations exist for this finding. First, from the perspective of Socioemotional Selectivity Theory, as the population ages and social norms evolve, the rigid, hierarchical nature of AFP may be softening. The emotional satisfaction derived from intergenerational interactions (Carstensen, 2006) might buffer the potential “normative burden” of AFP, neutralizing its negative aggravating effect. Second, this may be attributed to the societal transition in Chinese society, which is moving from authoritative obedience to reciprocal equality (Lum et al., 2016; Pan et al., 2022). It is possible that the variation in AFP scores among modern participants has narrowed, or its binding force has weakened to the point where it no longer functions as a dominant resource-draining demand in the work-family interface. This suggests that future research should re-examine the boundary conditions of authoritative filial piety in a rapidly modernizing society.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretical Implications First, this study deepens the application of Conservation of Resources (COR) theory in the work-family interface, while simultaneously responding to the foundational Spillover Hypothesis proposed in our introduction. While the Spillover Hypothesis explains that stress transfers across domains, our use of COR theory elucidates how this process occurs—through a mechanism of resource deficits. By identifying family-to-work conflict as a catalyst for a resource loss spiral, we clarify that the “spillover” of negative affect is fundamentally a state of resource depletion. This integrates the logic of self-control depletion into the broader COR framework, explaining that family interruptions do not just "spill over" but actively drain the specific cognitive resources required for work.

Most significantly, this study advances cultural contextualization in organizational behavior by dismantling the monolithic view of filial piety through a resource lens. We demonstrate that the two dimensions of filial piety function differentially: only reciprocal filial piety—rooted in affection and voluntary choice—serves as a valid “personality resource” (buffer) in the modern workforce. In contrast, the non-significant effect of authoritative filial piety challenges the traditional assumption that all indigenous virtues are inherently protective. This null result reflects the societal transition in contemporary China, suggesting that rigid hierarchical obligations may function as a “depreciated resource” or even a burden, no longer offering sufficient psychological compensation for the stress of conflicting roles. This prompts a re-evaluation of how traditional values function as resources or demands in modern management research.

Practical Implications Practically, the findings offer actionable insights for mitigating the adverse effects of family-to-work conflict. At the school leval, recognizing the interdependence of family and work domains is essential; implementing genuine Family-Friendly Policies (FFPs), such as flexible arrangements and Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs), can reduce the permeability of family demands and preserve teachers’ psychological resources. For managers, the pivotal mediating role of emotional exhaustion highlights the need for supportive leadership. Rather than punitive measures, managers should provide emotional support and temporary workload adjustments to assist teachers in breaking the cycle of resource depletion.

Crucially, for individual teachers, this study highlights a specific cultural strategy for resource recovery. Understanding that family conflicts deplete work resources, teachers should go beyond passive boundary management and actively optimize the quality of their family interactions. Our findings on Reciprocal Filial Piety suggest that nurturing positive, high-quality connections with parents is not merely a moral duty, but a vital mechanism for replenishing psychological resilience. Teachers are encouraged to shift the focus of family dynamics from “authoritative obligation” to “affective connection.” By prioritizing mutual understanding and emotional intimacy over rigid obedience, individuals can transform family life from a source of normative burden into a “restorative reservoir” of support, ultimately enhancing satisfaction across both life and work domains.

Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations warrant attention. First, the cross-sectional design limits causal inference; future research should employ longitudinal methods to verify these mechanisms over time. Second, the sample was limited to primary and secondary school teachers in China, which may constrain the generalizability of the findings. Future research could examine whether the proposed relationships hold across different educational levels, school types, regions, and cultural contexts, while also considering potential gender differences. Third, regarding the measurement of filial piety, this study relied exclusively on the self-reported perspective of teachers (as adult children). Since filial piety implies an interactional dynamic, relying solely on the unilateral perception of the younger generation may not fully capture the complexity of the parent-child relationship. Future research should consider adopting a dyadic design, collecting matched data from both teachers and their aging parents. This would allow for a comparison between the parents’ expectations and the teachers’ actual behaviors, offering a more comprehensive understanding of how authoritative versus reciprocal dynamics influence the family-to-work conflict mechanism.

Conclusion

This study examined family-to-work conflict’s impact on job satisfaction and the roles of emotional exhaustion and filial piety. Results showed that family-to-work conflict indirectly affects job satisfaction through emotional exhaustion, and reciprocal filial piety can moderate family-to-work conflict's effects on emotional exhaustion. Specifically, as reciprocal filial piety levels increase, family-to-work conflict's predictive effects on emotional exhaustion gradually weaken.

Declarations

Author contributions

L.Y.[1] and H.H. conceptualized the study and designed the research methodology.

H.H. and N.L. organized the data collection and conducted the statistical analysis.

H.H. and N.L. wrote the first draft of the manuscript, with input from G.C.X.

L.Y.[1], L.Y.[2], T.T., and G.X. refined and revised the manuscript.

All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Data availability

The datasets in the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

The authors declare that this paper has not been published previously and it is not under consideration for publication elsewhere.

Ethical approval

Since this study included human participants, the ethical approval No. H51012 was acquired from the Institutional Review Board of College of Economics and Management, China Three Gorges University. All methods were carried out in accordance with relevant guidelines and regulations.

Consent to participate

All participants were informed about the study procedure and consented to take part in the study, and informed consent was obtained from all persons involved in the study.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest for this study.

Consent for publication

Not applicable.

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Figures

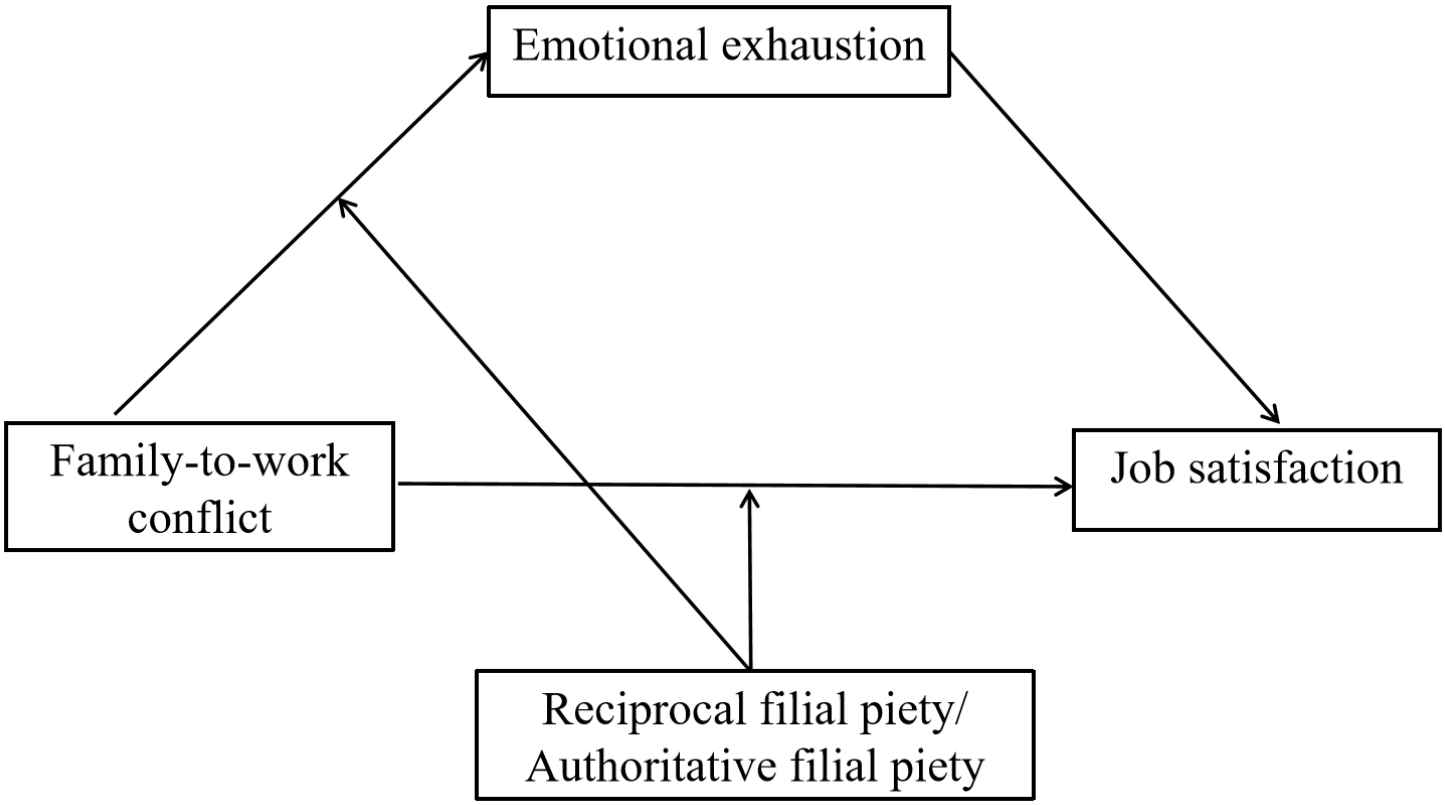

Figure 1

Proposed research model

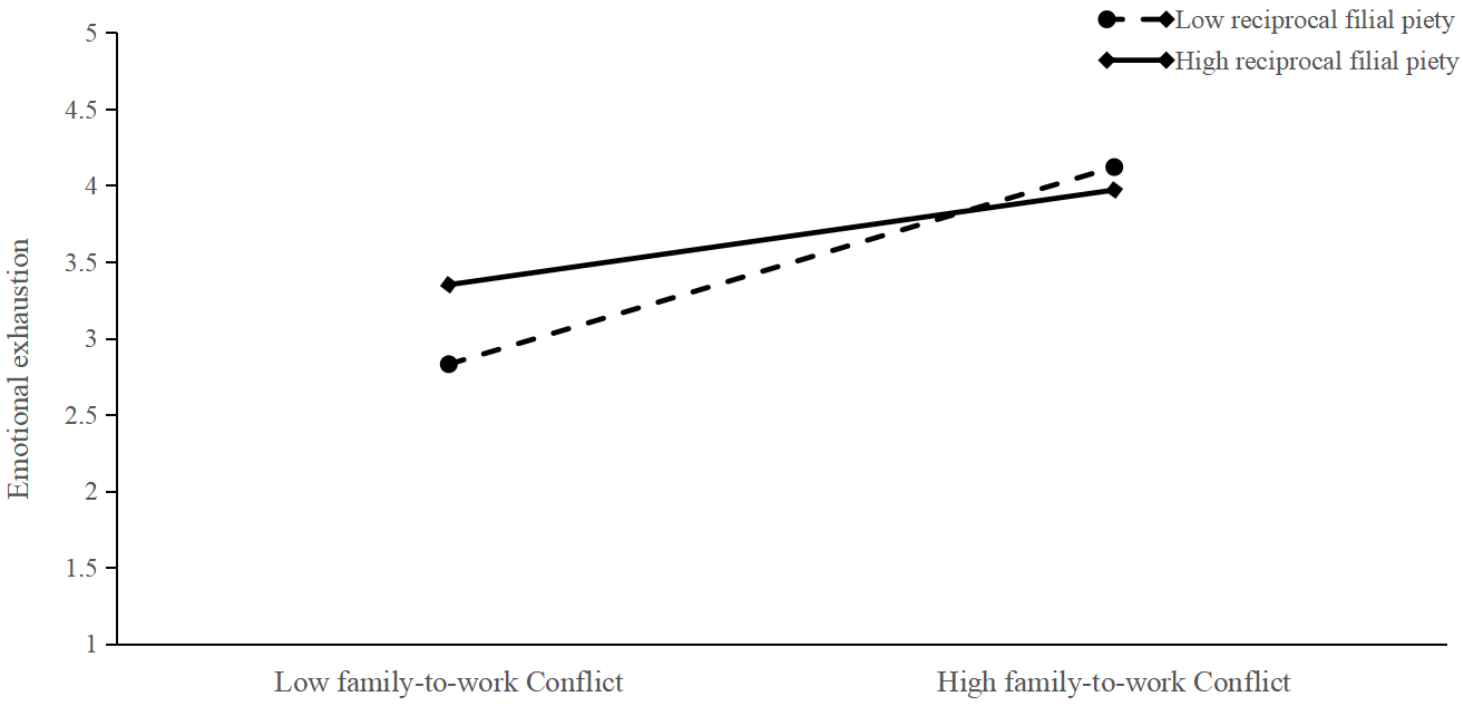

Figure 2

Reciprocal filial piety as a moderator in the relationship between family-to-work conflict and emotional exhaustion