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How work-life conflict affects employee outcomes of Chinese only-children academics: the moderating roles of gender and family structure

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5 **How work-life conflict affects employee outcomes of Chinese only-children academics:**
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7 **the moderating roles of gender and family structure**
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12 **Abstract**
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14 **Purpose** - China's controversial one-child policy has been blamed for creating an aging
15 population, a generation of employees without siblings and a 4-2-1 family structure that places
16 eldercare responsibility, primarily, on women. Current understanding of how this affects
17 contemporary employees' work-life interface is lacking. This study examined the moderating
18 roles of family structure and gender in the relationships between work-life conflict (WLC), job
19 satisfaction and career aspiration for university academics.
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23 **Design/methodology/approach** – Online and self-administered surveys were used to collect
24 data, which involved 420 academic staff in three Chinese research universities.
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26
27 **Findings** – Our results revealed that WLC is positively related to career aspiration, and this
28 **relationship** is stronger for academics with siblings and, within the only-children group,
29 significantly stronger for **women** than for **men**. WLC is also negatively related to job
30 satisfaction and this **relationship** is stronger for only-children academics.
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33 **Research limitations/implications** – Results were limited by a cross-sectional sample of
34 modest size. Nevertheless, this study contributes to the understanding of gender roles and
35 changing family structure in the work-life interface of Chinese academics.
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38 **Practical implications** – Our findings have implications for both universities seeking to
39 improve staff wellbeing and for wider society. A number of support mechanisms are proposed
40 to enhance the ability of only children, especially **women**, to operate as effective members of
41 the labour market.
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44 **Originality/value** – Our results showed that only-children academics face a unique set of
45 difficulties across career and family domains, which have been previously neglected in
46 literature.
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50 **Key words:** career aspiration, family structure, gender, job satisfaction, one-child policy,
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52 work-life conflict
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Introduction

Modern employees report facing multiple demands, most significantly from career and family. Theoretical development of work-life interface research recognises the ‘cross-domain effects’ in this relationship (Plaisier et al., 2015, Sturges and Guest, 2004). Ren and Caudle (2016) found that Chinese academics experiences a high level of work-life imbalance or conflict due to demands from both domains and a traditional Chinese work ethic that places work ahead of family and self-enjoyment. Hence, in this paper, we adopt a work-life conflict (WLC) perspective, which assumes that individuals have a fixed amount of time, resource and energy and that participation in multiple roles inevitably create conflicts and affect quality of life (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985).

Western research suggests that WLC has been most acute with high-skilled employees who are torn between career ambition and family responsibilities (Beigi et al., 2017, Sturges, 2012). This group tends to work long hours in order to establish their careers and at the same time has a strong interest in keeping a balance between work and life (Sturges, 2012).

However, the majority of existing research investigates the relationship between WLC and other employee outcomes from either psychological or organisational perspectives, using variables such as self-efficacy or perception of organisational demand/support (Cho and Ryu, 2016, McCarthy et al., 2013) and thus overlooks an important source of potential support – one’s family. Moreover, current research rarely looks beyond dual-earner couples or nuclear family structures in the West (Ten Brummelhuis and Van Der Lippe, 2010). Similarly, little is known about the impact of gender beyond the Western context (Huang and Gamble, 2015). Here we investigate an under-researched group of high-skilled employees, university academics, in a non-Western context, China, to investigate WLC and the moderating roles of both family structure (which, in the Chinese context, includes grandparents, parents and

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3 **children**) and gender. Academics generally have more flexibility and control over their time
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5 to manage their professional and personal lives than many workers. Alongside this, they are
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7 also known for having constant work demands and working long hours, which may
8
9 accentuate WLC (Ren and Caudle, 2016, Xia et al., 2019). Unlike other high-skilled worker
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11 groups (e.g. engineers or doctors), academics frequently experience long periods of insecure
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13 employment in early career before securing a permanent position. This often coincides with a
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15 life stage when individuals typically start families (Dorenkamp and Ruhle, 2019), resulting in
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17 substantial WLC.
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23 The current Chinese workplace provides a unique research opportunity. In 1979, the Chinese
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25 Government introduced its controversial one-child policy (OCP), an extreme measure to
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27 control population expansion that limited each family to one child. By the 1990s, nearly 90%
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29 of children from urban areas and almost 60% of children from rural areas had no siblings
30
31 (Chen, 1994). Four decades later, these children have grown up and form an important part of
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33 the Chinese workforce. Yet, there have been very few work and organisational studies that
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35 examine this distinctive cohort and its so-called '4-2-1' family structure. As China is now the
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37 second biggest economy and the consequences of the (now repealed) OCP will continue to
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39 dominate the Chinese workplace for many years, this remains a significant gap in HRM
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41 research. OCP may also have altered gender dynamics in Chinese families (Whyte and
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43 Parish, 1984), as it created a preference for male children (Hesketh et al., 2005) and ran
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45 alongside free market reform, which eroded communist principles of gender equality. China
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47 thus presents a fruitful environment for exploring how family structure and gender affect
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49 **relationships between WLC and employee outcomes.**
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56 We consider this in relation to two important employee outcomes. First, job satisfaction (JS),
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58 as research has shown that WLC can lead to detrimental effects e.g. reduced JS (Buonocore
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3 and Russo, 2013, Drummond et al., 2017). Second, career aspiration (CA), which is
4 important to academics and where WLC can create barriers for individuals' career
5 development (Beigi et al., 2017). Our first objective is to explore whether family structure
6 moderates the relationships between WLC and JS and between WLC and CA. We recognise
7 that family structure can take many forms and focus here on the impact of being an only-child
8 versus having siblings. Our second objective is to develop an in-depth understanding of this
9 cohort by examining whether gender may moderate relationships within the only-child group.

10
11 We make a number of contributions. First, we offer empirical evidence that family structures
12 influence the work-life interface, enriching theoretical knowledge in work-life scholarship.
13
14 Second, drawing on gender role theory (Eagly et al., 2000), we demonstrate the dilemmas and
15 difficulties that female only-children face when managing both career and family roles.
16
17 Third, no studies, to our knowledge, have examined OCP's impact in the workplace. Our
18 study fills this void by providing understanding of only-children's experience in managing
19 work-life issues. While the present study focuses on only-children academics in China,
20 falling birth rates globally and aging populations in Western economies make our findings
21 relevant to many other countries where proportions of only-children employees are growing.

22
23 As work-life interface is specific to societal contexts, where social, cultural, political,
24 economic and organisational developments and concerns interact (Lewis et al., 2007), we
25 will begin with an overview of OCP and its impacts on Chinese society, then briefly review
26 the work-life literature and present hypotheses. Methodology and analysis will be outlined
27 and then will be followed by findings and discussion.

China's one-child policy

Since its establishment in 1949, China's population has nearly doubled (Hesketh et al., 2005). Food shortages and the need for economic reform encouraged leaders to seek measures to control population expansion. Against this backdrop, the government introduced the controversial OCP (Cameron et al., 2013) in 1979 to limit the number of children born in each family. Nationally, OCP was promoted as a trade-off between quality and quantity (Falbo and Hooper, 2015), whereby married couples were advised to focus their energies on one child. The policy applied mainly to ethnic majority *han* people living in urban cities where social resources were scarce, and restricted each couple to one child, although some exceptions were allowed. In the mid-1980s, the policy was extended and applied to other ethnic minorities, mainly *Manchu* and *Zhuang* people. Compliance with OCP was underpinned by a series of reward and punishment schemes. Only-children were allowed priority to social welfare such as schooling, employment and housing, while violations could result in financial penalties, confiscation of properties or dismissal from work (Hesketh et al., 2005).

Prior studies have assessed the policy's economic outcome, and overall OCP has been credited for slowing down population growth and contributing to China's rapid economic development (Liu and Hu, 2013). Despite these benefits, OCP has been widely criticised for producing a rapidly aging population and a shrinking labour force (Cao et al., 2015). China's total fertility rate (the average number of births per woman) dropped from 2.75 in 1979 to 1.56 in 2014, while the proportion of population aged 65 and above increased dramatically from 4.39 percent to 9.18 percent during the same period (World Bank, 2016). Further, OCP has significantly changed the structure of many Chinese households, which display a 4-2-1 format that comprises of four grandparents, two parents and one child (Cao et al., 2015).

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3 Within a Confucian tradition of filial piety or *Xiao*, children are expected to treat their
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5 parents/grandparents with loyalty, respect and physical care (Strom et al., 1996). In modern
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7 China, although the majority of urban retirees are entitled to a pension or similar, children are
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9 still considered the most reliable welfare source (Tsui and Rich, 2002). Thus one direct effect
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11 of OCP is that with an aging population, only-children are expected to primarily shoulder the
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13 burden of eldercare without sibling support. These developments have run alongside post-
14
15 1978 economic reforms, namely the shift from a planned to market economy and associated
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17 increased globalisation (Warner, 2011). This has been particularly notable in Chinese
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19 universities, where the 'iron rice bowl', lifelong employment and organisational
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21 welfare/support mechanisms associated with the planned economy, has broken down (Xia et
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23 al., 2019). Chinese HE institutions have undergone radical reforms, including expansion of
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25 student numbers, structural reforms, transformation of curricula and internationalisation of
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27 research and teaching activities (Lai et al., 2016). Work intensification and long working
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29 hours are common place, under a new system of performance and contract-based
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31 employment directly related to student satisfaction, research output and funding (Lai et al.,
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33 2016, Xia et al., 2019). Some Chinese academics in Ren and Caudle's (2016) study reported
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35 that eldercare contributes to their work-life imbalance.
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43 The increased pressure for eldercare also means that OCP has changed gender dynamics
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45 within Chinese families (Whyte and Parish, 1984). In the Communist years, women were
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47 encouraged to work full-time and contribute to social progress as much as men. Support, such
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49 as communal canteens, childcare and healthcare, were credited for reducing women's WLC
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51 (Cooke and Xiao, 2014). With free market economic reform, inflation and increased
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53 education, modern Chinese women continue to work and bring income to the family, but
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55 receive much less support from the state. Perhaps unsurprisingly then, existing research
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3 reported that woman academics in China believe that they must work double time and their
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5 biggest stressor came from balancing demands from both work and family life (Rhoads and
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7 Gu, 2012, Zhang, 2010).
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11 In summary, OCP has created a substantial burden of eldercare responsibility, particularly for
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13 only-children and particularly for women. WLC has thus become an important concern for
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15 both universities and academics.
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18 19 20 21 22 23 **Theory and hypotheses**

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26 Various terms have been used to capture work-life interface, such as work-life balance, work-
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28 life conflict, work to family strain, and positive/negative spill-over. These concepts are
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30 interchangeable in many ways as they are concerned with how individuals steer between
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32 work and life (Minnotte, 2012) and their impact on important employee outcomes e.g. JS
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34 (Powell and Greenhaus, 2010). Here, we use WLC and, given the Chinese context and its
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36 OCP, discuss the moderating effects of family structure and gender on relationships between
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38 WLC, JS and CA for a high-skilled group, Chinese academics. We take each in turn below.
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42 43 *Work-life conflict and job satisfaction*

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46 WLC describes a state of struggle to effectively reconcile work and family roles (Greenhaus
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48 and Allen, 2011) and is an important influence on JS, which describes an individual's state of
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50 positive effect in relation to their workplace experiences (Macdonald and MacIntyre, 1997).
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52 Research into JS in China has parallels with Western research in demonstrating that it is an
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54 important workplace construct (Authors). The negative relationship between WLC and JS has
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56 been well established by role conflict theory (Buonocore and Russo, 2013), which assumes
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3 an incompatibility between requirements from work and family within an individual's limited
4 time and resources. Such incompatibility may create a sense of resentment and lead to
5 negative organisational outcomes, when individuals see demands from work are responsible
6 for their lack of time and energy for family life (Daniels and McCarraher, 2000). Existing
7 international research has shown that academics who experience high level of WLC tend to
8 be less satisfied with their job due to an incongruence between work and family roles
9 (Dorenkamp and Ruhle, 2019), thus we might expect WLC to negatively impact JS for
10 Chinese academics.
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23 Research into how family structure affects WLC/JS relationship is rare. Studies so far tend to
24 suggest that fewer adults within household structures intensify this negative relationship
25 (Minnotte, 2012, Ten Brummelhuis and Van Der Lippe, 2010). For example, single-parent
26 families in the US, particularly those led by women, are more likely to experience financial
27 shortage and stress at work (Hernandez and Ziol-Guest, 2009). In China, the WLC/JS
28 relationship is substantially influenced by its ageing population and the 4-2-1 family structure
29 created by OCP. This structure places increased eldercare demands on, particularly, adult
30 only-children and combining work and informal care is likely to intensify the negative
31 relationship between WLC and JS (Plaisier et al., 2015), due to a lack of instrumental and
32 emotional support. Lack of adult siblings creates fewer resources to manage care of both
33 children and older dependents. A smaller extended family also reduces social capital, which
34 is vital in a society emphasising *guanxi*, reciprocal social practices within a person's network
35 of social/family connections (Hwang, 1987). Only-children academics are more likely to
36 have low JS due to WLC given their lack of sibling support to ease work pressure from long
37 hours, anxieties and conflicting demands faced by a post-reform HE system. We thus argue
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3 that being an only-child could increase the negative relationship between WLC and JS and
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5 propose that:
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9 H1: Family structure will moderate the negative relationship between WLC and JS, such that
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11 this relationship will be stronger for the only-children group than for the with-sibling group.
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18 Gender has operated as a moderator in previous work-life research (Minnotte, 2012,
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20 Drummond et al., 2017). We anticipate the same moderating effect in the WLC/JS
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22 relationship within the only-children group, as pressures for eldercare are likely to be
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24 particularly acute for Chinese women thus increase the effect of WLC on JS. Prior studies
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26 both in the West (Zou, 2015) and in China (Huang and Gamble, 2015) have suggested that
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28 women's JS is more likely to result from intrinsic rewards, such as balancing work and
29
30 family, than from extrinsic reward such as pay and promotion when compared to men (Zou,
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32 2015). In China, traditional gender roles persist and requires compliance with cultural norms
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34 at home (Author A). Chinese women academics have reported prioritising 'family' over
35
36 'work', while their male counterparts expect to allow 'work first', given a conflict between
37
38 work and life (Ren and Caudle, 2016). Accordingly, we argue that **female** only-children are
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40 expected to assume traditional gender roles as homemakers and take greater responsibility for
41
42 eldercare than **male** only-children. Higher family commitments owing to OCP and persistent
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44 gender stereotypes in promotion in Chinese universities (Rhoads and Gu, 2012) means WLC
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46 may have a greater negative impact on JS within **female** only-children academics. We
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53 hypothesise that:
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56 H2: Within the only-children group, gender will moderate the negative relationship between
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58 WLC and JS, such that this relationship will be stronger for women than for men.
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7 *Work-life conflict and career aspiration*
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10 CA is a self-concept of occupation for an individual shaped by personal beliefs and
11 perceptions about one's capacity, individuals' career actions, performance and outcomes
12 (Rosenberg, 1979). It captures one's career orientation and desire to reach a leadership
13 position, and is of substantial relevance for academics (Bataille et al., 2017). Litzky and
14 Greenhaus (2007) suggest that individuals seeking work-life balance are likely to have lower
15 levels of CA, as they perceive high work demands as incompatible with family life. Cooke
16 and Xiao (2014) argue that culture and context may lead to different perceptions of WLC
17 between Western and Chinese employees. While WLC in the West may be perceived as a
18 failure to care for an individual's significant others, within Chinese work ethics and recent
19 competition in the labour market, Chinese employees tend to accept WLC as a fact of life and
20 link it to their career expectations (Cooke and Xiao, 2014). The commitment-oriented HRM
21 model adopted by Chinese universities and HE reform mean Chinese academics may see
22 WLC as a prerequisite or 'investment in the profession' for achieving good performance and
23 being positively related to career outcomes (Ren and Caudle, 2016, Xia et al., 2019).
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42 Moreover, Coso Strong and Sekayi (2018) found that doctoral students are typically trained
43 to deal with conflicting demands and intense struggles throughout the course of their studies.
44 WLC, as a result of intense engagement in academic activities (conducting research, applying
45 for grants, teaching, and networking), can increase academics' perception of their capability
46 and reinforces their career identity and confidence, which in turn lead to higher career
47 expectations. Given pressures in the Chinese HE institutions, we follow Litzky and
48 Greenhaus (2007) to postulate that WLC is positively associated with Chinese academics'
49 CA.
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3 Changing family structure may moderate the relationship between WLC and CA. Within a
4
5 Confucian tradition that stresses intergenerational support, most parents make substantial
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7 investment in emotional and financial support for their only child, who is expected to
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9 reciprocate in the form of eldercare (Tsui and Rich, 2002). The lack of siblings is likely to
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11 intensify the WLC/CA relationship, in which only-children may see WLC as a price they
12
13 must pay in order to reach a higher position, so that they can provide better financial support
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15 for parents and grandparents (Wang and Fong, 2009). Conversely, those with siblings can
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17 share eldercare responsibilities and may not see WLC as part of achieving CA. Therefore, the
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19 ability to tolerate WLC becomes a more critical component of only-children's pathway
20
21 toward career success. Accordingly, we hypothesise:
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27 H3: Family structure will moderate the positive relationship between WLC and CA, such that
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29 this relationship will be stronger for the only-children group than the with-sibling group
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33 We propose gender may again moderate between WLC and CA for only-children. It is widely
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35 reported in Western literature that women's career paths are different to those of men, in that
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37 women experience more interrupted and fragmented careers and face more barriers
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39 advancing to senior management (Powell and Butterfield, 2013). Women's ability to juggle
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41 work and life is inextricably associated with their academic career development (Rhoads and
42
43 Gu, 2012). These factors are particularly relevant to China, where the increased caring
44
45 responsibilities generated by OCP fall primarily on women according to current Chinese
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47 norms (Cooke and Xiao, 2014). Prior research shows that **women in Chinese universities**
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49 choose to abide by social gender norms and push themselves to 'do it all', rather than
50
51 challenging gender role expectations, to avoid backlash (Ren and Caudle, 2016). Their
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53 'conformist strategy', which is detrimental to their own wellbeing, means that female only-
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55 children's career development is more dependent on their ability to withstand WLC, than
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3 male only-children. Thus, sacrificing one's self-enjoyment and family life for work can be
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5 viewed as self-sacrifice critical to women's career achievements, or short-term pain for long-
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7 term gain for Chinese female academics (Ren and Caudle, 2016). WLC functions as a more
8
9 important 'filter' to female academics' CA: their ability to handle WLC without dropping out
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11 increases their career self-belief and ambition. The higher the WLC, the more capable they
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13 perceive themselves to be:
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18 H4: Within the only-children group, gender will moderate the positive relationship between
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20 WLC and CA, such that this relationship will be stronger for women than for men.
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24 The research model that contains all the hypotheses is presented in Figure 1.
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28 INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE
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31 **Method**

32 *Data collection*

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35 The study was conducted in three medium-size universities (two in the South-west and one in
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37 Eastern China), using a web-based survey. All three universities are ranked within the top
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39 200 Chinese universities. We gained access through our contacts who referred us to three HR
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41 managers, who randomly selected and sent the survey link by email to 300 full-time
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43 academic staff in each university (from a total of 5,638). In our final sample, which consists
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45 of 420 employees, representing a 46.7% response rate, we found moderate-high levels of
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47 WLC (mean=3.66). 39.0% participants were only-children; 55.0% were men and 45.0% were
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49 women. 35.0% had medium-term tenure of 5-10 years, while 36.0% had tenure of more than
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51 10 years, and 29% less than 5 years. 87.2% were aged between 26 and 50. 40.2% of
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53 participants held master degrees and 54.3% held a doctorate. Furthermore, 55.2% were
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3 lecturers or senior lecturers, and 44.8% occupied associate professorship or professorship. All
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5 questions were translated independently and a consensus agreed by two Chinese researchers
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7 in the research team. This was then reviewed by two local participants, so that the measures
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9 were comprehensive and context-appropriate.
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12 13 *Measures*

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17 *Independent and dependent variables.* The independent variable WLC was measured by 10
18
19 items from The Industrial Society's Work–Life Checklist (Daniels and McCarragher (2000). A
20
21 10-item Generic Job Satisfaction Scale (Macdonald and MacIntyre (1997) was used to
22
23 measure the first dependent variable JS. The 10-item Career Aspiration Scale (O'Brien (1996)
24
25 was adopted to measure the second dependent variable. This scale has been used effectively
26
27 in previous research in the Chinese context (Cheng and Yuen, 2012). To avoid the typical
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29 bias in Chinese samples towards the central point (Hui et al., 2004), all measures were
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31 assessed with a six-point Likert scale from (1) 'Strongly disagree' to (6) 'Strongly agree'.
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37 *Moderators.* The main moderating variables of interest are gender (0 = man, and 1= woman),
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39 and family structure (0 = only-child respondent, and 1 = with-sibling respondent).
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43 *Control variables.* A number of controls at the individual level were included in the model,
44
45 including age, marriage status, education background, the number of working years, and job
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47 position. Before testing the hypotheses, a number of t-tests were conducted to compare the
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49 similarity levels in terms of the demographic distributions between the only-children and
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51 with-sibling groups.
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Analysis and results

We used two models to examine common method bias. Firstly, we followed Harman's single factor test using SPSS (Podsakoff and Organ, 1986). The largest factor explains 31.86% of the variance, indicating no substantial common method bias exists. Secondly, we tested a latent common method factor model in AMOS (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Comparison of the fit indices showed that the model with the latent common method factor had less goodness of fit with the data than the model without it. These analyses indicated that common method bias did not pose any risk or concerns for the results of this study.

Validation of measurement scales

It is good practice to validate scales developed in the West to improve measurements' cross-linguistic reliability and validity, using exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis (Zhou et al., 2012). To assess the factor structure of responses, scales were first subjected to Exploratory Factor Analysis with SPSS 25.0. The EFA results confirmed the factor structure in the proposed model. At this stage, poorly-performing items (i.e., low item-total correlations, high inter-item correlations or cross-loading items) were eliminated. During item removal tests, we considered "the trade-off between the number of scale items (for face validity or construct coverage) or measurement scales that perform well and discriminate" (Farrell, 2010: 326). 24 of the 30 items were retained, comprising 3 factors, which is consistent with the proposed measurement structure.

The psychometric properties of the constructs were then examined by Confirmatory Factor Analysis with AMOS 25.0. The CFA results for the 24-item model in the EFA solution did not demonstrate good model fit ($\chi^2/d.f. = 4.34$, IFI = .90, TLI = .87, CFI = .89, RMSEA = .09), and attempts were made to improve fit. Six items were removed either due to a low

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3 loading on the intended factor or high cross-loadings on other factors. Their removal may
4 relate to cultural and linguistic reasons. First, some statements (e.g. double negative) are not
5 common in the Chinese language and thus create confusion. Second, item contents (e.g.
6 focusing on individual leisure rather than family) may not be consistent with a collectivist
7 culture and real-life experiences of Chinese participants. The CFA was repeated on the
8 modified 18-item model. The resulting fit indices for this modified model showed improved
9 fit and all indices are adequate ($\chi^2/d.f. = 3.68$, IFI = .94, TLI = .92, CFI = .94, RMSEA =
10 .08).

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13 The validated measures showed good internal consistency and reliability via Cronbach
14 Alphas (WLC Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.91$, JS Cronbach's $\alpha = .85$, and CA Cronbach's $\alpha = .91$).
15 Composite reliability was calculated based on the standardised indicator loadings and
16 measurement errors of each construct. All the constructs had composite reliability values
17 greater than the recommended level of .75 (Table 1). Validity of the measures was assessed
18 by the critical ratios (CRs) and the average variance extracted (Chan et al., 2016). All
19 construct indicators met the recommended criteria, where the CRs were larger than 2.00,
20 statistically significant at the .05 level (Bollen, 1989). Moreover, all constructs had AVE
21 values higher than .50, demonstrating good convergent validity (Fornell and Larcker, 1981).
22 Measurement scales also showed adequate discriminant validity, where all three AVE values
23 were greater than the squared correlations (Fornell and Larcker, 1981).

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INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

Hypothesis testing

We tested whether family structure and gender moderated relationships between WLC, JS and CA. To test the moderators, a multi-group approach was used. The objectives of multi-

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3 group simultaneous path analysis are to determine (1) whether the path coefficients for the
4 relationships between WLC/ JS and WLC/ CA were equal across the with-sibling and only-
5 children groups (2) within the only-children group, whether the path coefficients for the
6 relationships between WLC/ JS and WLC/CA were equal across the male and female groups.
7
8 Multiple-path comparisons using AMOS bootstrap function based on 2,000 bootstrap
9 samples and 95% bias corrected confidence intervals were specified. We first constrained one
10 path (i.e., from WLC to JS) to be invariant across both groups and then freely estimated this
11 path. The χ^2 test was used to examine if the path from WLC to JS was different between the
12 with-sibling ($\beta_{\text{with-sibling}} = -.03$, ns.) and the only-children group ($\beta_{\text{only-children}} = -.26$, $p < .001$).
13 The result of χ^2 difference comparison provided evidence that there is a significant difference
14 between these two groups in the relationship between WLC and JS ($\Delta\chi^2 / \Delta d.f. = 6.82$, p
15 $< .01$), suggesting a significant **moderating role** from family structure. We also calculated Z
16 scores for path differences between parameters and found that the difference between the two
17 groups was also significant ($Z = -2.64$, $p < .001$). (See Table 2 and Figure 2a). In other words,
18 WLC is stronger on JS in the only-children group. H1 was supported.

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39 **Within the only-children group, relationships between WLC and JS were statistically**
40 **negative for both men and women ($\beta_{\text{men}} = -.15$, ns; $\beta_{\text{women}} = -.32$, $p < .01$). However, the**
41 **moderation of gender on the WLC/JS relationship could not be supported with insignificant**
42 **differences in χ^2 over the change of degree of freedom ($\Delta\chi^2 / \Delta d.f. = .12$, ns.). There was no**
43 **significant difference between men and women ($Z = 0.35$, ns.) (see Table 2 and Figure 2b).**
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H2 therefore was not supported.

INSERT TABLE 2 & FIGURES 2a AND 2b HERE

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3 We then constrained the path from WLC to CA to be invariant across both with-sibling and
4 only-children groups. WLC was found to be positive on CA for both groups ($\beta_{\text{with-sibling}} = .48$,
5 $p < .001$; $\beta_{\text{only-children}} = .26$, $p < .01$). The result of χ^2 difference comparison showed that there
6 is a significant difference between these two groups in the relationship between WLC and CA
7 ($\Delta\chi^2 / \Delta d.f. = 7.07$, $p < .01$), suggesting a significant moderation by family structure. Such
8 relationship was, however, significantly stronger for the with-sibling group ($Z = -2.68$, p
9 $< .001$) (see Table 3 and Figure 3a). H3 was rejected.

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12 We found that within the only-children group, the relationship between WLC and CA was
13 not significant for men ($\beta_{\text{men}} = -.05$, ns.). However, there was a significant positive
14 relationship between WLC and CA for women ($\beta_{\text{women}} = .48$, $p < .001$). The result of χ^2
15 difference comparison showed that there is a significant difference between men and women
16 in this relationship ($\Delta\chi^2 / \Delta d.f. = 12.98$, $p < .001$), suggesting a significant moderating role by
17 gender. The WLC/CA relationship was significantly stronger for women than for men ($Z = -$
18 3.65 , $p < .001$) (see Table 3 and Figure 3b). H4 was therefore supported.

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INSERT TABLE 3, FIGURES 3a, AND 3b HERE

Discussion and Conclusions

The effect of China's controversial OCP in contemporary workplaces provides a unique opportunity to explore novel aspects of work-life interface. More specifically, we tested the moderating role of family structure (Voydanoff, 2005) in the relationships between WLC/JS and between WLC/CA. We also examined whether gender moderated the above relationships particularly in the only-child group. This study was conducted in the context of Chinese HE, which has undergone radical reform (Lai et al., 2016), with academics frequently

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3 experiencing work intensification and long working hours (Lai et al., 2016, Xia et al., 2019).

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5 Our results partially support the hypothesised model.

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8 Our findings show that WLC reduces JS for only-children, though not those with siblings.

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10 This partially supports existing studies largely conducted in the West, which tend to suggest a
11 negative relationship between WLC and JS (Buonocore and Russo, 2013). Importantly, it

12
13 evidences significant differences between the only-children/with-sibling groups, supporting
14 the view that OCP and its resultant family structure effect only-children's work and life.

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16 Within the only-children group, however, gender does not moderate between WLC and JS.

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18 There are two possible explanations. First, we tentatively propose that family structure and
19 educational background of university academics have a stronger impact than gender
20 difference on shaping only-children's work experiences. Second, reduced family resources in
21 the 4-2-1 family structure may create an expectation that both men and women will have to
22 engage in work and family roles, albeit impacting differently on their careers as noted in the
23 WLC/CA relationship.

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26 Second, our results confirm that family structure moderates the positive relationship between
27 WLC and CA. Surprisingly, however, this relationship is stronger for the with-sibling group,
28 despite our expectations that only-children would be more tolerant to WLC in order to
29 achieve CA, due to the greater parental support and the higher expectations created by being
30 the sole focus of parental attention (Strom et al., 1996), and experience greater WLC to fulfil
31 these aspirations. One possible explanation is that OCP has increased family ties. Only-
32 children have been found to be more reliant on parents (Cameron et al., 2013) and this
33 reliance may extend into adulthood, meaning they reduce WLC despite their CA in order to
34 fulfil caring responsibilities. Another explanation may be that our with-sibling sample tends
35 to be more advanced in their career stage and thus face much higher levels of pressure to

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3 produce research outputs and obtain research funding than earlier career researchers in the
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5 current Chinese HE system (Lai et al., 2016).
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9 Another important issue identified here is the moderating role of gender between WLC and
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11 CA within the only-children group. While Western research evidences that women are more
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13 likely to suffer from WLC (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985), our results further suggest that, for
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15 female only-children, higher levels of WLC lead to increased CA. Gender dynamics are
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17 changing in modern China. Women's identities include their work roles, care roles and
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19 reproductive roles (Leung, 2002). As modern educated women, female only-children
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21 academics are thus more likely to withstand WLC in achieving their CA due to the re-
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23 emergence traditional gender roles (Cooke and Xiao, 2014). This is also reflected in our data
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25 that show male only-children occupy more senior positions than female only-children.
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31 This study makes empirical contributions to the emerging understanding of WLC, JS and CA
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33 in a Chinese context, and particularly HE. It also makes a number of contributions both
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35 theoretically and empirically. First, within work-life literature, although there has been a
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37 recognition that family can be a source of both resource and demands (Powell and
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39 Greenhaus, 2010), little research has examined how family structures influence the work-life
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41 interface. By testing their moderating effects, we highlight that changing family structures
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43 raise concerns in the work domain. Being an only-child can be both beneficial and
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45 problematic within a 4-2-1 family structure. Compared with those who have siblings, only-
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47 children receive more parental career guidance and emotional support. Yet they also face
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49 greater pressure in eldercare and access less emotional and physical support from siblings.
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54 Consequently, WLC has a significant impact on their JS.
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3 Second, this study contributes to the understanding of gender role dynamics in the context of
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5 changing family structure and work-life interface. Drawing on gender role theory (Eagly et
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7 al., 2000), we show that being a woman intensifies the relationship between WLC and CA
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9 due to the lack of sibling support. For many modern, educated female only-children, this
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11 career-family dilemma results in women ‘doing it all’, given the smaller family network and
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13 support available. While actively engaging in professional work reinforces women’s career
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15 identity, evidence in the present study indicates that female only-children’s career
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17 development may increasingly rely on their acceptance of WLC as a prerequisite. **This is**
18
19 **particularly so in a substantially reformed HE system that requires long working hours as a**
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21 **prerequisite to career success (Lai et al., 2016, Xia et al., 2019).**
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28 A third contribution is that our study provides sociological understanding of only-children’s
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30 work experience. Despite OCP’s profound impacts on many aspects of Chinese society, no
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32 studies, to our knowledge, have examined **the impact of 4-2-1 family structure** in the
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34 workplace. Our study fills this significant gap in international HRM research by offering
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36 empirical evidence on how only children experience work-life domains in the face of an ever
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38 aging population and changing family structures. We argue that OCP produced a generation
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40 of employees that experience ‘sibling deprivation’. As the only-child, they are expected to
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42 provide eldercare to aging parents and grandparents like previous generations within a
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44 Confucian tradition of filial piety. These issues are likely to detract from employees’ quality
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46 of life and their relationships both at work and at home (Powell and Greenhaus, 2006).
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52 Fourth, our findings serve to develop understanding of key aspects of work-life interface of
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54 high-skilled employees in Chinese labour markets, **beyond the HE context**. Global
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56 competition and the transition from a manufacturing-based to a more knowledge-intensive
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58 economy (OECD, 2016) means this group will be key to economic developments in the
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3 coming decades. Similar to studies conducted with professionals elsewhere (Powell and
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5 Greenhaus, 2006, Sturges, 2012), our study reveals that work-life conflict is dominant in
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7 university academics, especially women, seeking to realise their career ambitions.
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10 Academics work long hours and often experience difficulties of disengaging even at home
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12 (Ren and Caudle, 2016). Managing work-family interface is thus crucial to their physical and
13
14 mental wellbeing.
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21 **Implications and limitations**

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25 Given that work and family domains are highly permeable (Voydanoff, 2005), we argue that
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27 consideration of OCP's implications for only-children academics is both important and
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29 neglected. Our results have significant implications for society, Chinese organisations
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31 (particularly universities) and employees. At the societal level, this research suggests that
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33 men and women of the only-children generation are facing substantial pressures in the work-
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35 family interface. Traditional Chinese gender roles dictate that women take responsibility for
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37 raising children and caring for the elderly and men for succeeding at work and providing for
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39 the family. Thus, female only-children employees are more likely to be affected by the
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41 relationship between WLC and CA. Policymakers should consider support mechanisms to
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43 enhance the ability of only children (especially women) to remain in and be effective
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45 members of the labour market, thus supporting the national economy. Western governments
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47 have adopted varied approaches here and careful attention to design will be required. One
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49 such avenue could be a continued reform of the Chinese pension system and medical
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51 insurance systems to ensure retirees are properly protected. Another potential avenue could
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53 be to increase the availability and services of care institutions particularly in rural areas.
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3 For academics, we demonstrate important differences between those with siblings and those
4 without. This poses challenges for both universities seeking to improve staff wellbeing and
5 for wider society. Western universities have provided support to improve WLB and have seen
6 a range of positive responses, including improved retention. Chinese universities can learn
7 much from this and are advised to develop appropriate policies (e.g. part-time work,
8 institutional support and eldercare counselling) to ensure that they are well-placed in
9 competitive labour markets (Ren and Caudle, 2014; Xia et al. 2019). **More widely, a review
10 of workload model and career pathways is advised, following Western research (Authors) to
11 ensure that university working practices, that, for example, require long working hours, do
12 not embed disadvantage to those with caring responsibilities and preclude female career
13 success.**

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29 Although this study was conducted in China, its findings may have wider international
30 relevance. Globally, falling birth rates and the increased prevalence of only-children in the
31 workplace have posed considerable challenges. The general trend in many countries is
32 towards an aging population, albeit the underlying reasons (e.g. change of lifestyle, women's
33 increased participation at work, and lack of affordable housing) may be different (Nargund,
34 2009). While the long-term solution may be to support an increasing birth rate, short term,
35 governments must develop policies to cope with this phenomenon and support a shrinking
36 pool of young (often only-children) workers (Li et al., 2017). Organisations should equally
37 implement creative practices to attract, motivate, develop and retain this cohort, given their
38 pressure in eldercare and vulnerability in socialisation.
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3 This study has limitations. First, it was constrained by a single-sector and cross-sectional
4 sample of modest size. Second, age and tenure differences between with-sibling and only-
5 children groups means we were unable to control for these life stage factors, which may
6 influence respondents' perceptions of WLC, CA and JS. Third, existing scales measuring the
7 work-life interface do not recognise the impacts of eldercare. **Fourth, this study focuses on**
8 **potential demands of eldercare from (grand)parents, who can also be potential sources of**
9 **support in Chinese families.** A number of potential directions for future research may be
10 suggested. Theoretically, future research could develop work-life interface scales which
11 capture the demands of eldercare. More research is needed to explore WLC and include other
12 attitudinal parameters, such as trust, commitment, and perceptions of intrinsic/extrinsic
13 motivations, to further understand only-children's work-family interface. **Moreover, future**
14 **research can also investigate potential support (e.g. childcare, cooking and chores) only-**
15 **children receive from their (grand)parents in the work-life interface.** Methodologically, our
16 data were collected with educated urban individuals working in academia. Thus, future
17 research can examine a larger sample, which includes workers at different industrial sectors
18 and from rural areas **to extend understanding of only-children workers.** Alternatively,
19 qualitative methods (e.g. in-depth interviews) may gather rich insights into the problems of
20 combining eldercare, gaining JS and achieving CA for only-children.
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Personnel Review

Table 1: Results of Measurement Model (n=420)

Constructs	α	CR ^a	AVE	N ^b	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1.WLC	.91	.91	.64	6	3.66	1.19									
2.JS	.85	.86	.55	5	4.39	.82	-.02 ^c								
3.CA	.91	.91	.60	7	4.82	.89	.28**	.07							
4.Age ^d					3.10	1.03	-.02	-.01	-.09						
5.Gender ^e					.45	.50	-.23**	.16**	-.24**	-.12*					
6.Family structure ^f					.39	.49	-.23**	-.22**	.18**	-.17**	.02				
7.Marriage ^g					2.59	.79	.04	-.04	-.10*	.40**	-.01	-.10*			
8.Education ^h					2.49	.60	.14**	.09	.11*	.21**	-.14**	-.20**	.13**		
9.Tenure ⁱ					2.07	.80	-.04	-.04	-.19**	.70**	-.08	-.23**	.38**	.04	
10.Position ^j					2.38	.88	.03	.00	-.07	.71**	-.16**	-.22**	.42**	.19**	.67**

^a Composite Reliability

^b Number of items in each validated measure

^c Correlations

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

^d 1 = 18 to 25; 2 = 26 to 30; 3 = 31 to 40; 4 = 41 to 50; 5 = 51 to 60; 6 = above 60

^e 0 = man; 1 = woman

^f 0 = with-siblings; 1 = only-child

^g 1 = single; 2 = married with no child; 3 = married with children; 4 = divorced

^h 1 = undergraduate; 2 = postgraduate; 3 = doctorate

ⁱ 1 = less than 5 years; 2 = 5-10 years; 3 = more than 10 years

^j 1 = lecturer; 2 = senior lecturer; 3 = associate professor; 4 = professor

Table 2: Results of path analysis with group comparisons for H1 and H2

	Unstandardized regression weights	Standardized regression weights	<i>p</i> - value
WLC on job satisfaction (with-sibling)	-.017	-.034	.630
WLC on job satisfaction (only-child)	-.193**	-.262**	.000
<i>Control variables:</i>			
Age on job satisfaction	.028	.035	.146
Gender on job satisfaction	.292**	.178**	.000
Marriage on job satisfaction	-.063	-.061	.249
Education on job satisfaction	.086	.063	.209
Tenure on job satisfaction	-.112	-.110	.130
Position on job satisfaction	.039	.042	.565
<i>Then, within the only-child group:</i>			
WLC on job satisfaction (men)	-.141	-.151	.161
WLC on job satisfaction (women)	-.183**	-.324**	.005
<i>Control variables:</i>			
Age on job satisfaction	-.078	-.087	.456
Marriage on job satisfaction	-.086	-.080	.339
Education on job satisfaction	.195	.128	.107
Tenure on job satisfaction	.077	.068	.546
Position on job satisfaction	-.038	-.031	.790
WLC on job satisfaction (men)	-.141	-.151	.161

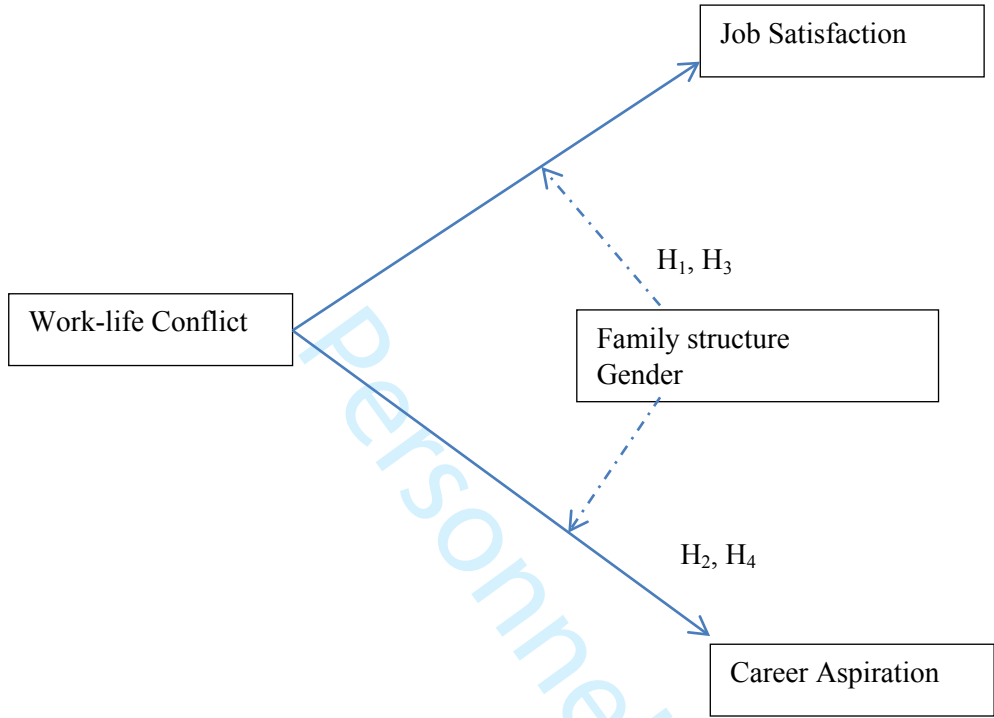
* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

Table 3: Results of path analysis with group comparisons for H3 and H4

	Unstandardized regression weights	Standardized regression weights	p-value
WLC on career aspiration (with-sibling)	.439**	.482**	.000
WLC on career aspiration (only-child)	.204**	.260**	.002
<i>Control variables:</i>			
Age on career aspiration	.005	.005	.943
Gender on career aspiration	-.412**	-.230**	.000
Marriage on career aspiration	-.057	-.050	.058
Education on career aspiration	.165*	.111*	.024
Tenure on career aspiration	-.222**	-.200**	.005
<i>Then, within the only-child group:</i>			
WLC on career aspiration (men)	-.027	-.045	.701
WLC on career aspiration (women)	.419**	.476**	.000
<i>Control variables:</i>			
Age on career aspiration	-.039	-.050	.658
Marriage on career aspiration	-.095	-.101	.216
Education on career aspiration	-.064	-.048	.537
Tenure on career aspiration	-.356**	-.361**	.001
Position on career aspiration	.294*	.274*	.016

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

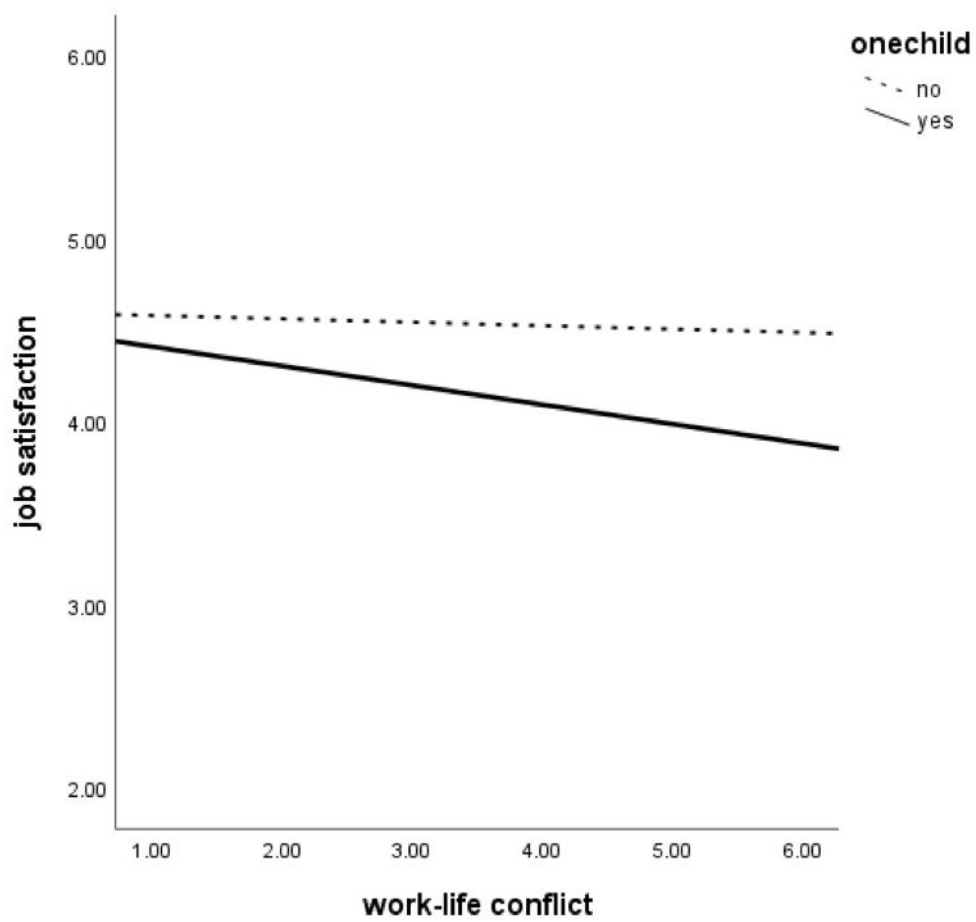
Figure 1: Hypothesised model



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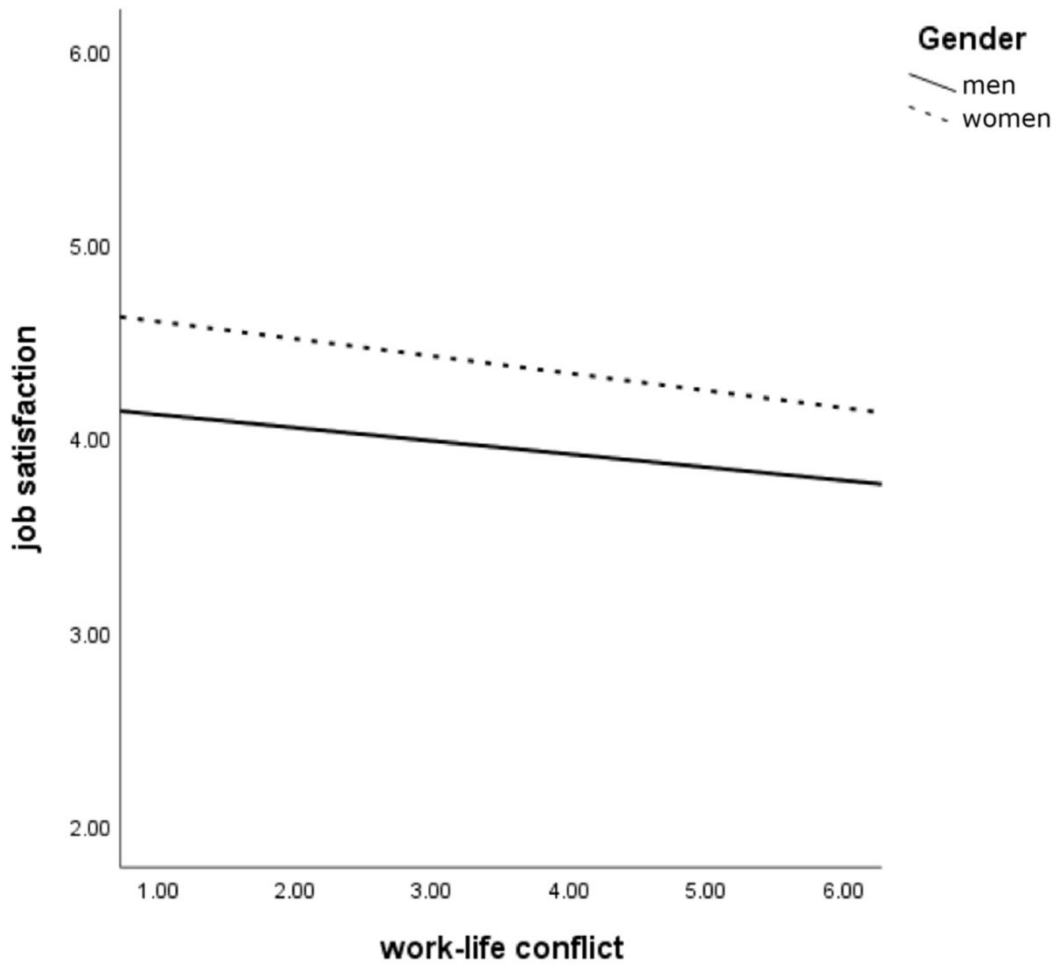
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Figure 2a: Moderating Role of Family Structure on WLC and JS



Review

Figure 2b: Moderating Role of Gender on WLC and JS within Only-children Group

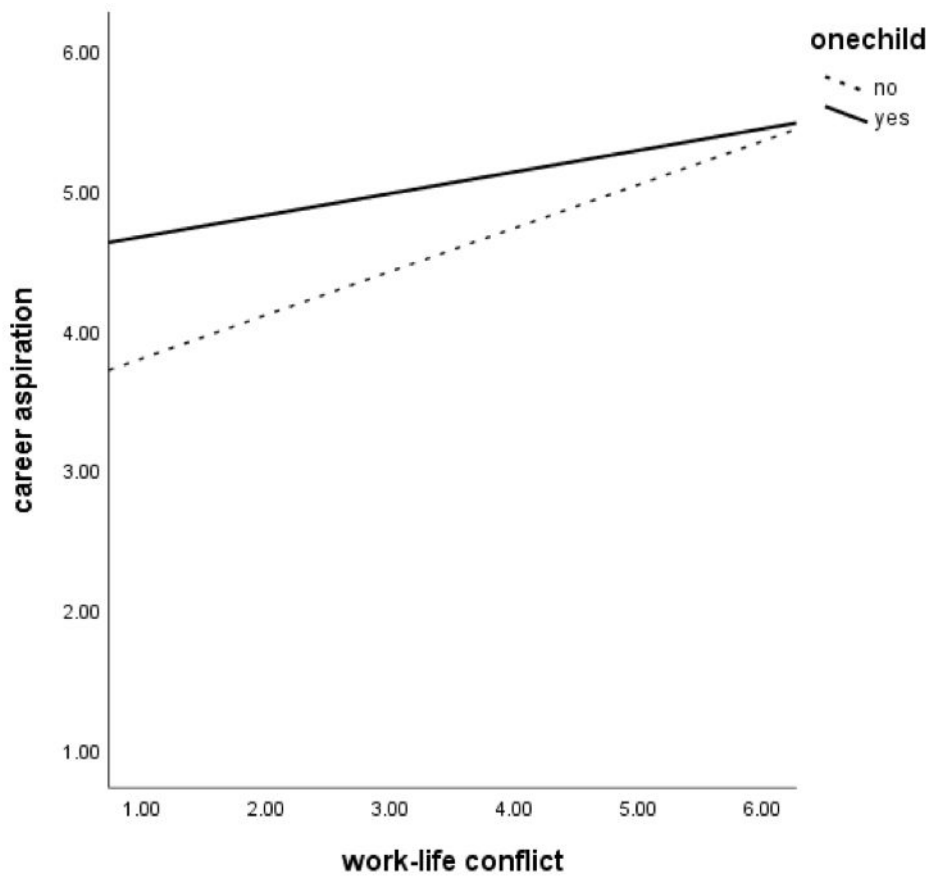


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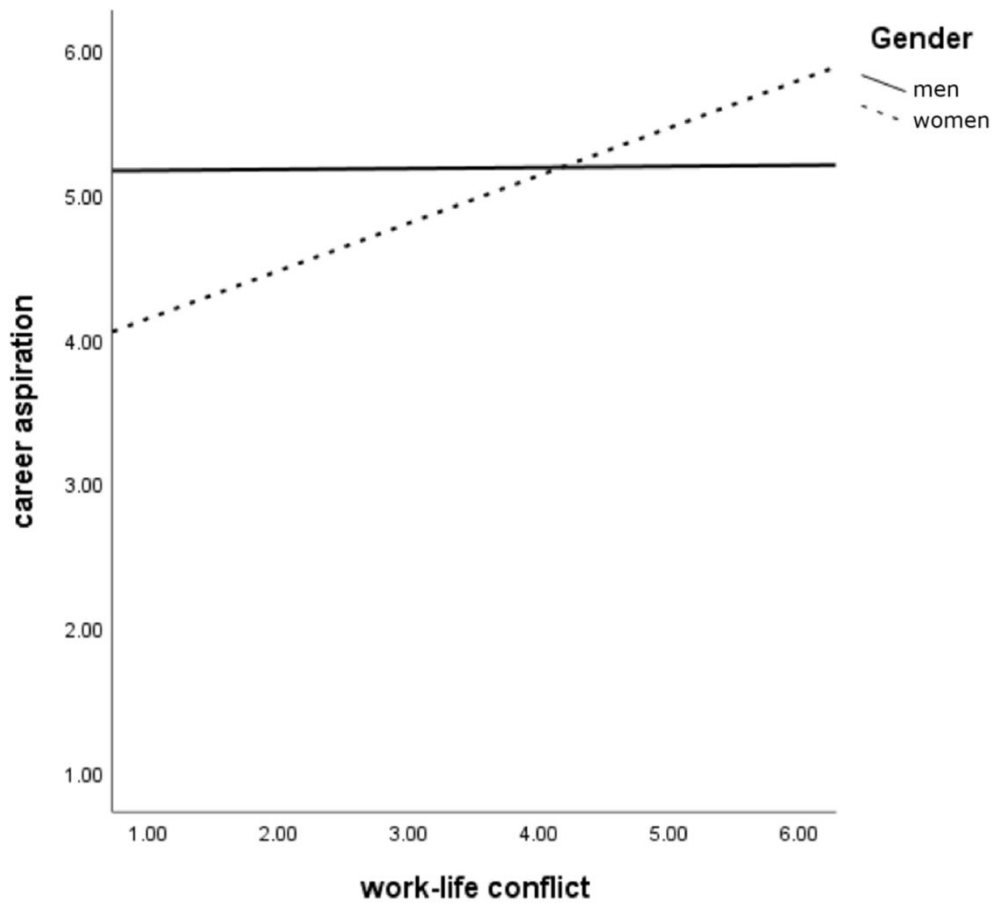
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Figure 3a: Moderating Role of Family Structure on WLC and CA



view

Figure 3b: Moderating Role of Gender on WLC and Career Aspiration within Only-children Group



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