Gender Invariance of the Mediating Effect of Perceived Emotional-Social Support in the Relationship between Work-Life Conflict and Occupational Stress

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DECLARATION

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Date: December 2021

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ABSTRACT

The 21st century shift brought about many changes, including the perceptions regarding traditional gender roles. As a result, the boundaries between work and family roles have blurred and men and women are now responsible for participating in both caretaker and breadwinner roles. This phenomenon, along with the abrupt COVID-19 pandemic, highlighted the existence of role conflict. This conflict has led to an increase in the incidence of occupational stress amongst men and women, and research has clearly identified that occupational stress undermines both individual and organisational well-being. A gap in the South African literature was identified, highlighting effective variables that mediate the relationship between work-life conflict and occupational stress, for both men and women. Consequently, the present study is aimed at evaluating the effectiveness of perceived emotional-social support as a possible mediating variable.

Available research is characterised by inconsistent and even conflicting results in terms of gender, occupational stress, work-life conflict and perceived emotional-social support. This study therefore investigates the questions of whether the effect of work-life conflict on occupational stress is the same for men and women; if the effect of work-life conflict on perceived emotional-social support is the same for men and women; if the effect of perceived emotional-social support on occupational stress is the same for men and women; and finally if perceived emotional-social support mediates the effect of work-life conflict on occupational stress, and if this effect is the same for men and women.

A large sample size (2097 working individuals) was examined in the Structural Equation Modelling framework, while using a reliable measuring instrument - the Sources of Work Stress Inventory - to gain even more statistical power. In order to assure replicability of results, the archival dataset was fitted to two data sets, namely the 'calibration' and the

'validation' samples. The analysis focused on examining the psychometric properties of the three the scales representing the latent variables, fitting the mediation model to the manifest data using structural equation modelling, evaluating whether a mediation process is present and testing whether the parameters of the model are invariant across both men and women.

This study found that work-life conflict affects occupational stress in that increased work-life conflict leads to increased occupational stress, whilst work-life conflict affects employees' experiences of perceived emotional-social support in the workplace, such that increased work-life conflict leads to reduced levels of perceived emotional-social support. In turn, perceived emotional-social support also affects occupational stress in that reduced support leads to increased occupational stress and, finally, perceived emotional-social support has a partial, mediating effect on the relationship between work-life conflict on occupational stress for men and women.

This leads to the conclusion that receiving emotional-social support from colleagues and managers, in the form of constructive interpersonal relationships, has the potential to soften the effect of work-life conflict on occupational stress. Therefore, this research also presents an effective intervention from which both groups will benefit. Finally, this study's theoretical and practical contribution fills a significant research gap in South African literature, while holding significant benefits for both employee and organisational well-being and growth.

ABSTRAK

Die aankoms van die 21ste eeu het baie veranderinge meegebring, insluitend die persepsies rakende tradisionele geslagsrolle. As gevolg hiervan het die grense tussen werk- en gesinsrolle vervaag en is mans en vroue nou verantwoordelik om aan beide rolle deel te neem. Hierdie verskynsel, te same met die skielike COVID-19 pandemie, het die manifestasie van rolkonflik beklemtoon. Daarom verhoog die ervaring van beroepstres onder mans en vroue, terwyl navorsing prominent bewys dat dit individuele en organisatoriese welstand ondermyn. Daarbenewens is 'n leemte in die Suid-Afrikaanse literatuur gevind oor effektiewe veranderlikes wat die verhouding van konflik tussen werk en lewe en beroepsstres bemiddel, op dieselfde manier vir mans en vroue. Die huidige studie het gevolglik die effektiwiteit van waargenome emosioneel-sosiale ondersteuning as 'n moontlike bemiddelende veranderlike geëvalueer.

Beskikbare navorsing word gekenmerk deur inkonsekwente en selfs teenstrydige resultate ten opsigte van geslag, beroepsstres, konflik tussen werk en lewe en emosioneel-sosiale ondersteuning. Daarom ondersoek hierdie studie of die effek van konflik tussen werk en lewe op beroepstres dieselfde is vir mans en vroue; of die effek van konflik tussen werk en lewe op waargenome emosioneel-sosiale ondersteuning dieselfde is vir mans en vroue; of die effek van waargenome emosioneel-sosiale ondersteuning op beroepstres dieselfde is vir mans en vroue; en laastens, of waargenome emosioneel-sosiale ondersteuning die effek van konflik tussen werk en lewe op beroepstres bemiddel, en of hierdie effek dieselfde is vir mans en vroue.

'n Groot steekproef is in die strukturele vergelyking-modellering raamwerk ondersoek, terwyl 'n betroubare meetinstrument - die 'Sources of Work Stress Inventory' - gebruik is om nog meer statistiese krag te verkry. Om repliseerbaarhied van die resultate te verseker, is die

argiefdatastel by twee datastelle aangebring, naamlik die 'Calibration' en 'Validation' monster. Die analise het gefokus op die ondersoek van psigometriese eienskappe van die drie latente veranderlikes, die aanpassing van die mediasie-model by die manifes-data met behulp van strukturele vergelyking-modellering, die evaluering of 'n mediasie proses aanwesig is en of die parameters van die model onveranderd is vir mans en vroue.

Hierdie studie het bevind dat konflik tussen werk en lewe beroepsstres beïnvloed, sodat verhoogde konflik tussen werk en lewe tot verhoogde beroepstres kan lei, terwyl konflik tussen werk en lewe 'n uitwerking het op werknemers se ervarings van waargenome emosioneel-sosiale ondersteuning in die werkplek, sodat verhoogde werk-lewe konflik lei tot verminderde vlakke van waargenome emosioneel-sosiale ondersteuning. Op sy beurt, beïnvloed die waargenome emosionele-sosiale ondersteuning ook beroepsstres, sodat verminderde ondersteuning tot verhoogde beroepstres lei, en emosioneel-sosiale ondersteuning, het uitendelik 'n gedeeltelike, mediasie effek op die verhouding tussen werk-lewe-konflik op beroepsstres vir beide mans en vroue.

Dus, is daar bewys dat die ontvangs van emosioneel-sosiale ondersteuning van kollegas en bestuurders, in die vorm van konstruktiewe interpersoonlike verhoudings, die potensiaal het om die effek van konflik tussen werk en lewe op beroepsstres te versag. Hierdie bevinding bied in effek ook 'n effektiewe intervensie, waarvan albei geslagsgroepe voordeel sal trek. Laastens, vul die teoretiese en praktiese bydrae van hierdie studie 'n aansienlike navorsingsgaping in die Suid-Afrikaanse literatuur, terwyl die bevindinge groot voordele inhou vir beide werknemers- en organisatoriese welstand en groei.

Sleutelwoorde: Konflik tussen werk en lewe, Beroepsstres, Emosioneel-sosiale ondersteuning

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

LIST OF TABLES

CHAPTER 1

MOTIVATION FOR THIS STUDY

Constant stress to keep the organisation's expenses low, profits high, to achieve more in a shorter period and to execute several life roles at once (parent, worker, friend or spouse) continue to be major concerns in the 21st-century workplace (de Souza et al., 2020). Additionally, the significant societal shifts caused by the COVID-19 pandemic greatly adds to the need for identifying effective interventions to combat occupational stress (Rudolph et al., 2020), as the margins among work and non-work, for many employees around the world, have been reconfigured and contribute significantly to the experience of stress (Duong et al., 2020).

It is widely acknowledged that occupational stress has a continual influence on employees' physical, emotional and psychosocial health and well-being (Landy & Conte, 2014). Consequently, it is thought that research's attempts to intervene by providing a possible contribution to reducing the negative effects that occupational stress holds for both individuals and businesses, may be considered a valuable investment. With the Coronavirus pandemic severely impacting work, family, and employees' social life, it is reported that the resulting changes, such as the closing of schools, encouraging of remote work arrangements or adjusting to office-based work post-lockdown, have increased employees' exposure to work-life conflict (Schieman et al., 2021).

Moreover, de Bruin and Taylor (2005) identified work-home balance, also acknowledged as work-family conflict or, in this study - work-life conflict - as a cause of occupational stress that remains a topic of interest, due to society's shift in traditional gender roles across the

globe (Bilodeau et al., 2020; Folkman, 2013). The traditional perception where men occupied the role of breadwinner and women the role of the homemaker or caretaker had, to some extent, faded a few years prior to the start of the 21st century (Jinnah, 2020). One recent study confirms this phenomenon by stating that the experience of work-life conflict remains a critical issue in current workplaces (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2020), whilst yet another study determined that it could be attributed to an escalation in women's partaking in the contemporary labour force, increasing numbers of dual-income households and growing single parenting (Pučėtaitė et al., 2020).

After South Africa became a democracy in 1994, the Government enforced new regulations to encourage the further inclusion of women in the workplace by employing various policies such as family responsibility- and maternity leave (Jinnah, 2020). However, even though the South African government, together with most societies around the globe, may have welcomed the scrapping of traditional gender roles, this is not true of all households. Patil and Koti (2020) highlighted that, whilst there is a noticeable increase in women's partaking in workplaces, they nonetheless retain the role of caretaker of family-related responsibilities (childcare, cooking, and cleaning) at home. This situation creates a clear route for conflict between a woman's role as wife and/or mother and her role as an employee, since both roles are demanding in their respective ways (Lips, 2018).

In a similar vein, paternity leave was recently introduced as part of our Basic Conditions of Employment Act (Patel & Mhlongo, 2020), for those fathers who broke from traditional societal beliefs relating to accepted gender roles as breadwinner and caretaker (Cunningham, 2008). This ultimately highlights society's contribution to the scrapping of traditional gender roles by presenting an opportunity for men to actively practice their shared caretaker role. This supports research that men experience more work-life conflict due to their complete

acceptance of the caretaker role where they assume most of the family responsibilities, while women climb the corporate ladders (Baqutayan, 2011; Cinamon and Rich, 2002; Dabbs et al., 2016; Dolder et al., 2013; Dong et al., 2020; Han & Noland, 2020; Trzebiatowski & del Carmen Triana, 2018).

It is well-known that conflicts within both work and family spheres activate the experience of stress which ultimately affects the mental and physical health of employees and, eventually, organisational performance (Pasamar et al., 2020). From an organisational perspective, this phenomenon causes decreased employee morale and organisational commitment together with associated increases in employee turnover, training expenses, absenteeism and, ultimately, more expenses than actual profits (Hughes & Bozionelos, 2007; Lingard et al., 2007; Wong & Chan, 2020). From an individual's perspective, this conflict can ultimately create job dissatisfaction and employee disengagement which can result in experiencing continuing periods of stress, depression, and burnout (Le et al., 2020; Prescott et al., 2008; Tytherleigh et al., 2005; Waltman & Sullivan, 2007).

Consequently, organisations are encouraged to invest in effective interventions that can mediate the effects of work-life conflict to assist in providing a constructive equilibrium among work and personal roles. However, for an employer to agree to making such an investment, it is necessary to guarantee them a return on investment. Several studies have, however, found that some intervention attempts have diminutive or incongruent effects on their employees' reports of work-life conflict and occupational stress (Eversole & Crowder, 2020; Kossek, 2016; Ropponen et al., 2016). Consequently, a critical gap in South African research literature needs to be addressed regarding effective interventions that will mediate the effects of work-life conflict to lessen the experience of occupational stress for both men and women. Therefore, to encourage managers to intervene, a need arises to verify the

effectiveness of a proposed (in this study, emotional-social support) intervention and ultimately demonstrate whether men and women can benefit equally therefrom.

Researchers have carried out many studies regarding gender and work-life conflict, some establishing that men experience more work-life conflict (Baqutayan, 2011; Cinamon et al., 2002; Dolder et al., 2013; Han et al., 2020) whist others found contradictory results (Bolino & Turnley, 2005; Chopra & Zambelli, 2017; Grönlund & Öun, 2018; Lips, 2018; Michie, 2002; Rivera-Torres et al., 2013). There are also reports which indicate no differences relating to gender (Fatoki, 2018; Jaga & Bagraim, 2017). Evidently, many conflicting results exist regarding gender-related experiences of work-life conflict and occupational stress, and most research originates from a negative perspective. Fewer studies have been initiated from a positive standpoint, knowing that both men and women encounter a degree of work-life conflict, but with the intent to focus on the value and effectiveness of a proposed intervention for men and women (Temam et al., 2019).

Furthermore, the development of such interventions relies in part on an understanding of the mechanisms through which work-life conflict impact occupational stress, and whether these mechanisms operate in the same way for both men and women. Therefore, studies are required that (a) examine potential mediating variables in the relationship between work-life conflict and occupational stress, and (b) examine whether the strength of the mediating effect proves to be the same for men and women.

Additionally, Banerjee and Mehta (2016) state that occupational stress can originate from a job demand, such as work-life conflict or social facets including poor supportive interpersonal relationships in the organisation. Inequity within social support and work-life conflict can eventually cause an employee to experience feelings of rejection, which adds to

their job disengagement and deteriorating well-being at work (Ellwardt et al., 2019; Utz & Breuer, 2017).

Employee well-being should be viewed as a strategic asset, for employees with increased well-being at work reportedly work more innovatively, productively and are generally more engaged with and loyal to their organisation (Khatri & Gupta, 2019). Therefore, those employees who experience work-life conflict should be provided with accessibility to valuable social support from their managers and colleagues to facilitate the regulation of the disproportion between efforts and rewards (Foy et al., 2019). Hence, the introduction of an intervention classified as an effective resource that can possibly play a mediating role in the provision of social support (Colloca & Colloca, 2016; Ellwardt et al., 2019; Foy et al., 2019; French et al., 2018; Utz et al., 2017).

Social support can be defined as "a multidimensional concept that involves the provision of emotional, informational, appraisal and tangible resources for coping, by helping within an interpersonal relationship, that comprises a reciprocal exchange of resources between those involved" (Gumani, 2019, p. 1). Accordingly, social support involves being enabled to communicate a struggle, while having the opportunity to receive guidance or resources that can help to effectively deal with the problem at hand, without experiencing unfair judgement from others (McLaughlin et al., 2010). Therefore, social support has a relational focus and the strain experienced by an employee, because of having poor or inadequate interpersonal relationships with colleagues and managers at work, adds to their experience of work-life conflict, while the positive presence thereof could be a mediating effect (Temam et al., 2019).

Furthermore, a study done by Gan (2019) links work-life conflict to emotional job demands and de Jonge et al. (2008) argues one must intervene with an equivalent type of job resource,

to reduce the possibility of experiencing occupational stress. Therefore, the following study will focus on the emotional aspect of social support. Additionally, South Africa seriously lacks research in this domain, for many studies have been done in the domains of occupational stress, work-life conflict, and social support but very few focusing on the emotional type of social support.

In addition, very few studies have combined the three variables to form part of one study to investigate whether emotional-social support has a similar mediating effect on the relationship between work-life conflict and occupational stress for both men and women. The few associated studies that do exist provide extremely contrasting results in terms of gender and the overall experience of occupational stress, work-life conflict and emotional-social support. Consequently, this study will additionally investigate whether the effect of work-life conflict on occupational stress is the same for men and women; if the effect of work-life conflict on perceived emotional-social support is the same for men and women; and if the effect of perceived emotional-social support is the same for men and women; and finally, if the effect of perceived emotional-social support on occupational stress is the same for men and women.

The following section will provide more information regarding the chosen variables, to provide a compact background of this study.

1.1. Background to the Study

South Africa's transformation in 1994 from Apartheid to a democracy introduced many changes in workplaces and households across the country (Festus et al., 2016). One of the many areas affected is that of traditional gender roles. This can be attributed to the Government's intense focus on its responsibility to ensure equal rights among people of

different race, ethnicity, religion, and more specifically, gender (Jaga et al., 2018). This focus is in line with many societies worldwide where gender roles and beliefs are more flexible, which ultimately obscure the margins between individuals' work and family lives. Moreover, the following is stated in The SABPP Women's Report 2017:

> Gender equality in the workplace is regulated through, amongst other labour legislation, the Employment Equity Act (Act 55 of 1998) and the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act (PEPUDA) (Act 4 of 2000). It is also Constitutionally protected through provisions preventing discrimination on certain grounds in the equality clause in the Bill of Rights. Of these grounds, five are important for gender equality: Sex, gender, sexual orientation, marital status, and pregnancy. (Naudé, 2017, p. 9)

However, the law only has the capacity to hold employers and employees accountable for practising gender equality, emphasising structural aspects, i.e., equal representation, access to resources, opportunity, and equal benefits (Parry & Segalo, 2017). Accordingly, objective measures can be put in place with respect to aspects such as representation and benefits in the workplace, yet it remains problematic to keep track of people's subjective experiences of equality.

The division between the public domain (organisations and politics) and the private domain (households) is potentially worrisome, as the government cannot ensure equality within personal and gender-related roles practised at home (Lyon & Morris, 2016). In other words, the government has no say with regard to how partners choose to perform roles in their households, even in instances where the roles are unequally shared, and one partner is experiencing high strain as a result.

The following research supports this phenomenon (Statistics South Africa, 2013): In 2000 a study conducted across all nine provinces by Statistics South Africa focused on the differences in how men and women spend their time. The results, based on 14 306 participants, demonstrated that women spent more than twice as much time on household chores per day than men. Women also reported that they spent almost nine times more of their time per day than men on caretaking. The same study was replicated ten years later, and the results indicated that women performed four times more household and care tasks than men. These results were confirmed in 2016 when the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development reported that women in South Africa devote 4.3 hours per day on household and care tasks, on average, while men only spend 1.5 hours per day on the same tasks (Jarva, 2016).

It is clear that the struggle to change broader gender role perspectives remains a major challenge in South Africa, and some attribute this finding to the country's conservative and patriarchal nature, therefore exhibiting fierce devotion to cultural perceptions of gender roles (Köhler et al., 2019). It is acknowledged that the traditional gender role belief system of men being the breadwinner and women the caretaker is still supported in many communities in the country (Pinho & Gaunt, 2019). Consequently, despite the Government's attempt to foster gender equality in forming structures that welcome women in the workplace, the traditional gender role mentality causes an increase in women's experience of work-life conflict (Bowen et al., 2018).

Women are now being encouraged to take on demanding occupations, enabling them to become economically independent by earning higher salaries. However, social structures have failed to adjust in reaction to this powerful revolution, suggesting that the dual responsibilities demanded from a female's work and life role are in serious misalignment

(Dolder et al., 2013). Jensen (2016) suggests that this phenomenon, in effect, results in intense role conflict, which is evident in their reports of work-life conflict, affecting their physical-, emotional- and psychosocial health (Kossek & Lee, 2017).

Additionally, without the necessary support or resources, the extended experience of stress can ultimately cause burnout, which includes detachment and exhaustion to such an extent that it threatens one's health, job, and relationships (Khamisa et al., 2016). Thus, the above findings support the abundant research, confirming that women experience more occupational stress, due to work-life conflict (Bolino et al., 2005; Chopra et al., 2017; Grönlundet al., 2018; Lips, 2018; Michie, 2002; Rivera-Torres et al., 2013).

In contrast, conflicting research is surfacing which reports that men are suffering more from work-life conflict and occupational stress, due to fluctuating traditional gender roles (Baqutayan, 2011; Dolder et al., 2013; Dong et al., 2020; Han et al., 2020; Trzebiatowski et al., 2018). There are, however, exceptions where the shift is accepted by some households, and due to women's increased involvement in their work-roles, men attempt to adjust and increase their involvement in the caretaker role whilst still being the main breadwinner (Dabbs et al., 2016).

This finding is also supported in the abovementioned study by STATS SA as it demonstrates the subtle acceptance of flexible traditional gender roles over time. As reported, in 2000 women spent nine times more time on caretaking than men whilst this had decreased by 2010 when they only spent four times more time on caretaking than men. Consequently, it is clear that men became five times more involved in the caretaking role over the course of ten years, indicating some progression in the population's acceptance of the shifting of traditional gender roles.

Whether these roles are equally shared or have entirely shifted, Smith et al. (2016) note that in those households where fathers are upscaling their involvement in household tasks and actively participating in their new roles as caretakers, they are struggling balance work and family responsibilities, thus leading to more work-life conflict. Furthermore, Thompson (2016) trusts that organisations will rapidly realise the need to foster structures in work environments that enable fathers to claim their roles as caretakers, without this having to impact their work roles. Clearly, those men who struggle to balance their demanding work and parenting roles will be identified by their employers through poor performance, disengagement, and loss of capacity (Zhang, 2017). This is where organisations will recognise the need to intervene in a way that accommodates both men and women in respect of their experience of work-life conflict.

Nevertheless, South Africa's Employment Equity Act does expect organisations to propose equity strategies to be submitted to the Department of Labour, where they indicate exactly how the organisation plans to promote equality and fairness. Numerous equity strategies nonetheless still fail to propose interventions towards combating the increase of work-life conflict for both men and women (Landman & O'Clery, 2020). Consequently, the South African legislation intervened by requiring every organisation to grant at least four months' maternity leave. This intervention was deemed ineffective in providing equal prospects for fathers' involvement in their family lives, especially with the fluctuation of gender roles where they are expected to take or share the caretaker role (Sinden, 2017). However, South Africa finally reacted in December 2019 by legislating that male employees be granted ten consecutive days of unpaid paternity leave following the birth of their child (Rich & Roman, 2019).

Despite this breakthrough legislation, a study found that a stigma exists where others look down on fathers who use their paternity leave and, in turn, men feel that their masculinity is being attacked as society expects them to remain at work (Kinney, 2019). A study proved that men feel their employer will interpret their use of paternity leave as not being fully committed to the company and their career (Knoester et al., 2019), while Harvey and Tremblay (2019) additionally established that most employers are, in fact, of the opinion that men do not need to take paternal leave at all. This creates an additional source of pressure, which contributes towards men experiencing work-life conflict.

Pasamar et al. (2020) states that the area of work-life conflict will expand even more in the next decade and for a sense of work-life balance to occur, one's public world of work and private life at home should not continue to be considered in isolation. In addition, organisations must adhere to their obligation to look after both their male and female employees' well-being and to be effective, they need to invest in interventions that can mediate the occurrence of work-life conflict for both gender groups. Research, furthermore, shows that organisational social support is an effective tool to deal with stressors that arise from work, as it provides employees with a constructive coping mechanism to deal with any source of occupational stress (Cortese et al., 2010; Kossek et al., 2011; Wadsworth & Owens, 2007). A global definition associates social support with an interpersonal transaction that involves components of an evaluative, affective, informative, and helpful nature (Gerdenitsch et al., 2016).

Moreover, Ishii et al. (2017) continue that social support centres on an interpersonal relationship or transaction that offers various types of resources which the receiver can utilize to positively influence their current situation. Therefore, it appears to be an intervention method that employees can potentially benefit from in combating work-life conflict (Zhang,

2017). Yoo et al. (2017) found that it is managers and colleagues who own the capacity to positively influence the method in which the employees (the receivers) choose to cope with demanding family- and work-role conflict (the situation).

Furthermore, most experimental studies have confirmed a negative correlation (as one variable increases, the other one decreases) between managerial support and work-life conflict, as most showed that employees who received social support from their managers showed lower work-to-family conflict as well as family-to-work conflict (Burke et al., 2013; Cinamon, 2009; Koekemoer & Mostert, 2010). Work-to-family conflict ultimately occurs in an instance where work demands make it impossible to respond effectively to family responsibilities (Elfering et al., 2020), while family-to-work conflict arises when family responsibilities make it impossible to effectively respond to work demands (Peng et al., 2020).

Agarwala et al. (2014) argue that having managers who react in a family-supportive manner can mediate the experience of work-to-family conflict, as they are inclined to allow their employees more control over their work demands and provide guidance by supporting their employees with work-related challenges. Hence, supportive managers will ultimately buffer their employee's experience of stress occurring from unbearable work demands. This, consequently, lessens the possibility of bringing occupational stress into the home-environment and, finally, reduces the manifestation of work-to-family conflict (Sherman et al., 2016).

Also, these supportive managers who genuinely express consideration for an employee's family life, by accommodating positive adjustments concerning intolerable work demands, can strengthen the employee's self-efficacy levels as well as their self-perception, which will ultimately increase their motivation and energy levels (Pousa & Mathieu, 2015). This will

enable employees to be physically and psychologically steady to successfully deal with family demands at home and ultimately decrease the possibility of bringing family-related stress into the work environment, thereby reducing the manifestation of family-to-work conflict (Bakker et al., 2011).

In addition, Haynes (2011) found that most employees are surrounded by their colleagues for, on average, eight hours per day and five days a week. As a result, they are inclined to form relationships and pursue support from colleagues by seeking guidance related to difficulties experienced in their family lives. Studies found that employees who receive social support from their colleagues showed minor work-to-family conflict as well as family-to-work conflict (Allard et al., 2011; Cinamon & Rich, 2005; Cinamon & Rich, 2010; de Klerk & Mostert, 2010). Thus, the opportunity of communicating family-related issues and receiving support in the form of assistance - or simply acceptance - can act as a source of new energy for employees to proceed with work demands, without being distracted by undealt-with thoughts and feelings (Thompson & Prottas, 2006). Consequently, it appears that supportive colleagues may have the potential to reduce the manifestation of family-to-work conflict.

Mesmer-Magnus and Viswesvaran (2009) established that colleagues are often presented with demands of a similar nature, leading one to assume that they share a joint comprehension of work tasks and related pressures. For this reason, employees are inclined to pursue support from their colleagues concerning job-related tasks or problems. Consequently, by having others who can relate to similar struggles at work, showing genuine understanding and offering guidance, this can potentially reduce having work-related issues spill over to the home-environment (Abendroth & Den Dulk, 2011). Consequently, colleague support can also reduce the manifestation of work-to-family conflict.

The conservation of resources theory serves as a compelling theoretical foundation to support the above-mentioned findings (Halbesleben et al., 2017). The theory proposes that manager or colleague support enables employees to produce resources, which they can convert into available energy, to successfully cope with work-life conflict (Foy et al., 2019). Therefore, based on the presented findings, it is expected that social support (including emotional-social support), derived from a manager and colleague, will have a negative relationship with work-life conflict amongst employees.

The majority of the available studies, including the above-presented findings, are based on the general definition of social support that involves informational, emotional, and instrumental types of support (van der Laken et al., 2016). Conversely, the present study will specifically focus on the emotional type of social support (emotional-social support) that involves an interpersonal relationship, with a focus on constructive communication, fairness, and respect that are solely sourced from colleagues and managers, to deal with work-life conflict.

The idea proposed by Caplan et al. (1975) is therefore partially applicable in the present study, as they refer to social support as the relationship with other employees that provides an individual with mental and tangible resources to cope with work stress. However, the focal point will only be on the intangible, psychological, and ultimately the emotional type of support derived from colleagues and managers. Consequently, the available research regarding the positive effects of social support from colleagues and managers serves as a plausible platform for proposing emotional-social support's effectiveness as a resourceful intervention to mediate the experience of work-life conflict on occupational stress.

The present study attempts to fill the research gap regarding emotional-social support literature to determine whether men and women will benefit equally from such an

intervention. Accordingly, this will be proven when the results show that the mediating effect of perceived emotional-social support from colleagues and managers affects the link amidst work-life conflict and occupational stress in the same way for both men and women.

In the following section, the present study's key variables will be introduced, namely: (a) Work-life conflict; (b) Emotional-social support; (c) Conflicting research regarding gender; and (d) The proposed research question and objectives.

1.2. Work-Life Conflict

1.2.1. *Classifying the Work-Life Conflict Construct*

Judge and Colquitt (2004) argue that work-life conflict appears in nearly every list of fundamental sources of occupational stress and has raised numerous concerns with conflicting results regarding gender differences. Consequently, this stressor was selected as the independent variable in the present study, due to the critical role that both work and family plays in any individual's life (Basu et al., 2016; Bolino et al., 2005).

The term work-life conflict can be described as the outcome when demands at work and demands at home conflict with one another (Hill et al., 2010). In contrast, the term work-life balance refers to a balance where the demands of a person's work- and family-life are equivalent (Sirgy & Lee, 2018). In other words, work-life balance can be viewed, as opposite to work-life conflict, for neither the individual's work nor family demands conflict with each other and enough energy and resources are available to effectively perform both roles.

Furthermore, work-life conflict consists of two key components, namely, the practical facet as well as the affective facet (Dorenkamp & Ruhle, 2019). The practical facet includes

aspects of meeting specific deadlines and planning conflicts (Basu et al., 2016), while the affective facet consists of feelings associated with emotional exhaustion, due to the pressure of performing various roles simultaneously (Hartman, 2016). Subsequently, it is evident that a wide range of factors are used to explain the concept, however the literature predominantly highlights two facets that jointly form the bi-directional construct that is work-life conflict (Higgins et al., 2008):

Work-to-family conflict

This facet of work-life conflict arises when work-related tasks make it tough to effectively respond to family-related tasks (Palomino & Frezatti, 2016). Here, the individual's work demands spill over to the individual's home environment and directly interferes with perceived family responsibilities and demands. In addition to the role theory, an increase in an individual's time, energy, and devotion towards their work will directly cause a decrease in the time, energy and devotion towards their family or spousal responsibilities (Jiang et al., 2020).

Family-to-work conflict

This facet state arises when family responsibilities make it challenging to respond effectively to work-related tasks (Peng et al., 2020). Here, family demands and responsibilities spill over to the individual's workplace and interfere with perceived work demands and responsibilities. In retrospect, it works both ways, as an increase in an individual's time, energy and devotion towards their families or spouse, will directly cause a decrease in time, energy and devotion towards their work commitments (de Clercq, 2020).

Accordingly, the present study will focus on the bi-directional concept that is work-life conflict. Moreover, to explore and fully comprehend a concept such as occupational stress,

one must explore the antecedents thereof, therefore identifying what provokes the occurrence of work-life conflict in order to establish effective intervention methods.

1.2.2.   The Antecedents of Work-Life Conflict

Byron (2005) constructed a simplified classification which categorised the antecedents of work-life conflict into three broad clusters, in which each contains additional variables that are non-exhausted, namely:

(a) Work field variables, which can be considered as occupational and organisational-related elements, such as lacking agenda flexibility and autonomy, as well as growing occupational stress (Lee et al., 2017); (b) Non-work field variables, which can be linked to the individual's family-related strains and additional non-work issues, including aspects such as personal-relationship conflict, lacking social support, the amount of time spent on managing household activities, and the age of children (Akkas et al., 2015); and (c) Demographic variables, which ultimately include the individual's attributes, i.e. personality type, reactive behaviours, and additional personal variances such as gender, earnings, and coping mechanisms (Foy et al., 2019).

In knowing what causes work-life conflict, it is necessary to explore the outcomes of both the presence and absence of work-life conflict, which will ultimately motivate this study's independent variable.

1.2.3.   Outcomes of the Presence and Absence of Work-Life Conflict

Work-life conflict holds countless negative effects as it directly affects employees and the organisation in a destructive manner (Fontinha et al., 2019). A critical need exists to

introduce effective interventions that increase employees' work-life balance; therefore, this section contributes to the motivation for this study.

The outcomes of decreased work-life conflict

The outcomes of decreased work-life conflict can have a direct or indirect effect (Nicklin et al., 2019). Studies found that the advantages of an organisational culture that values work-life balance include direct effects such as increased employee-organisation loyalty, organisational citizenship behaviours and improved attitudes towards work and productivity (Hassan et al., 2017; Jackson & Fransman, 2018; Shakir & Siddiqui, 2018), while the indirect effects include increases in employee-well-being, decreased occupational stress and fewer reports of burnout (Elpert & Wagner, 2017; Fontinha et al., 2019; Youssef-Morgan & Craig, 2019).

These consequences can also be categorised into work-related outcomes (job satisfaction, organisational commitment, lower intention to quit, increased experience of diversity and fairness), family-related outcomes (relations satisfaction, family and leisure fulfilment), physical well-being (improved energy, eating and exercise behaviours), and psychological well-being (decreased stress, anxiety and depressive indicators) (Bell et al., 2012; Kinman & Jones, 2008; Oludayo et al., 2018; Wadsworth et al., 2007). Ultimately, individuals have the necessary resources and energy to efficiently fulfil both work and family roles, indicating crucial benefits for the organisation and its employees.

Outcomes of increased work-life conflict

Contrarily, increased work-life conflict can be directly associated with increased reports of intention to quit, absenteeism, job- or career-dissatisfaction, as well as decreased organisational loyalty, organisational citizenship behaviour and performance (Hughes et al., 2007; Lingard et al., 2007; Tytherleigh et al., 2005). Furthermore, studies found indirect

effects such as a cycle enhanced by rising work-life conflict, evident in increased reports of detrimental physiological, mental and physical employee well-being, linking to increased occupational stress, burnout, substance abuse and, ultimately, reduced family functioning (Nicklin et al., 2019; Prescott et al., 2008; Waltman et al., 2007).

Additionally, these consequences can also be categorised into work-related outcomes (job dissatisfaction, decreased employee engagement, lower organisational commitment, increased intention to quit, absenteeism, lateness, and occupational stress), family-related outcomes (unsettled private life, relational conflict and deterioration in family roles), physical well-being (lacking energy and sleep, worsening of eating and exercise behaviours), and psychological well-being (increased emotional strain, anxiety and depressive indicators) (Bell et al., 2012; Kinman et al., 2008; Oludayo et al., 2018; Wadsworth et al., 2007). Ultimately, these outcomes will leave individuals lacking the necessary resources and energy to efficiently fulfil both work and family roles, presenting major adversity for the organisation and its employees especially with regard to increased occupational stress.

Consequently, this section further motivates work-life conflict as the independent variable in this study, considering how its outcomes - both directly and indirectly - affect an organisation and its employees' overall well-being. Moreover, the identification of effective interventions which can reduce work-life conflict, restore work-life balance and, finally, act as a mediating link to reduced occupational stress, becomes a critical need.

Xu (2019) suggests there are two categories of support that organisations can offer to reduce their employees' experience of work-life conflict. Organisations can offer formal support in the form of family-oriented strategies and reimbursements, including paid parental leave, flexible work schedules, job-sharing and childcare days. The opposing category involves organisations' provision of informal interventions, including the promotion of an

organisational culture that is family-friendly (Jurado-Guerrero et al., 2018). In such an organisation, managers are encouraged to offer emotional forms of support and guidance, whilst offering employees the time and space to build constructive interpersonal relationships with their managers and colleagues (Gunawan et al., 2018). The latter category of social support introduces a challenge with regard to the measurement thereof and, therefore, remains a field that lacks research (Haar et al., 2019).

Furthermore, social support has reportedly been incorporated in studies as an antecedent, mediating, and moderating variable (French et al., 2018; Lu et al., 2018; Ross et al., 2020) and despite the great intervention potential it holds, many of those studies found that individuals from diverse groups perceive the concept differently (Arnold et al., 2018). Consequently, the overall effectiveness of the latent variable is questioned, as it appears some groups might benefit more than others with regard to experiencing a buffering effect on work-life conflict. It is evident from the scarcity of South African research, as well as the differing perceptions of social support, particularly emotional-social support, that a need for ongoing research exists.

1.3. Emotional-Social Support

The present study recognises emotional-social support as a type of social support, and therefore social support research will be introduced to gain a comprehensive perspective of the central part of the study's potential mediating variable.

Social support can be recognised as an individual's shared relations with others, which can be perceived as encouraging and considerate and promoting one's well-being (Maselesele & Idemudia, 2013). Social support can serve as a buffer against the physical and emotional effects of stressful events; however, it can also protect an individual against possible

pressures without obvious stressors (Brown et al., 2003). Additionally, social support is known as one of the most significant approaches to coping with academic and work-related stress and can intercept the causal effects that link poor health to stress (Baqutayan, 2011).

However, the study of social support, including emotional-social support, and its link to occupational stress continues to be an underdeveloped subject in the research domain in several countries (Crutcher et al., 2018; Setti et al., 2016; Winnubst, 2017) including South Africa (du Plessis, 2019). Therefore, the need arises to investigate the presence of social support available and received at work, as it can conceivably influence the employee's experience of occupational stress and their overall health and well-being (Barr, 2017).

1.3.1. *Classifying the Root Element of Emotional-Social Support*

In an organisational context, emotional-social support signifies an employee's certainty that he or she is appreciated, knowledgeable, included in conversations, emotionally taken care of, and belonging to a larger group or system (Agarwal et al., 2019). However, social support remains the core of emotional-social support and is considered a key resource, as it can be linked to positive evaluation of work circumstances and it is classified as an adaptive coping mechanism (Holton et al., 2016). Additionally, the core of social support, including emotional-social support, can be classified and distinguished in numerous ways.

Social support can be clustered as 'received' and 'perceived' social support (Kim et al., 2019). Eagle et al. (2019) state that perceived social support represents the individual's expectation of obtaining social support in the future, while received social support emphasises the amount and value of the support received. Furthermore, Thoits (2011) states that the direct and moderated effect model of social support can be considered as a theoretical

foundation to understand the two influence points of social support, known as the direct effect (main effect model) and the moderated effect (the buffering hypothesis).

Ahlich et al. (2020) argues that the direct effect model views social support as having a direct positive influence on well-being, indicating that the presence of social support will affect one's well-being. Secondly, social support can intervene between the stressful situation and the individual's reaction to that situation (Watson et al., 2019). This occurs when an individual perceives that those essential resources will be provided to assist in managing demands in the future.

In other words, social support can intervene between the occurrence of a stressful event and the pathological effect, in decreasing the stress reaction, by way of constructing a solution to the problem (Maheux & Price, 2016). Hence, the moderated effect demonstrates that social support can improve one's well-being by acting as a buffer against the destructive consequence of stress and thus moderating or mediating the effect of the stressor on well-being (Baqutayan, 2015). Social support can therefore be used in problem-focused coping for instrumental reasons, i.e., co-workers or family members suggesting/providing a possible solution to a problem, while in emotional-focused coping for emotional reasons, i.e. supporting one by offering positive appraisals and motivation during stressful events (Lees, 2009). Furthermore, social support can be classified by its type and source.

1.3.2. Types of Social Support

According to Kim et al. (2019), a broad set of views currently exists regarding different types of social support; however, Berard et al. (2012) and Brown et al. (2003) suggest that there are three general types of social support including (a) Instrumental-social support involving practical aid, i.e. activities such as transport, assistance with domestic tasks or financial aid;

(b) Informational-social support involving the provision of data which can assist employees in solving problems or coping with demanding situations, i.e. offering guidance and assistance with tasks; and (c) Emotional-social support involving spoken or unspoken communication in the form of thoughtfulness and, i.e. attending, understanding, and comforting others to provide acceptance, compassion, and reassurance. In addition, social support can be categorised by its source.

1.3.3. *Sources of Social Support*

Watson et al. (2019) found an organisational setting has distinctive sources of social support, i.e. colleagues, managers and the overall workplace culture. These work-related sources of social support are often labelled (Mukanzi & Senaji, 2017): (a) Perceived colleague support involving inclusion in communication and group-related activities; (b) Perceived managerial support involving the provision of clear guidance and assistance; and (c) Perceived organisational support involving policies and practices which offer physical and psychological support (EAP).

Furthermore, social support that is derived from non-work sources can also, to a certain extent, affect an employee's well-being and work outcomes. These social support sources are usually provided informally by a significant other, family, friends, associates, or more formally by experts external to the organisation, i.e. a priest or counsellor (van der Laken et al., 2016).

Nevertheless, the present study focuses on perceived emotional-social support sourced from colleagues and managers, which ultimately embodies the degree to which employees believe their managers and colleagues fairly respect their contributions and are concerned about their well-being. The presence of social support from managers and colleagues can be linked to

certain positive outcomes, while the lack thereof can be associated with detrimental outcomes (Watson et al., 2019). The following section will serve as motivation for this study's hypothesized mediating variable, in considering that emotional-social support can mediate the relationship between work-life conflict and occupational stress.

1.3.4. *Outcomes of Social Support from a Colleague and Manager*

Collins et al. (2016) present an invaluable argument that employees are humans who are social beings, making it impossible to disregard the vast presence of social relations in societies worldwide. Social interaction between humans ultimately forms the foundation of any relationship, network and system, including our global economy (Knoke, 2018), although, due to the existence of an eight-hour working day, most employees devote more of their time to colleagues than family. Johnsen et al. (2018) further recognise the importance of social support, including emotional-social support, in an organisation due to the immense value and necessity of good interpersonal relationships between employees and managers.

Outcomes of the presence of social support from managers and colleagues

Inagaki and Orehek (2017) state that the offering of social support remains one of the most significant interventions with regard to improving one's mental well-being as well as decreasing the negative effects when experiencing any form of stress. Therefore, social support is critical in the organisational context, particularly support from managers and colleagues as it has been proven to have a great influence on the receiver's health and well-being (Pluut et al., 2018). For example, employees who experience this type of support are likely to experience an enhanced ability to manage work demands, therefore reporting less perceived occupational stress and burnout (Beausaert et al., 2016).

Additionally, they report feeling valued and rewarded for their contributions, thereby experiencing increased job satisfaction, job engagement, organisational commitment, and productivity as well as decreased intention to quit, absenteeism, lateness, detachment from work and teams, alcohol abuse and work-life conflict (Avanzi, 2018; Gerdenitsch et al., 2016; Jong, 2018; Veth et al., 2018; Yang et al., 2018). The present study expects similar outcomes, where heightened levels of perceived emotional-social support will result in reduced levels of occupational stress for men and women alike.

Outcomes of the absence of social support from managers and colleagues

Schelvis (2017) found occupational stress to be a side-effect of work-related demands and the absence of social support from managers and colleagues. Furthermore, several studies identified a link between the lack of social support and ill-health as negative facets of interpersonal relations such as social undermining have been proven to decrease physical, psychological, and societal performance (Yang et al., 2018).

Moreover, the construct of social undermining does not only represent a lack of social support but also refers to behaviour which aims to purposefully harm another individual (Gaffey, 2018). Additionally, these unhealthy social interactions, which are contradictory to social support, include counter-productive workplace behaviours such as bullying, harassment, making antagonistic remarks, and receiving deliberate unfair treatment from managers and colleagues (Duffy et al., 2006; Gerdenitsch et al., 2016).

Furthermore, the lack of social support in the form of destructive interpersonal relationships among employees, their colleagues and managers negatively shape employees' observations of equal treatment and self-worth (Foy et al., 2019). This results in employees feeling humiliated, useless and rejected which, in turn, causes increased absenteeism, lateness,

intention to quit, high turnover, work-life conflict and a decrease in job satisfaction, employee engagement, organisational loyalty, productivity and, ultimately, the experience of occupational stress (Berard et al., 2012; Crossley, 2009; Das, 2016; Haque et al., 2016).

Accordingly, the presence of social support derived from managers and colleagues appears to contribute greatly towards both the individual and organisational well-being (Pluut et al., 2018). The absence thereof, however, has the potential to cause immense damage to an individual, which directly affects the organisation (Yang et al., 2018). Moreover, as researchers proved that both the constructive and destructive aspects of social support ultimately stem from interpersonal relationships, the proposed mediating variable in this study will focus on the aspect of interpersonal relationships. It is expected that employees' report of work-life conflict, resulting in occupational stress, will decrease with the intervention of social support in the form of constructive interpersonal relationships with managers and colleagues (Beausaert, 2016).

This study will further investigate social support in the form of emotional-social support (type) perceived by colleagues and managers (source) and aims to evaluate whether it mediates the relationship between work-life conflict and occupational stress and, finally, whether the effect is the same for men and women. However, many studies have independently studied gender differences in the experience of occupational stress, work-life conflict, and social support (Handa & Chung, 2019; Stronge et al., 2019; Trzebiatowski et al., 2018), but many of these studies are characterised by inconsistent and even conflicting results, especially concerning gender.

1.4.   Gender-Related Research and the Identified Research Gap

Several research studies report that women experience more occupational stress whilst some found the opposite (Baqutayan, 2011; Bi et al., 2016; Denton et al., 2004; Klein & Kotov, 2018; Moffat et al., 2004). Numerous studies found that women report more work-life conflict (Bolino et al., 2005; Chopra et al., 2017; Grönlundet al., 2018; Lips, 2018; Michie, 2002; Rivera-Torres et al., 2013) and some found contradictory results (Cinamon et al., 2002; Dabbs et al., 2016; Dong et al., 2020; Trzebiatowski et al., 2018). Moreover, researchers report that men and women perceive emotional-social support differently, consequently resulting in conflicting outcomes in the effectiveness of these types of interventions (Deng et al., 2016; Joo et al., 2020; Li et al., 2015; Soman et al., 2016; Whiteman et al., 2013).

Lastly, very few researchers have focused on the variables that are work-life conflict, emotional-social support, and occupational stress with reference to gender differences, as part of one study. The absence of South African research regarding these variables greatly motivated the need for the present study, in an attempt to fill this significant gap in existing research studies. In addition, much of the available research is characterised by inconsistent and even conflicting results which often arise due to small sample sizes or shortcomings in the use of unreliable measuring instruments. In an effort to counter these shortcomings, the present study will examine a large sample size in the Structural Equation Modelling framework, as well as utilizing a reliable measuring instrument to gain statistical power, which is expected to provide valid results. This study also aspires to improve the replicability of its results by fitting the data to two data sets, namely the calibration and validation samples.

The following section will introduce the aim and objectives of the present study, along with the specific research questions.

1.5.   Research Objective and Questions

The aim of this study is to examine whether perceived emotional-social support (ESS) from colleagues and managers, has a mediating effect on the relationship between work-life conflict (WLC) and occupational stress (OS), and if the mediating effect is the same for men and women. The relationships between these variables are depicted in Figure 1.1. Therefore, Figure 1.1 provides a graphical presentation of the mediating role of emotional-social support between work-life conflict and occupational stress. Figure 1.1 also shows that work-life conflict has both an indirect and direct effect on occupational stress, where the indirect route works through emotional-social support.

Figure 1.1

The Hypothesised Mediating Effect of Emotional-Social Support in the Relationship Between Work-Life Conflict and Occupational Stress
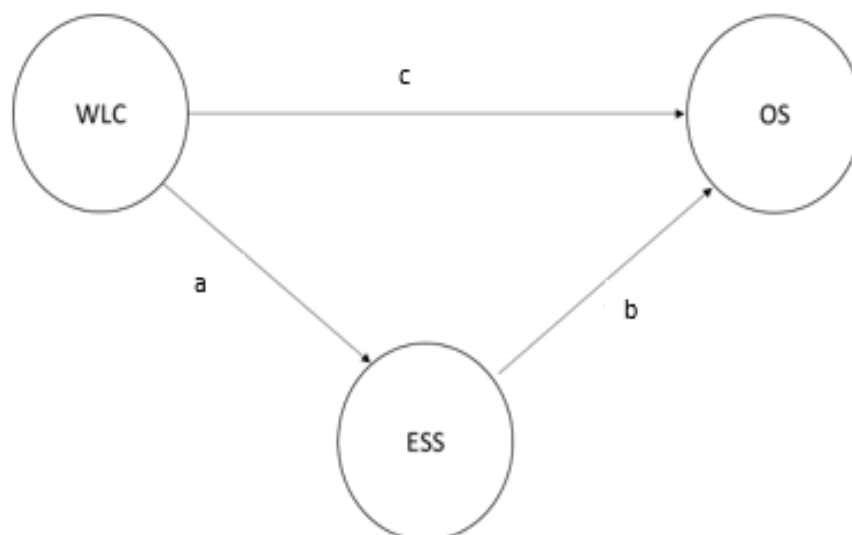
The research objective translates into the subsequent secondary research questions, namely: (a) Does work-life conflict have a direct effect on occupational stress (path c in Figure 1.1), and is this effect the same for men and women?; (b) Does work-life conflict have an effect on

emotional-social support (path a in Figure 1.1), and is this effect the same for men and women?; (c) Does emotional-social support have an effect on occupational stress (path b in Figure 1.1), and is this effect the same for men and women? In conclusion, the primary research question that flows from the core research objective is: (d) Does perceived emotional-social support mediate the effect of work-life conflict on occupational stress (path a × path b in Figure 1.1) and is this effect the same for men and women?

The following Chapter aims to unpack the literature available to support the execution of the present study through further exploration of the available research relating to the latent variables.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This Chapter provides an overview of the relevant literature which relates particularly to this study's primary variables. Consequently, the Chapter focuses on the following aspects: (a) catalysts for work-life conflict; (b) theoretical models and theories of work-life conflict; (c) work-life conflict as an antecedent of occupational stress; (d) sources of occupational stress and gender-related differences; (e) work-life conflict and gender-related differences; (f) theoretical models and theories of social support; (f) emotional-social support elements; and finally (g) perceived emotional-social support and gender-related differences. The ultimate aim of presenting the above-mentioned body of literature is to paint a picture which will highlight and support the need for the present research study.

2.1. Work-Life Conflict

2.1.1. Catalysts for Work-Life Conflict

How we work and live has undergone several transitions over the last decade. One such transition relates to shifts relating to the manifestation and understanding of traditional gender roles (Williams et al., 2016). These roles can be described as a universal belief system involving certain responsibilities and behaviours that are considered fitting for men and women (Dicke et al., 2019). Stereotypically, these (now outdated) beliefs prescribed that a woman's role was as the "caretaker at home", and a man's role was as the household's "breadwinner" (Bear & Glick, 2016).

Based on these traditional beliefs regarding gender roles, women would first and foremost be expected to concentrate on family-related duties before they agreed to enter the labour force

(Zhou et al., 2018). Similarly, men could attain any occupational position or aspiration, due to their responsibility for providing for their family by employing their earnings (Bear et al., 2016). Hence, a women's choice of education or occupational aspiration was directly influenced by society's traditional gender role expectations (Dicke et al., 2019).

This type of belief system seems to have faded a few years prior to the start of the 21st century, with the rise of dual-income partners, career-driven couples, single parents and, ultimately, the realization of a shift in work and family-related gender roles (Kriesi & Imdorf, 2019). Due to economic and self-actualization reasons, the general labour force shows high levels of diversification, with a boost in women's participation and dual-income couples becoming the norm (Mohamed, 2019; Ruhle et al., 2018).

Consequently, major shifts have occurred in the way in which men and women balance work- and family roles (Gaunt & Scott, 2017). Increasingly, women are expected to balance both roles, while men are increasingly expected to have a more prominent participation in the family role (Chopra et al., 2017) above and beyond their role as worker. However, evidence shows that, despite clear advances in women's participation as workers, they are still expected to carry the bulk of the burden with respect to the caretaker role in family contexts (Jarva, 2016). In turn, this contributes to working women facing more demands in obtaining work-life balance than working men (Bear et al. 2016).

On the contrary, another development is evident, for men are reporting to be more involved in the caretaker role, due to shifting from the traditional work-driven mentality (Baqutayan, 2011). Studies report that this occurrence increased the experience of work-life conflict reported by men in the workplace, owing to the lack of balance between their traditional role as breadwinner and the new shared role as caretaker (Dabbs et al., 2016; Trzebiatowski et al., 2018). Additionally, the increasing divorce rate has given rise to single parenting and expects

some individuals to adopt the role of both breadwinner and caretaker (Shinall, 2018). As a result, the overall occurrence of work-life conflict has drastically increased as both women and men continue their attempts to balance the contradicting expectations of their family- and work-roles (Michie, 2002).

Secondly, another crucial catalyst for work-life conflict is the rise of information and communication technologies (Powell et al., 2019). This phenomenon occurs frequently through cell phones and laptops connected to the internet that virtually unite employees, while escalating the occurrence of work outside of the conventional workplace and work hours (Ciolfi & Lockley, 2018). Moreover, organisations have responded by presenting flexible working arrangements to allow employees to exert control over their work location and schedule. However, advanced technology in the 21st-century workplace introduces the challenge of "boundary-less work-life conflict" (Field & Chan, 2018), in which the boundaries of work and non-work activities become vague and ultimately increase the likelihood of role conflict.

Both catalysts for work-life conflict can be attributed to conflicting roles which are supported by the role theory. The role theory proposes that as an individual, partaking in various roles, allocates greater value to one specific role, it becomes plausible that they will experience inter-role conflict (Eagly & Wood, 2016) as the remaining roles and their demands are neglected to fulfil the demands of the most valued role (Bolino et al., 2005). Furthermore, Byron (2005) found it is evident that the role theory relates to the root of work-life conflict, which forms part of the conflict theory. The conflict theory suggests that work and family realms are inharmonious, owing to diverse standards and duties, hence an imbalance occurs between one's life and work.

This ultimately raises great concern, as lacking work-life balance essentially reduces the buffering effect against the experience of occupational stress, which poses detrimental physical and mental complications for an employee and their organisation (Duxbury et al., 2007). Consequently, the need exists to explore the source of occupational stress that is work-life conflict, to emphasise organisations' obligation to intervene (Goldscheider et al., 2015). Some of the major theories and perspectives of work-life conflict are covered to give a broad overview of developments in this field.

2.1.2. *Theoretical Models and Theories on Work-Life Conflict*

Many theories underpin the work-life conflict construct and, consequently, the following section presents an overview of a few theories that can clarify the occurrence of the work-life conflict construct. According to Kossek et al. (2017) the theories are categorised into three groups, namely: the constructive sphere of work-life conflict, the destructive sphere of work-life conflict and the indistinct boundaries between work- and family-life.

(a) Constructive sphere of work-life conflict.

Greenhouse and Powell introduced the concept of work-family enrichment, which ultimately proposes that experiences in one role enhances the value of experiences in other roles (Putnik et al., 2018). This concept is based on the role-accumulation theory, which argues that having numerous roles is more gratifying than it is demanding, as an individual is more likely to accumulate supplementary resources and opportunities therefrom (Bhalla & Kang, 2019). However, the destructive sphere of work-life conflict cannot be ignored, for the majority of individuals find it challenging to balance work and family demands (Watanabe & Falci, 2016).

(b) Destructive sphere of work-life conflict

The role strain and/or conflict theory takes the most popular perspective, that an individual who takes on numerous roles will ultimately experience role strain and inter-role conflict, due to contradictory expectations, including energy and time from the diverse roles (O'Neil et al., 2016). Hence, an individual's participation in a family-role weakens their performance in their work-role and vice versa, hence the occurrence of work-life conflict. Research done by Barnett and Hyde (2001), found that taking on numerous roles was not the main concern, however, it was the individual's value and arrangement of the roles that ultimately caused role strain.

(c) Indistinct boundaries among work and family-life

In conjunction with work-family role enrichment and conflict theories, numerous other theories developed with regard to work-life balance. Both the border (Clark, 2000) and boundary theory (Ashforth, 2000) add to the study of the work-family relationship.

The border theory is dedicated to work and family spheres and focuses on creating a balance between the two spheres by way of crossing borders (Clark, 2000). Consequently, the border theory serves as a framework for employees and businesses that aims to encourage work-life balance practices. The theory consists of four essential spheres including: the work and family sphere; the borders among work and family; the "border-crosser" (i.e. flexible work schedules), and the "border-keepers" (i.e. partners, managers) (Leung & Zhang, 2017).

Moreover, borders involve mental and physical boundaries that separate the location, time, and individuals linked with life and work spheres. White (2018) states that those borders can also be considered as weak (more flexible in merging work and family roles) or strong (more resistant and thus preventing the merging of work and family roles). Additionally, border-keepers are individuals within a sphere who are central in distinguishing the border between

the spheres (Chan, 2019). Hence, conflict can occur when border-keepers and border-crossers disagree on the degree of flexibility regarding the boundaries of the two spheres.

The boundary theory centres on the meaning that individuals attribute to their work- and family-roles, with the supplementary effort of constantly shifting between these roles (Ashforth et al., 2000). It is thought that boundaries are considered clearer when the two roles are divided, therefore the transitioning between roles is more complicated when the roles are combined. It becomes challenging to differentiate work from family roles and consequently role blurring occurs, hence the "boundary-less work-life conflict" (Desrochers et al., 2005).

Moreover, boundaries can be categorised by their adaptability and permeability, where adaptability is the "extent to which the physical time and location markers, such as working hours and workplace, may be changed"; and permeability is "the degree to which a person, physically located in one domain, may be psychologically concerned with the other" (Hall & Richter, 1988, p. 215).

Furthermore, roles can be ordered in a segmentation-incorporation range, therefore when a specific role's boundaries are uncompromising and resistant the roles are segmented, whereas when a role's boundaries are adaptable and permeable, the roles are combined (Bulger et al., 2007). Hyland and Prottas (2017) found that unbalanced permeability leads to demands overflowing into family domains. As a result, people with separate roles experience conflict when crossing boundaries, while people with combined roles experience conflict due to the challenge of forming and maintaining boundaries, leading to the occurrence of work-life conflict.

In conclusion, the preceding paragraphs highlight the fact that an imbalance among work and family roles contribute towards work-life conflict and such imbalances cause individuals to

experience strain, which can conceivably manifest in occupational stress (Shimada et al., 2019). Against this background, the following section examines work-life conflict as an antecedent of occupational stress.

2.1.3. *Work-Life Conflict and Interpersonal Relationships (Lacking Emotional-Social Support) as Antecedents of Occupational Stress*

Occupational stress remains a major threat to organisations across the globe and can be understood as the mental and physical state that emerges when the resources available for the employee to complete job tasks are insufficient to successfully manage the pressures of the work situation or environment (Abbas & Raja, 2015).

The experience of occupational stress can be understood by examining the Job Demands-Resource model (Braine & Roodt, 2011), as it showcases the existence of stress and possible intervention methods to encourage employee well-being. The model proposes that occupational stress exists due to an imbalance amongst an employee's specific job demands and job resources accessible to manage those demands (Jenkins et al., 2016). The model further suggests when job resources are scarce and job demands are challenging, it is expected that an employee will be subjected to increased occupational stress (Birtch et al., 2016).

High job demands deplete employees' physical and psychological resources which, in turn, manifest in low work engagement, increased absence from work, poor quality work relationships, and increased reports of occupational stress (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Jenkins, 2016). Conversely, access to job resources have a motivating effect on employees, leading to increased work engagement, job satisfaction, improved employee well-being, decreased absenteeism and good quality work relationships (Hoboubi et al., 2017; Tuckey et

al., 2017; Van Wingerden et al., 2016). Thus, providing adequate job resources is pivotal for an organisation to experience what is necessary for profitable organisational performance.

Nevertheless, the experience of occupational stress is progressing into an extremely critical dilemma for the 21st century's workforce, their employers, as well as bounded societies (Bakker et al., 2017; Khodarahimi et al., 2012). Previous and current research indicates that occupational stress is still considered a key barrier in organisations' Human Resources departments and can be directly linked to poor employee well-being and finally burnout (Duong et al., 2020; Hornstein & de Guerre, 2006; Ram et al., 2011).

Job resources have the capacity to mediate the effects of taxing job demands and an employee's experience of occupational stress (Lambert & Hogan, 2018). However, to identify effective resources that can mediate the effect, it is essential to establish the specific job demands causing the effect (Weisshaar, 2017). Vander Elst (2016) found that the most common job demands involve job content, workload, work setting and apparatus, organisational culture, relationships at work and, lastly, work-life conflict. These job demands are, in fact, parallel to the sources of occupational stress identified by de Bruin et al. (2005). Hence, the above-mentioned job demands' (including work-life conflict) causal relationship with occupational stress is lucratively established.

Additionally, many of the sources of occupational stress are psycho-social in nature, and it is typical for individuals to react in different ways when exposed to these stressors (Rivera-Torres et al., 2013). Aneshensel et al. (2013) identified gender to be the greatest, constant social determinant for poor employee well-being in the workplace and the experience of occupational stress. This directly leads to the significance of considering gender differences in the experience of the specific sources which mainly underpins these to groups' experience of occupational stress (de Souza et al., 2020; Skritek, 2017).

The Sources of Work Stress Inventory (SWSI), which is an instrument designed to measure occupational stress and identify the sources of occupational stress (de Bruin et al., 2005), identified the following sources: Role Ambiguity, Working Environment, Tools and Equipment, Workload, Autonomy, Career Advancement, Relationships and Work-Home Interface. The last two sources mentioned above represent the study's proposed mediating variable, in the form of lacking emotional-social support (relationships), and the independent variable work-life conflict (work-home interface), which will be discussed in the subsequent section.

It is a reasonable assumption that employees initiate workplace relationships, not only for the sake of specific organisational benefits and objectives, but also for the intrinsic rewards, i.e., the support that these social connections offer (Morrison, 2008). Employees spend most of their work hours surrounded by colleagues and managers in the workplace and they tend to experience diverse interpersonal relationships from which they might - or might not - benefit. High quality interpersonal relationships (between employees and their colleagues or managers) remain essential associations through which employees contribute to activities that speaks to the organisation's goals (Carmeli et al., 2009).

This concept can act as a resource as well as a source of occupational stress in a case where the experienced interpersonal relationships are lacking or poor i.e., The experience of interpersonal exploitation from managers or colleagues (Gyllensten & Palmer, 2005). Good and poor-quality interpersonal relationships have different effects on the individuals' experienced occupational stress and previous research specifically shows that gender heavily contribute to establishing the strength of the relationship between interpersonal relationships and occupational stress (Khodarahimi et al., 2012).

Morrison (2008) reports that men and women have different views and values concerning interpersonal relationships at work, as women value actions like sharing opinions and beliefs, while men value actions such as participation from colleagues during work activities. This study further indicates that the gender-related differences concerning interpersonal relationships and their contribution to occupational stress, can be due to women viewing social connections as an essential feature of work, whereas men view social connections at work as a bonus. However, Khodarahimi et al. (2012) concluded that individuals will attach different meanings to their interpersonal relationships at work, which will alter their perception and experience of occupational stress.

Finally, poor interpersonal relationships relate to a lack of emotional-social support from the members of an organisation, and ultimately represents the proposed mediating variable of the present study, which will be discussed at a later point in the document. However, the present study's independent variable will be discussed in the following section, as recognised by de Bruin et al. (2005) as one of the sources of occupational stress.

Work-home interface (work-life conflict)

Work-home interface or work-life conflict denotes to the strain faced by an individual due to conflict between their work- and family-role (Putnik et al., 2018). Consequently, as previously explained by the role theory, a negative overflow occurs when demands in one realm spill over to influence the other realm, causing the experience of stress. (Shimada et al., 2019). Kumar et al (2020) states that work-life conflict remains the source of occupational stress that is mostly impacted by gender and as previously discussed, this can be attributed to the increase in shifting gender roles. This indicates a clear need for further research on this source of occupational stress.

Previous research showed that gender has a great impact on the degree to which employees invest and demonstrate devotion in their family- and work-roles (Bertrand, 2020; Bolino et al., 2005; Cinamon et al., 2002). The gender-role theory proposes that family demands are prone to harm female participation in work roles, and work strains are prone to harm male participation in family roles, since women and men rank work and family duties differently (Zhou et al., 2018;). Therefore, the following section highlights previous research regarding gender differences in the experience of work-life conflict, to illustrate the complexity of current available research in this domain, due to contradictory results reported.

2.2.   Work-Life Conflict and Gender

Prior to the examination of an individual's degree of work-life conflict experienced, one will have to take their perception of the concept into account (Bjärntoft et al., 2020). Some women or men might see family-to-work or work-to-family conflict as a natural or expected phenomenon, hence merely an interference, not a source of stress (Patil et al., 2020). Having this information can aid in the understanding of how the two groups experience stress due to their perceived level of work-life conflict.

According to Chopra et al. (2017), women are prone to perceive work-life conflict as a source of stress, since they are viewed as accountable for the household and childcare responsibilities. Moreover, women are more popular in lower status and lower-paid occupations, and they are more likely to volunteer for work shifts to accommodate these household and childcare responsibilities (Lips, 2018; Michie, 2002). In a study undertaken by Bolino et al. (2005) to investigate the correlation between employee initiative (eagerness to act in the absence of instructions) and work-life conflict, it was found that the relationship appeared to be stronger for women than for men, therefore contributing to the perception that women experience more work-life conflict than men.

Furthermore, Martins et al. (2002) found that women experience work-life conflict to a greater degree than men. They propose that women are supposedly more vulnerable to the stressor that is work-life conflict, as it has an enormous effect on their experienced job satisfaction and overall work performance. Moreover, more women than men tend to stay longer in the same job, implying that the potential exposure to the destructive risks continues for a longer period (Elsaid & Ursel, 2018). Kumar et al. (2020) further argues that women are still mainly responsible for unpaid work such as childcare and house-holding whilst working a full-time job, which produces more stress for working women (Rivera-Torres et al., 2013).

To further strengthen the above conclusion, the following results were obtained during a study performed by Bolino et al. (2005): Women tend to accentuate and value their family roles to a greater degree as compared to men and, therefore, they tend to report more stress in trading off work and family responsibilities. Additionally, it was also found that, relative to men, women have a primary obligation to do what will enable them to have a healthy balance between their family and employer's demands. This further supports research that women experience more work-life conflict than men (Grönlund et al., 2018).

In total contrast with the research presented above, Baqutayan (2011) found that men experience more work-life conflict, as women reported higher levels of social support and lower levels of isolation at both home and work. The results established that women tend to form more diverse types of relationships and showed themselves to be more emotionally transparent towards others in a stressful period.

Furthermore, Cinamon et al. (2002) examined the degree to which gender influences work-life conflict and found the following: Women fit more with the family profile, meaning they tend to value the family role more than the work role, whereas men fit more with the work

profile and are reported to account for more occupational stress due to work-life conflict. Dong et al. (2020) found that men reported fewer barriers to attain work-life balance, as they rely less on social support from others. Another study suggests that women's economic empowerment allows them to easily attain work-life balance (Ibrahim, 2015). On the other hand, research undertaken by Zhou et al. (2018) supports the phenomenon that there are no significant gender variances regarding the experience of work-life conflict. Earlier research of gender differences in work-life conflict has clearly yielded varied results, and therefore these conflicting findings indicate a vital need for further research.

Some individuals find it difficult to completely disregard family-related demands while at work, i.e., taking phone calls from a family member or feeling the need to seek family-related advice from a colleague during work hours (Bellezza et al., 2017). In their well-known classification of job demands, Cox and Griffiths (1995) therefore identified family-to-work conflict as a job demand, as it interferes with emotional and cognitive elements of the job, caused by conflicting demands from home.

However, some individuals find it difficult to completely disregard work-related demands at home, i.e., responding to work-related emails or completing unfinished work tasks at home (Reimann et al., 2019). This could lead to possible friction between partners or lead to the neglecting of childcare-related demands. This paves the way for the experience of stress, which spills over to the work environment by way of inhibiting additional emotional and cognitive tension that will, in due course, interfere with job performance (Lee et al., 2018). For this reason, Pluut et al. (2018) linked work-to-family conflict indirectly to an individual's job demands, as demands from work ultimately increases conflict at home which, in time, spills over to the work sphere and influences the employee's emotional and cognitive ability

to execute their work tasks. Thus, work-life conflict can ultimately be linked to emotional job demands in the previously discussed Job Demands-Resources model (Berthelsen et al., 2018).

Consequently, the need arises for organisations and Industrial Psychologists to intervene, by way of identifying a mediating variable against the negative effects of work-life conflict that ultimately enhance occupational stress. As discussed, the Job Demand-Resources theory suggests that the provision of adequate job resources will facilitate this mediating effect and enable the motivational process. Additionally, some researchers found that, for the most effective mediating outcome of a specific job demand, the provision of a similar type of job resource is required (Braine et al., 2011). Therefore, an emotional job resource is required for the emotional job demand of work-life conflict. The following section will therefore introduce an emotional job resource which was identified in having a possible mediating effect on the relationship between work-life conflict and occupational stress.

2.3. Motivating the Proposed Mediating Variable

The buffering hypothesis claims that social support (a job resource), protects employees from the adverse effects of high job demands (Cortese et al., 2010). Additionally, Kossek et al. (2011) deems this type of job resource to be effective, as it can be implemented on an individual level (colleagues), managerial level (supervisors) and an organisational level (culture and policies). Moreover, it has been observed that a good quality interpersonal relationship amid an employee and their respective supervisor has the potential to positively impact job demands including work-life conflict (Gerdenitschet al., 2016). This is evident in a situation where emotional support from colleagues or managers can assist employees by offering guidance or simply displaying compassion with regard to a personal problem that interferes with their work performance (Wadsworth et al., 2007).

The receiving of emotional-social support has the potential to mentally enable the employee to effectively complete their work at a time when they are experiencing personal problems, and subsequently display a probable mediating effect in the relations between work-life conflict and occupational stress (Nierenberg et al., 2017; Osborne & Hammoud, 2017; Zak, 2017). This can be provided by leaders offering fair treatment, employing a zero-bullying tolerance, offering constructive guidance, demonstrating appreciation and support to change an employee's perception of their job demands (Jena et al., 2018). It can therefore be seen that the offering of social support, specifically through emotional support, in the form of constructive interpersonal relationships from colleagues and managers, can potentially mediate the relations between work-life conflict and occupational stress (Ishii et al., 2017).

As formerly discussed under the constructive sphere of work-life conflict, the work enrichment theory further supports this notion by stating that the experience in one role (work or family) can improve the value attributed or experienced in the other role (Shein & Chen, 2011). Therefore, this theoretical model aims to explicate the possibility of positive effects stemming from the work-life relationship. The enrichment theory thus raises the phenomenon that instrumental foundations (i.e., values) or emotional foundations (i.e., fulfilment) can progress the quality of the other sphere (Morris and Madsen, 2005). One can reasonably assume that positive outcomes stemming from the work sphere can enhance the quality of an individual's private life and vice versa.

However, an Industrial Psychologist's focus remains "what can be done at work" to mediate sources of occupational stressors and consequently enhance employee well-being, by reducing occupational stress. Therefore, in this study it is argued that the experience of work-life conflict (i.e., having trouble in balancing the demands of work with the demands of non-work life) can lead to poorer relationships with supervisors and colleagues at work and,

therefore, reduced social support. This may happen because an employee who experiences high demands in the life domain may have less time available for work-related tasks and activities, which may lead to the possibility of low-quality work, unwillingness to accept extra work, less time to spend with colleagues and not participating in social events. In turn, the resulting reduced social support contributes to increased occupational stress. The converse is that employees who experience low work-life conflict may have the time and resources available to invest more heavily in the worker role which may, in turn, lead to improved relationships with colleagues and supervisors, resulting in reduced occupational stress.

The theoretical model that supports the hypothesized mediating variable will be explored in the following section, to gain a comprehensive perspective of the untapped value that emotional-social support can offer.

2.4. Emotional-Social Support

2.4.1. *Theoretical Models and Theories of Social Support*

As discussed above, the Job Demand-Resources model primarily hypothesises that job resources can mediate the effects of taxing job demands as job resources enable a motivating effect that results in, amongst others, employee engagement, personal growth, development and learning (Berthelsen et al., 2018). Yet, the contraction of related mental and physiological costs remains the most significant outcome of the effects of job resources, for it ultimately leads to decreased levels of occupational stress (Schaufeli, 2017). Therefore, the objective of many studies is to identify highly effective job resources that can serve as effective mediators. Job resources include career growth opportunities, coaching, role clarity, autonomy and, more specifically, social support (note that lacking social support can also be seen as a stressor) (Demerouti et al., 2017).

Hansson et al. (2017) argues that occupational stress can be a consequence of certain work facet, but similarly, it can also be an indication of lacking social support in an organisation. As previously mentioned in the Job Demand-Resources theory discussion, employees with reduced access to resources, such as colleague and supervisor support, are more likely to develop poor health and experience increased occupational stress (Mudrak et al., 2018). On the contrary, employees with supportive colleagues report lower risks of experiencing destructive consequences (Bryan et al., 2017).

Consequently, Colloca et al. (2016) further confirms that social support is known as a highly effective tool to encourage employee well-being, as it serves as a mediator against the undesirable effects of occupational stress. Thus, social support, being an adaptive coping mechanism, is essential in most organisational settings to facilitate employee well-being; especially in those where occupational stress is evident (Foy et al., 2019).

Social support embodies the networks accessible to employees, including colleagues, supervisors, managers and employee assistance programs (Moeller & Chung-Yan, 2013). Ellwardt (2019) found that employees who have access to healthy social support networks are ultimately better equipped to deal with demanding work situations. Additionally, Utz et al. (2017) reported that an employee whose colleagues, manager, family, and friends are encouraging and accepting in nature, will ultimately report having reduced occupational stress levels. This effect can be further demonstrated by an employee who continually receives support from managers and colleagues at work, and as a result experience increased motivation to fulfil their work tasks, while effectively managing demanding situations (Border et al., 2019; Greenspan et al., 2013).

One can therefore identify social support as a mediator in the relationship between a stressor and occupational stress, for the degree of social support perceived will depict the effect of the stressor on an employee's occupational stress levels (Roohafza et al., 2016). Consequently, research suggests that a negative relationship exists between social support and occupational stress, hence as social support increases, occupational stress will decrease (Barr et al., 2017). This valuable finding led to the realisation of a need to adapt a substantial model in the domain of occupational stress and employee well-being research, the Job Demand-Control-Support model (Dawson et al., 2016).

The Job Demand-Control model suggests that occupational stress is the response to an imbalance amid psychological stressors (Job demands i.e. time pressure, amount of work, degree of concentration required) and the job control (Decision latitude i.e. authority, skill discretion) that an employee has over his or her work responsibilities (Cendales-Ayala et al., 2017). However, the model was criticised for its simplicity. Consequently, to increase the model's relevance, social support was included as a third element, thereby introducing the Job Demand-Control-Support model (Raemdonck et al., 2014).

Asif et al. (2018) argues that the adapted model proposes that increased occupational stress is evident in occupations with high demands, low control, and lacking social support. Therefore, the Job Demand-Control-Support model, together with the Job Demands-Resources model, ultimately serves as the theoretical foundation in support of the chosen variable that is emotional-social support. The general formulation of the model proposes that high job demands ultimately result in the experience of occupational stress (Sippel et al., 2015). Nevertheless, it may increase or decrease depending on the degree of control or autonomy the employee has in their work, as well as the social support available (Giauque et al., 2019; Pozo-Antúnez et al., 2018).

Furthermore, in the framework of the Job Demand-Control-Support model, social support may cooperate additively with demands and control in explaining occupational stress. Particularly high demands, low control and lacking support are likely to manifest in high strain. Social support may also cooperate multiplicatively with demands and resources in explaining occupational stress; particularly, low social support may amplify the destructive effects of high demands and low control. A third possibility is that social support may mediate the effects of demands and control on occupational stress, particularly high demands and low control may lead to poorer relations with supervisors and/or colleagues which, in turn, leads to occupational stress.

However, previous research proves that the same type of job resource is most effective when applied in response to the same type of job demand (Braine et al., 2011). Consequently, work-life conflict was previously classified as an emotional job demand; hence it is plausible that the present study will focus on the emotional type of social support as a potential, intervening job resource (Lee et al., 2010). Kleiman et al. (2018) further support this potential effect by stating that social support is an essential quality of the workplace and an incomparable intervention for mediating occupational stress, specifically the type of support that incorporates constructive interpersonal relationships amongst employees, colleagues and managers. Therefore, the following section will explore the present study's potential mediating variable, emotional-social support, that might influence the relationship between work-life conflict and occupational stress.

As crucial as water and food are for our human existence, so are emotional connections (Uhlmann et al., 2018). The experience of a connection that is emotionally supportive creates a psychological experience of security in both an environment and relationship (Siegel, 2020). Consequently, introducing the notion of emotional or psychological safety at work,

which incorporates the concept that employees can operate in a setting where they feel safe enough to voice their thoughts and feelings without fearing resentment or unfair judgements from their managers or colleagues (Frazier et al., 2017).

Moreover, Luthans et al. (2008) state that emotional safety goes hand in hand with emotional-social support, which is fundamental for the enabling of employees to excel in their work roles. Johansen and Cadmus (2016) found that 21st-century employees are motivated when their efforts and presence are accepted, appreciated, and valued by their organisations and its stakeholders, far more than by simply receiving a raise. The following section will introduce the present study's definition of emotional-social support to acquire a clear sense of the factors underpinning the construct.

2.4.2. *Emotional-Social Support Defined by Literature*

Tilden and Gaylen (1987) highlight the essence of emotional-social support that is affirmative communication, which results in acquiring information that: (a) One is genuinely cared for and understood; (b) One is respected, valued, and reassured; and (c) One forms part of a greater system of reciprocal devotion. Stevens (1992) however, emphasises the tolerable, empathetic and trust elements that are rooted in authentic emotional-social support. For, to engage in the practice thereof, one needs to display these factors to enable the receiving party to feel as if their emotions are accepted and not unfairly used against them.

The present study will incorporate both conceptualisations of emotional-social support to define the potential mediating variable in the setting of the workplace. Hence, emotional-social support is defined as a supportive interpersonal relationship amongst employees, their colleagues and managers, that is built on a firm foundation of respectful, affirmative

communication and fair treatment that fosters a sense of trust and acceptance, to ultimately generate the presence of emotional safety at work.

The following section will explore the elements of emotional-social support, according to its definition, that can possibly contribute to mediating the effect of a stressor (i.e. work-life conflict) on occupational stress.

2.4.3. *Emotional-Social Support Elements*

(a) Emotionally supportive interpersonal relationships

Emotional-social support indicates that one's presence, opinions and feelings are accepted by others, which in the context of the workplace, resonates with constructive interpersonal relationships between employees, their colleagues, and managers (Moon et al., 2014). An emotional-supportive interpersonal relationship creates a feeling of belonging, which often creates positive outcomes that are emotionally rewarding (Elreda et al., 2019). Therefore, when an employee feels overwhelmed by work or personal-related challenges, emotionally supportive interpersonal relationships with a colleague and/or a manager, can offer a platform of acceptance, compassion, and a sense of being connected and supported. Accordingly, this study argues that emotionally supportive relationships with colleagues and managers can mitigate the experience of occupational stress.

Emotionally supportive behaviours demonstrated by managers and colleagues can be classified as positive, reassuring, comforting, verbal, or non-verbal communication, which ultimately aims to lessen employees' stress (Dasgupta et al., 2013). Moreover, these types of behaviours, which include verbal and non-verbal communication, are symbolic of genuine concern, assurance, and empathy (Jain & Cooper, 2012; Pavlovich & Krahnke, 2012).

Furthermore, for an employee to view any interpersonal relationship as being emotionally supportive there must be a sense of perceived fairness (Johansen et al., 2016). An employer who can resolve conflicts at work in a way that is fair, will generate trust and respect from their employees and ultimately create an environment for employees to feel safe and emotionally supported (Walker & Hamilton, 2011). Additionally, Jiang et al. (2017) found that a supportive organisational culture that encourages supportive interpersonal relationships should be grounded in fair treatment, as it incorporates trust and mutual respect.

It follows that employees will be inclined to seek and utilize emotional-social support from their colleagues and managers in a work environment where all employees are treated in a consistent way (Gosh, 2018). Ultimately, employees will be more likely to communicate and report sources of occupational stress in an environment where fair treatment is valued and expected (Louis & Murphy, 2017). Therefore, the study's proposed mediating variable embodies the quality of an interpersonal relationship that is rooted in fair treatment.

(b) Affirmative, respectful, and constructive communication

It is evident in all its definitions, that emotional-social support is closely related to the concept of connectedness (Turki et al., 2018). Therefore, emotional-social support can be viewed as a central part of interpersonal relationships. For any form of social support to be enabled, even in a platonic work relationship, a critical requirement is constructive communication (Adigwe & Okoro, 2016). The concept of constructive communication can be described as "verbal and non-verbal communication behaviour, produced to assist others perceived as needing that aid" (Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002, p. 374).

However, the effectiveness of constructive communication, in fulfilling the employee's emotional need, depends on their respective interpretation of the interaction (Eisenberger et

al., 2002). Consequently, the effect of emotional-social support seems dependent on the outcomes of certain verbal or non-verbal communication or acts, and more importantly, the individual's cognition regarding those actions (Myers et al., 2018). Hence, highlighting the importance of considering different perceptions amongst men and women, which will be discussed later in the Chapter. However, Naumova and Hennessy (2018) argued that, for the perception of feeling emotionally supported, an encounter must be interpreted as having a supportive intention.

   (c) Uncertainty reduction

Furthermore, an interpersonal relationship, built on constructive communication, holds an invaluable outcome that is the reduction of uncertainty (Belavadi & Hogg, 2019). Therefore, supporting Albrecht and Adelman's definition of social support as "verbal and non-verbal communication, between recipients and providers, that reduces uncertainty about the situation, the self, the other, or the relationship, and functions to enhance the perception of personal control in one's life experience" (Albrecht & Goldsmith, 2003, p. 265). This further supports the idea that people search for human interaction to establish the significance of their life experiences (Lebois et al., 2018).

These interactions become emotionally supportive when the interaction leads to the reduction of uncertainty, relating to the circumstances as well as the relationship (Au & Ahmed, 2016). Therefore, when employees experience any source of occupational stress, a manager or colleague can offer guidance by way of interacting in a supportive, intentional way (Bacha et al., 2019), which reduces uncertainty regarding their work role. Again, it remains the receiver's perception that controls the value of the interaction, for the mitigation of uncertainty ultimately depends on the recipient's evaluation of the experience (Shu et al., 2020).

Therefore, this study will focus on an employee's perceived emotional-social support, as the perceiver's evaluation of the effectiveness of an emotionally supportive act appears to determine the effectiveness thereof. In addition, this study proposes that emotionally supportive managers and colleagues have the potential to alter an employee's experience of occupational stress. It is proposed that the fostering of an interpersonal relationship that includes constructive communication, genuine intention and a degree of uncertainty reduction might bring about a positive alteration regarding an employee's perception of the level of stress experienced. Consequently, it remains critical for organisations to incorporate these elements as part of their culture, and so the following section will explore emotional-social support in the context of an organisation.

As previously discussed, an employee spends most of the day at work and consequently organisations become a central foundation of social support as employees develop interpersonal relationships and even friendships with their colleagues or managers (Giauque et al., 2019). Several studies proved that the creation of an organisational culture where emotional connections amongst the workforce are fostered and valued, showed improved productivity, employee engagement, job satisfaction, organisational loyalty, and employee well-being (Jena et al., 2018; Nierenberg et al., 2017; Osborne et al., 2017; Zak, 2017). These highlight the criticality for adjusted organisational cultures, by way of investing in emotionally supportive interventions. When employees feel emotionally secure in their work environment, they operate more innovatively, and are inclined to take part in organisational citizenship behaviours and less likely to perform organisational deviant behaviours (Bani-Melhem et al., 2018; Javed et al., 2019).

Chiswick (2015) found that managers perceived the provision of emotional-social support as additional, while employees perceived it as crucial. Similar to the managers' and employees'

differing views regarding the provision of support, it is probable that various groups may have diverse perceptions of emotional-social support and its value as an organisational intervention (Arnold et al., 2018; Brunsting et al., 2019; Shu et al., 2020). Therefore, following the argument previously given, the need arises to investigate the notion of perceived emotional-social support.

Vangelisti (2009) believes emotional-social support from others has great potential to act as a mediator against the destructive effects of stressors, as it facilitates and enables adaptive coping. However, it is known that some groups might possess different perspectives of emotional-social support and its effectiveness (Jacobson et al., 2017). Therefore, it is possible that emotional-social support can benefit some groups more than others (Lakey et al, 2002). Thus, it is of great value for Industrial Psychologists, who are designing interventions for support purposes, to be mindful of the immense value that employees' perception holds (Khalifa & Rana, 2017).

In addition, the study's proposed mediating variable closely relates to the concept of perceived organisational support, which can be understood as employees' perceptions of how their organisation respects their input and care about their well-being (Brunsting et al., 2019; Shu et al., 2020). Zagenczyk et al. (2010) discovered that perceived organisational support is a similar experience to receiving social support from friends or family, though emotional-social support merely emphasises the emotional facet of this phenomenon (Kurtessis et al., 2017).

Moreover, Eisenberger et al. (2017) found that employees who report high perceived organisational support, feel respected by their managers and colleagues, which increases employee morale and performance. Nevertheless, the same study highlights the individual on the receiving end's frame of reference that influences their perception regarding the value of

support. Each employee has an emotional supportive need to be fulfilled, although some more than others. Armeli et al. (1998) performed a study on police officials and found that those officials who desired more acceptance, respect and connection arrested more drivers who were under the influence of alcohol and issued more tickets for driving over the speed limit, when they reported high perceived organisational support. Consequently, they performed more efficiently in their work environment, when their supportive needs were met (Dewe, 2004).

Conversely, stress is affected by perceived organisational support, as Eisenberger et al. (2016) found that employees with high perceived organisational support are more likely to perceive their level of stress as maintainable, whereas employees who report low perceived organisational support are inclined to perceive their stress levels as higher.

Similarly, the present study aims to examine whether employees who perceive their colleagues and managers as emotional-social supportive, can reduce their occupational stress levels. However, it is necessary to investigate the target group selected for this study, to determine their perception regarding emotional-social support in predicting the effectiveness of such an intervention (Shane, 2010). The present study ultimately focuses on gender, therefore female and male employees. Thus, a critical element of the research remains the evaluation of the two groups in terms of their perception of social support and, more importantly, emotional-social support.

A valuable starting point will be to review the available literature regarding gender and coping, to determine how frequently the two groups tend to turn to social support, incorporating emotional-social support, as a way of managing stressful circumstances.

2.5. Gender, Coping and Social Support

Social support literature proposes this construct to be significant for an individual's bodily and emotional well-being (Ginja et al., 2019; Lane et al., 2017; Stronge et al., 2019). Nonetheless, Taliaferro et al. (2019) found that social connectedness differs more by gender than any other demographic trait and therefore, the following section will investigate the role of gender in utilizing social support as a coping mechanism against stress and more importantly, their perception of emotional-social support.

Brewin et al. (2000) argues that social support has a positive influence on a person's coping capability with regard to stressful or traumatic events. They found that social support contributed to 40% of the decrease in Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder severity. Additionally, other researchers have also confirmed a positive relationship amid increased social support and survivors of a stressful event (Haden et al., 2007; Nickerson et al., 2017; Yıldırım et al., 2017), therefore showcasing the great potential social support has to offer for individuals dealing with demanding stressors that affect their mental health and overall functioning.

As previously discussed, a person's assessment of social support systems greatly determines the degree to which they will pursue and utilize their available social resources (Maselesele et al., 2013). Therefore, it is imperative to understand the individual's perception of available social support, as Haden et al. (2007) found that individuals who observe deficient social support are inclined to experience negative outcomes from a stressful event, and to report higher stress levels, problematic behaviours, and lower life satisfaction. On the other hand, those who perceived a higher degree of social support and utilized it as a way of coping, reported lower stress levels, constructive behaviours and higher life satisfaction (Shane, 2010).

It is known that women are more likely to use social support as a mechanism to cope and tend to offer more social support to others while attracting socially supportive networks more often in stressful periods (Baqutayan, 2011). Women tend to use the "tend and befriend" response that refers to nurturing actions and pursuing social support, caused by the oxytocin hormone (Olff, 2017). In contrast, men are inclined to use the "fight or flight" response, caused by adrenaline (Lee & Harley, 2012). However, not all research has shown results that are like these conventional interpretations.

Berard et al. (2012) reported that the influence of social support on maintaining healthy well-being was restricted to men, as they perceived increased levels of social support and experienced better outcomes in comparison to women. Furthermore, this study established that men were more likely to report an improvement in their general health conditions, when perceived levels of positive social support were high, while women showed no significant effect. It appears that social support has less of an impact on women's improved health consequences or bodily function and that other forms of support like self-care capacity tend to have a stronger impact on their well-being. Consequently, this study found that social support is supposedly more effective in improving the well-being of men, rather than that of women.

Furthermore, Silk et al. (2009) established that the majority of women have more social networks, therefore seeking and possibly receiving more social support than men. However, McLaughlin et al. (2010) confirmed that men are inclined to preserve close relationships with fewer individuals, while women perceive many social connections as essential. Watson (2012) explains that women are inclined to foster larger groups of social connections, while men prefer smaller groups, but that does not necessarily imply that they are receiving less

social support. It therefore comes down to the value of support received and the support seeker's perception thereof, as opposed to the number of social networks.

Also, the abovementioned studies contribute to the contradiction of outcomes in previous research, for social support has a positive relationship with enhanced health conditions (Berard et al., 2012), though it is still unclear as to which gender benefits more. Furthermore, social support remains an adaptive coping mechanism since it enhances the individual's well-being and does not lead to further destruction thereof, as with maladaptive coping mechanisms (Banerjee et al., 2017). However, the present study specifically focuses on the emotional type of social support, therefore the following section will review the available research regarding gender difference regarding perceived emotional-social support.

2.6.   Perceived Emotional-Social Support and Gender

Soman et al. (2016) found that there are indeed gender variations in perceived social support, in all its forms, which can be attributed to social practices and roles related to gender. According to the apparent social norm, women are inclined to showcase their emotions and feelings, while men tend to obscure theirs (Edgell et al., 2013). This can also be linked with social expectations and stereotypes that expect men to suppress their emotions, for expressing their emotions will negatively influence their masculinity and will ultimately be interpreted as being weak (Silk et al.,2009).

Anderson and McCormack (2018) support the fact that social norms expect men to prove their masculinity, which includes being tough, avoiding weaknesses, restricting, or hiding emotions and the need to be emotionally supported. Conversely, society accepts that women are more emotionally inclined and attributes their emotional reactions to possible hormonal fluctuations (Toffoletto et al., 2014). Thus, gendered stereotypes, social norms and

expectations anticipate that men are able to cope with less emotional support than women, therefore influencing men's tendency not to voice their need or desire to be emotionally supported (Hearn & Morgan, 2014).

Furthermore, a study done by Lu et al. (2016) regarding injured student athletes found that female athletes desired and valued significantly more emotional support from their trainer during their recovery period than the male athletes. The female athletes anticipated to receive more emotional support from their trainer, than the male athletes. However, Deng et al. (2016) reports that some results may be obscured, as they found that men have stronger emotional experiences, however, women just have a stronger expression of their emotions. In other words, women are more inclined to express their emotional needs and experiences, while men internalise those emotional needs and suppress them. Again, this could be due to gender-related societal norms and expectations.

Additionally, Li et al. (2015) investigated how men and women vary in terms of perceived social support, including emotional-social support, as a coping mechanism. They found that, compared to men, women showed lower levels of utilizing emotional-social support to cope. These results seem to be contradictory to existing research, which shows that women, more often than men, utilize emotional-social support structures (Edgell et al., 2013; Joo et al., 2020; Whiteman et al., 2013). However, these apparently contradictory results may be due to other variables used in the studies. Thus, exclaiming the need for gender-related studies regarding emotional-social support, and coping with work-related stressors. Again, the contradictory results and obvious gaps in the South African literature ultimately support the need for further research.

2.7.   The Present Study

The preceding sections have focused on the roles of work-life conflict and social support in employees' experiences of occupational stress. We argue that work-life conflict affects occupational stress so that increased work-life conflict leads to increased occupational stress. We also argue that work-life conflict affects employees' experiences of social support in the workplace to the extent that increased work-life conflict may lead to reduced levels of social support. In turn, social support also affects occupational stress to the degree that reduced social support leads to increased occupational stress. From this perspective, we argue that social support serves as a mediator on the effect of work-life conflict on occupational stress. We expect that this mediating effect will be partial (i.e. the effect of work-life conflict on occupational stress is not fully transmitted via social support).

More formally, we hypothesise that (a) work-life conflict has a direct effect on occupational stress, (b) work-life conflict has a direct effect on social support, (c) social support has a direct effect on occupational stress, and therefore (d) work-life conflict has an additional indirect effect on occupational stress via social support (see Figure 1.1 on p. 28). We also examine whether the proposed mediation model functions in the same way for men and women. More specifically, we examine whether each of the effects stated in the previous paragraph are invariant across men and women.

CHAPTER 3

METHOD

The following Chapter introduces the study's participants as well as the selected instrument that was utilized to measure the three latent variables. A concise overview of the applied procedure is presented, followed by the chosen method of analysis. The Chapter concludes with the study's ethical considerations, to ensure that the techniques chosen to perform this study, along with the received data, was meticulously considered and used in a way that is valid, reliable and fair.

3.1. Participants

The present study made use of an archival data set that is maintained by JvR and Associates. The dataset included 2097 working adults (825 self-identified women and 1272 self-identified men) who have completed the Sources of Work Stress Inventory. These persons completed the Sources of Work Stress Inventory in organisational contexts for reasons such as organisational development, health surveys, and organisational culture surveys. The data set included participants across the four major ethnic groups in South Africa including: Black (537), White (811), Asian/Indian (116) and Mixed ethnic origin (156), while 477 participants chose to not disclose their ethnic origin. Note that the archival data set only contains information on self-identified male and female participants, hence the presents study did not deliberately exclude the option of non-binary gender groups to identify as such or to participate in the presented research.

3.2. Instruments

The Sources of Work Stress Inventory was designed to measure subjectively experienced occupational stress and to identify the sources thereof. The instrument comprises of two segments: (a) The General Work Stress Scale and (b) the Sources of Work Stress Scales which ultimately present eight potential sources of occupational stress (de Bruin et al., 2005). This study utilizes the General Work Stress Scale and two of the Sources of Work Stress Scales. Moreover, our study selected the General Work Stress Scale to measure the dependent variable, occupational stress, while the Work-Home Interface Scale was used to measure the focal independent variable, work-life conflict, and the Relationships Scale to measure the proposed mediating variable that is emotional-social support.

3.2.1. General Work Stress Scale

The General Work Stress Scale is a concise self-report measure of an individual's general level of experienced work-related stress, therefore serving as a measure of the present study's dependent variable, occupational stress. The 9-item General Work Stress Scale requests participants to respond on a five-point Likert-type Scale, indicating how often the content of the item applies to them. The response categories include (1) Never, (2) Rarely, (3) Sometimes, (4) Often, and (5) Always. Higher scores indicate the presence of occupational stress, whilst low scores indicate low occupational stress levels. De Bruin et al. (2005) reported satisfactory reliability coefficients for the General Work Stress Scale ($\alpha = 0.92$).

3.2.2. Work-Home Interface Scale

The Work-Home Interface Scale of the Sources of Work Stress Inventory was used to measure work-life conflict. The scale consists of 7 items. Each item is presented as a statement and participants respond on a five-point Likert-type Scale with response categories ranging from: (1) none at all, (2) very little, (3) some, (4) quite a lot, to (5) very much. Higher

scores indicate the presence of role conflict resulting in occupational stress, as the demands of work and family are mutually discordant, so that addressing the needs in one, directly makes it challenging to address the other. This represents the presence of work-life conflict, whilst lower scores evidently relate to the absence of experienced role conflict.

De Bruin et al. (2005) reported satisfactory reliability coefficients for the Work-Home Interface Scale (α = 0.86). In addition, they reported satisfactory fit of responses to the scale with the Rasch rating scale model. De Bruin et al. reported a correlation (*r*) of 0.42 between the Work-Home Interface Scale and the General Work Stress Scale. These results support the construct validity of the Work-Home Interface Scale.

3.2.3. Relationships Scale

The Relationships Scale of the Sources of Work Stress Inventory was developed to measure the stress experienced by an individual as a result of having poor interpersonal relationships with colleagues and superiors, as well as being subjected to interpersonal abuse (de Bruin et al., 2005). Hence, this scale measures lacking emotional-social support, as this study defines emotional-social support as supportive interpersonal relationships amongst employees, their colleagues and managers, that is built on a firm foundation of respectful, affirmative communication and fair treatment that fosters a sense of trust and acceptance, to ultimately generate the presence of emotional safety at work.

The scale consists of 11 items. Each item is presented as a statement and participants respond on a five-point Likert-type Scale with response categories ranging from: (1) none at all, (2) very little, (3) some, (4) quite a lot, to (5) very much. Consequently, higher scores on the scale indicate that relationships are a source of stress, and that interpersonal relationships with colleagues and supervisors are poor. In this respect, higher scores indicate lacking emotional-social support, whereas lower scores indicate adequate emotional-social support.

De Bruin et al. (2005) reported satisfactory reliability coefficients for the Relationships Scale ($\alpha = 0.93$). In addition, they reported satisfactory fit of responses to the scale with the Rasch rating scale model. De Bruin et al. reported a correlation (r) of 0.37 between the Relationships Scale and the General Work Stress Scale. These results support the construct validity of the Relationships Scale.

In addition, joint factor analysis of the General Work Stress Scale and the Sources of Work Stress Scales supplied additional support for its construct validity. Overall, the acquired factor composition was portrayed as psychologically meaningful and psychometrically fitting. The reliabilities of the acquired scales were homogeneously high, which provided additional support for the psychometric capability of the appointed instrument to measure the study's latent variables.

3.3. Procedure

The present study acquired previously captured data of the Sources of Work Stress Inventory (de Bruin et al., 2005), hence utilizing archival data to gain statistical power. However, it was only necessary to employ data related to four aspects of the data set: Gender, General Work Stress Scale (9 items); Work-Home Interface Scale (7 items) and the Relationships Scale (11 items). The data is maintained by the publisher, namely JvR and Associates, and permission was obtained from the publisher of the Sources of Work Stress Inventory to employ the archival data set.

Subsequently, a mediation model was fitted to the data set, to answer the following research questions: (a) Does work-life conflict have a direct effect on occupational stress, and is this effect the same for men and women?; (b) Does work-life conflict have an effect on emotional-social support, and is this effect the same for men and women?; (c) Does

emotional-social support have an effect on occupational stress, and is this effect the same for men and women?; and finally (d) Does perceived emotional-social support mediate the effect of work-life conflict on occupational stress, and is this effect the same for men and women?

3.4. Analysis

The present study included three latent variables of interest, namely work-life conflict (WLC), occupational stress (OS) and emotional-social support (ESS). The proposed relations between these three variables are illustrated in the mediation model presented in Chapter 1 as Figure 1.1. For convenience, this figure is repeated below as Figure 3.1. The study also included a categorical manifest variable that is not explicitly included in Figure 3.1, namely gender. In particular, the study examined whether the proposed mediation model is invariant across men and women.

Figure 3.1

The Mediating Effect of Perceived Emotional-Social Support in the Relationship between Work-Life Conflict and Occupational Stress
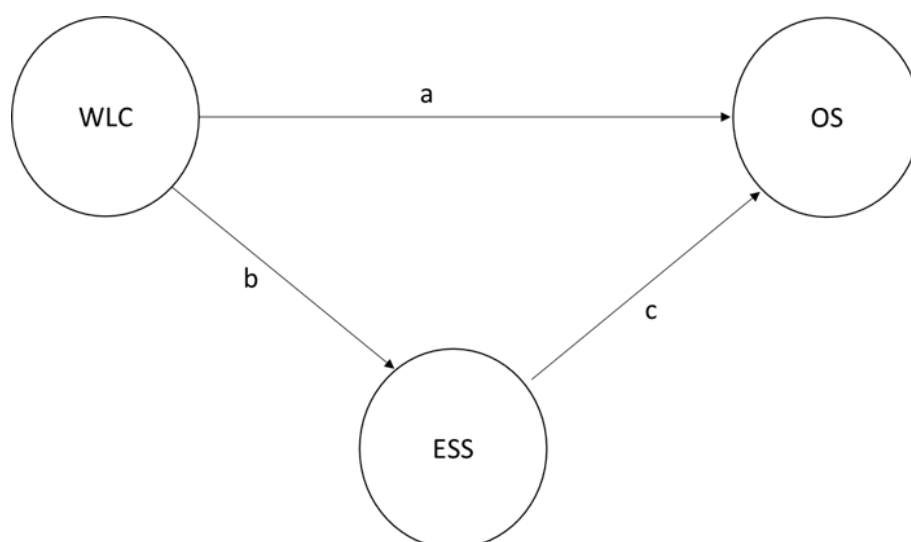
The analysis focused on (a) examining the psychometric properties of the scales representing the latent variables namely the Work-Home Interface-, Relationships-, and General Work Stress Scales; b) fitting the mediation model to the manifest data using structural equation modelling; c) evaluating whether a mediation process is present; and d) testing whether the parameters of the model are invariant across men and women to ultimately answer the following research questions: (a) Does work-life conflict have a direct effect on occupational stress, and is this effect the same for men and women?; (b) Does work-life conflict have an effect on emotional-social support, and is this effect the same for men and women?; (c) Does emotional-social support have an effect on occupational stress, and is this effect the same for men and women?; and finally (d) Does perceived emotional-social support mediate the effect of work-life conflict on occupational stress, and is this effect the same for men and women?

With regard to the psychometric properties, each of the three scales was subjected to confirmatory factor analysis and tests of measurement invariance. The mediation model was evaluated with reference to Baron and Kenny's (1986) guidelines. In particular, the emphasis was whether the indirect path of work-life conflict on occupational stress (via emotional-social support) was statistically and practically significant, while the direct path of work-life conflict on occupational stress was controlled for. Finally, the structural invariance of the mediation model across men and women was evaluated by comparison of the fit of a model where the structural coefficients were freely estimated and a model where the coefficients were constrained to equality across the two groups. A lack of substantive deterioration in the fit of the constrained model was interpreted as support for the invariance of the mediation model across gender.

Standard fit statistics, including the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), Comparative Fit Indices (CFI), Tucker Lewis Index (TLI), and standardised Root Mean

Square Residual (SRMR) was used to evaluate the fit of the measurement and structural models. The model comparison was emphasised by the Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC). Preference was given to the model with the smallest BIC value. In addition, the model comparison was considered against the difference of the CFI across models and a difference < .01 was taken to indicate substantively equivalent fit. All analyses were conducted in Lavaan, which is a structural equation modelling package in *R*.

3.5.   Ethical Considerations

This study utilized archival data retrieved by the Sources of Work Stress Inventory instrument, where all the participants gave informed consent for their responses to be used for research purposes. Any information that could be used to identify individual participants was removed from the data set by the distributors (JvR and Associates), which ensured the anonymity of the participants. The data was used for research purposes only.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

In this Chapter the results of the study are presented and discussed with reference to the aim of the research, which was to investigate gender invariance of the mediating effect of perceived emotional-social support (ESS) in the relationship between work-life conflict (WLC) and occupational stress (OS). The results were structured in such a way as to answer the study's secondary research questions: (a) Does work-life conflict have a direct effect on occupational stress, and is this effect the same for men and women?; (b) Does work-life conflict have an effect on emotional-social support, and is this effect the same for men and women?; (c) Does emotional-social support have an effect on occupational stress, and is this effect the same for men and women? In addition, these secondary research questions ultimately support and underpin the primary research question of the study: (d) Does perceived emotional-social support mediate the effect of work-life conflict on occupational stress, and is this effect the same for men and women?

The analysis of the results includes an examination of psychometric properties of the three latent variables as represented by work-life conflict, occupational stress, and emotional-social support; fitting the mediation model to the manifest data using structural equation modelling; evaluating whether a mediation process is present; and testing whether the relations are invariant across men and women. Furthermore, standard fit statistics, including the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), Comparative Fit Indices (CFI), Tucker Lewis Index (TLI) and standardised Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) was used to evaluate the fit of the measurement and structural models. The model comparison emphasised the Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC) and preference was given to the model with the

smallest BIC value. In addition, the model comparison considered the difference of the CFI across models (a difference < .01 was taken to indicate substantively equivalent fit). All analyses were conducted in Lavaan, which is a structural equation modelling package in R.

Moreover, the archival data obtained from the Sources of Work Stress Inventory were divided in two sets, being the calibration and validation sample. The data analysis was performed on both samples to gain statistical power by proving that the results obtained are consistent and stable, and not merely owing to chance. This allowed the study's findings to be more dependable, due to the valid and reliable statistical results observed.

Firstly, the data analysis of the calibration sample is showcased with the relevant results obtained, followed by the similar procedure for the validation sample and, finally, of the total sample. It should be noted that, in the present section, the study's variables are referred to as their representative factor name in the measurement instrument (Sources of Work Stress Inventory). Hence, emotional-social support is referred to as relationships (Note that relationships is synonymous to lacking emotional-social support), while work-life conflict is named work-home interface, and finally occupational stress is called general work stress.

4.1.   Descriptive Statistics for Calibration Sample

This section provides correlations and descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) of the General Work Stress Items, Work-Home Interface items and the Relationships items, for both men and women respectively.

4.1.1.   Correlation Matrix and Descriptive Statistics for General Work Stress

Table 4.1 summarises the inter-correlations, means and standard deviations of the nine General Work Stress items for men and women. The correlations of the items for men were

positive and ranged from moderately strong (gen3 and gen7, $r = 0.42$) to strong (gen1 and gen2, $r = 0.72$). A similar pattern was observed for the women, where the correlations ranged from moderately strong (gen3 and gen9, $r = 0.43$) to strong (gen1 and gen2, $r = 0.76$).

The item means of the men ranged from a low of 1.89 for item 8 to a high of 2.61 for item 7. This was mirrored in the data of the women, where the item means ranged from a low of 1,96 for item 8 to a high of 2.58 for item 1. For both groups, the standard deviations of the 9 items were similar in size. For men the standard deviations ranged from 0.90 for item 7 to 1.11 for item 7, whereas for women it ranged from 0.92 for item 5 to 1.12 item 4.

Table 4.1

Correlations and Descriptive Statistics of the General Work Stress Items for Men and Women (Calibration Sample)

	gen1	gen2	gen3	gen4	gen5	gen6	gen7	gen8	gen9
gen1	1.00	0.72	0.57	0.47	0.50	0.56	0.47	0.60	0.52
gen2	0.76	1.00	0.58	0.54	0.53	0.62	0.50	0.69	0.56
gen3	0.59	0.64	1.00	0.51	0.47	0.55	0.42	0.57	0.43
gen4	0.53	0.54	0.57	1.00	0.52	0.55	0.63	0.52	0.52
gen5	0.49	0.51	0.48	0.56	1.00	0.69	0.52	0.60	0.53
gen6	0.54	0.59	0.51	0.56	0.67	1.00	0.54	0.66	0.57
gen7	0.52	0.54	0.53	0.64	0.57	0.59	1.00	0.54	0.50
gen8	0.56	0.65	0.55	0.55	0.54	0.64	0.58	1.00	0.59
gen9	0.52	0.53	0.43	0.49	0.53	0.55	0.48	0.54	1.00
M_{men}	2.51	2.03	2.05	2.33	2.19	2.12	2.61	1.89	2.12
SD_{men}	1.04	1.05	1.02	1.10	0.90	0.91	1.11	1.00	1.02
M_{women}	2.58	2.18	2.23	2.34	2.14	2.18	2.53	1.96	2.17
SD_{women}	1.01	1.08	1.08	1.12	0.92	0.94	1.08	1.00	1.02

Note. Correlations of men and women are above and below the diagonal, respectively.

4.1.2. Correlation Matrix of the Work-Home Interface Items

Table 4.2 summarises the inter-correlations, means and standard deviations of the seven Work-Home Interface items for men and women. The correlations of the items for men were positive and ranged from moderately strong (wh1 and wh7, $r = .25$) to strong (wh1 and wh3, $r = .75$). A similar pattern was observed for the women where the correlations ranged from moderately strong (wh1 and wh7, $r = .27$) to strong (wh1 and wh3, $r = .74$).

The item means of the men ranged from a low of 1.50 for item 7 to a high of 2.66 for item 1. This was mirrored in the data of the women, where the item means ranged from a low of 1.45 for item 7 to a high of 2.59 for item 1. For both groups, the standard deviations of the 7-items

were similar in size. For men, the standard deviations ranged from .83 for item 7 to 1.28 for item 1, whereas for women the standard deviations ranged from .85 for item 7 to 1.32 for item 1.

Table 4.2
Correlations and Descriptive Statistics of the Work-Home Interface Items for Men and Women (Calibration Sample)

	wh1	wh2	wh3	wh4	wh5	wh6	wh7
wh1	1.00	0.32	0.75	0.42	0.38	0.35	0.25
wh2	0.40	1.00	0.49	0.32	0.43	0.51	0.36
wh3	0.74	0.53	1.00	0.46	0.47	0.43	0.31
wh4	0.52	0.42	0.57	1.00	0.71	0.49	0.42
wh5	0.45	0.42	0.48	0.67	1.00	0.55	0.51
wh6	0.41	0.46	0.46	0.55	0.49	1.00	0.43
wh7	0.27	0.35	0.29	0.34	0.46	0.41	1.00
M_{men}	2.66	1.93	2.42	2.02	1.74	1.79	1.50
SD_{men}	1.28	1.21	1.21	1.16	1.04	1.02	0.83
M_{women}	2.59	1.99	2.46	2.19	1.82	1.93	1.45
SD_{women}	1.32	1.24	1.26	1.21	1.07	1.07	0.85

Note. Correlations of men and women are above and below the diagonal, respectively.

4.1.3. Correlation Matrix of the Relationships Items

Table 4.3 summarises the inter-correlations, means and standard deviations of the eight relationships items for men and women. The correlations of the items for men were positive and ranged from moderately strong (rel2 and rel6, $r = .43$) to strong (rel4 and rel5, $r = .75$). A similar pattern was observed for the women where the correlations ranged from moderately strong (rel2 and rel6, $r = .44$) to strong (rel5 and rel8, $r = .76$).

The item means of the men ranged from a low of 1.71 for item 8 to a high of 2.34 for item 3. This was mirrored in the data of the women, where the item means ranged from a low of 1.77 for item 8 to a high of 2.20 for item 3. For both groups, the standard deviations of the 8-items were similar in size. For men, the standard deviations ranged from 1.00 for item 6 to 1.60 for item 5, whereas for women the standard deviations ranged from 1.06 for item 6 to 1.28 for items 1 and 3.

Table 4.3

Correlations and Descriptive Statistics of the Relationships Items for Men and Women (Calibration Sample)

	rel1	rel2	rel3	rel4	rel5	rel6	rel7	rel8
rel1	1.00	0.72	0.73	0.69	0.69	0.48	0.60	0.59
rel2	0.70	1.00	0.70	0.75	0.65	0.43	0.61	0.54
rel3	0.73	0.66	1.00	0.70	0.66	0.54	0.67	0.59
rel4	0.64	0.73	0.68	1.00	0.75	0.53	0.68	0.64
rel5	0.70	0.66	0.70	0.73	1.00	0.54	0.65	0.71
rel6	0.47	0.44	0.50	0.49	0.55	1.00	0.67	0.66
rel7	0.60	0.61	0.62	0.68	0.69	0.63	1.00	0.68
rel8	0.61	0.58	0.61	0.62	0.76	0.64	0.73	1.00
M_{men}	2.23	1.92	2.34	1.90	1.78	1.81	2.09	1.71
SD_{men}	1.31	1.18	1.26	1.15	1.60	1.00	1.15	1.02
M_{women}	2.13	1.91	2.20	1.76	1.80	1.83	1.96	1.77
SD_{women}	1.28	1.20	1.28	1.13	1.20	1.06	1.17	1.18

Note. Correlations of men and women are above and below the diagonal, respectively.

4.2. Measurement Invariance of the General Work Stress Scale

The evaluation of the measurement invariance of the General Work Stress Scale proceeded in the following steps: (a) Separate confirmatory factor analysis of the General Work Stress Scale for men and women (a simple one-factor model was fitted), (b) in the event of unsatisfactory fit modification of the measurement model, and (c) sequential fitting of increasingly constrained measurement invariance models (using the revised measurement model as the base model).

4.2.1. Confirmatory Factor Analysis of the Baseline General Work Stress Model for Men and Women (Calibration Sample)

Table 4.4 contains the fit statistics of the baseline one-factor model of the nine General Work Stress items for men and women. Overall, the fit statistics were similar across the two groups. For both men and women, the null hypothesis of perfect fit had to be rejected: Men, S-B $\chi^2(36) = 2061.448$, $p < .001$; Women, S-B $\chi^2(36) = 1756.826$, $p < .001$. The SRMR indicated satisfactory fit for both groups, the CFI and the TLI suggested moderately good fit for both groups, but the RMSEA suggested unacceptable fit**.**

Table 4.4
Fit Statistics of the Baseline General Work Stress Model for Men and Women (Calibration Sample)

	S-B χ^2	df	p	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	90% CI		SRMR
							Lower	Upper	
Men	2061.448	36	< .001	.936	.914	.111	.096	.126	.043
Women	1756.826	36	< .001	.932	.909	.115	.096	.135	.044

Inspection of the residual covariances indicated that three clusters of items share variance above and beyond the trait of interest, namely (a) items gen1, gen2 and gen3, (b) items gen4 and gen7, and (c) items gen5 and gen6. This unmodelled variance contributed to the unsatisfactory fit. Against this background, one item from each of these clusters were retained, in addition to items 8 and 9, yielding a revised five-item General Work Stress Scale containing items gen1, gen4, gen5, gen8, and gen9.

Confirmatory factor analysis of the reduced 5-item General Work Stress Scale produced highly satisfactory fit statistics (see Table 4.5). The null hypothesis of perfect fit could not be rejected: Men, S-B $\chi^2(5)$ = 6.142, *p* = .293; Women, S-B $\chi^2(5)$ = 5.313, *p* = .379. Similarly, the CFI, TLI, RMSEA, and SRMR pointed at excellent fit for both men and women.

Table 4.5
Fit Statistics of the Revised General Work Stress Model for Men and Women (Calibration Sample)

	S-B χ^2	df	p	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	90% CI		SRMR
							Lower	Upper	
Men	6.142	5	.293	.999	.998	.021	.000	.067	.013
Women	5.313	5	.379	.999	.999	.015	.000	.087	.017

Note. The revised measurement model contains five items, namely gen1, gen4, gen5, gen8, and gen9.

4.2.2. *Measurement Invariance of the Revised General Work Stress Model across Men and Women*

Tables 4.6 and 4.7 summarises the fit of the five increasingly constrained models of measurement invariance across the men and women. Chi-square difference tests in Table 4.6 indicate that none of the imposed constraints led to a statistically significant deterioration in fit ($p > .05$). In addition, the lowest BIC value was obtained for the most constrained model (equal latent means, error variances, intercepts, and loadings), which also indicates that the added constraints did not lead to weaker fit.

Table 4.6
Bayesian Information Criteria and Chi-square Statistics across Five Measurement Invariance Levels of the Revised General Work Stress Model (Calibration Sample)

Level	BIC	χ^2	df	$\Delta\chi^2$	Δdf	Δp
Configural	12796	15.0	10			
Weak	12771	17.8	14	2.9	4	.58
Strong	12749	23.7	18	6.0	4	.20
Strict	12718	26.9	23	2.82	5	.73
Means	12711	27.3	24	.41	1	.52

Table 4.7, which summarises the results of comparisons of the CFI and RMSEA across different levels of measurement invariance, also indicates that the added constraints across the different levels of measurement invariance did not lead to a meaningful reduction in fit. Overall, the results indicate that the reduced General Work Stress Scale measures the same trait in the same measurement units with equal precision for both men and women. Moreover, it appears that the standings of the men and the women on the trait are equivalent (i.e. men and women reported equal levels of general work stress).

Table 4.7

Comparative Fit Index and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation across Five Levels of Measurement Invariance of the Revised General Work Stress Model (Calibration Sample)

Level	CFI	ΔCFI	RMSEA	ΔRMSEA
Configural	.999		.019	
Weak	1.000	-.001	.010	.009
Strong	.999	.001	.017	-.007
Strict	1.000	-.001	.004	.013
Means	1.000	.000	.000	.004

4.3. Measurement Invariance of the Work-Home Interface Scale

The evaluation of the measurement invariance of the Work-Home Interface Scale proceeded in the following steps: (a) Separate confirmatory factor analysis of the Work-Home Interface Scale for men and women (a simple one-factor model was fitted), (b) in the event of unsatisfactory fit modification of the measurement model, and (c) sequential fitting of increasingly constrained measurement invariance models (using the revised measurement model as the base model).

4.3.1. *Confirmatory Factor Analysis of the Baseline Work-Home Interface Model for Men and Women*

Table 4.8 contains the fit statistics of the baseline one-factor model of the seven Work-Home Interface items for men and women. Overall, the fit statistics were similar across the two groups. For both men and women, the null hypothesis of perfect fit had to be rejected: Men, S-B $\chi^2(14) = 257.77$, $p < .001$; Women, S-B $\chi^2(14) = 104.50$, $p < .001$. The SRMR indicated moderate to weak fit for both groups, similarly the CFI and the TLI suggested moderate to weak fit for both groups, however, the RMSEA suggested unacceptable fit.

Table 4.8

Fit Statistics of the Baseline Work-Home Interface Model for Men and Women (Calibration Sample)

	S-B χ^2	df	p	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	90% CI		SRMR
							Lower	Upper	
Men	257.77	14	< .001	.774	.662	.224	.200	.248	.090
Women	104.50	14	< .001	.864	.796	.170	.140	.201	.065

Both the absolute and comparative fit indices suggest the elimination of weak items (wh1, 2, 5 and 6) to produce an improved model that will better fit the data. Table 4.9 below showcases the fit statistics of the revised four-item Work-Home Interface Scale containing items wh1, wh2, wh5, and wh6. Confirmatory factor analysis of the reduced four-item Work-Home Interface Scale produced highly satisfactory fit statistics (see Table 4.9). The null hypothesis of perfect fit could not be rejected: Men, S-B $\chi^2(2) = 2.898$, $p = .235$; Women, S-B $\chi^2(2) = 1.271$, $p = .530$. Similarly, the CFI, TLI, RMSEA, and SRMR pointed to excellent fit for both men and women.

Table 4.9

Fit Statistics of the Revised Work-Home Interface Model for Men and Women (Calibration Sample)

	S-B χ^2	df	p	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	90% CI		SRMR
							Lower	Upper	
Men	2.898	2	.235	.997	.992	.034	.000	.076	.015
Women	1.271	2	.530	1.000	1.007	.000	.000	.108	.012

Note. The revised measurement model contains four items, namely wh1, wh2, wh5, and wh6.

4.3.2. *Measurement Invariance of the Revised Work-Home Interface Model for Men and Women*

Tables 4.10 and 4.11 summarises the fit of the five increasingly constrained models of measurement invariance across the men and women. Chi-square difference tests in Table 4.10 indicate that none of the imposed constraints led to a statistically significant deterioration in fit ($p > .05$). Additionally, the lowest BIC value was obtained for the most constrained model

(equal latent means, error variances, intercepts, and loadings), which also indicates that the added constraints did not lead to weaker fit.

Table 4.10
Bayesian Information Criteria and Chi-square Statistics across Five Measurement Invariance Levels for the Revised Work-Home Interface Model (Calibration Sample)

Level	BIC	χ^2	df	$\Delta\chi^2$	Δdf	Δp
Configural	11899	6.47	4			
Weak	11885	12.33	7	4.78	3	.19
Strong	11870	18.18	10	5.95	3	.11
Strict	11848	24.49	14	3.93	4	.42
Means	11843	26.58	15	2.09	1	.15

Table 4.11, which summarises the results of comparisons of the CFI and RMSEA across different levels of measurement invariance also indicates that the added constraints did not lead to a meaningful reduction in fit. Generally, the results indicate that the reduced Work-Home Interface Scale measures the same trait in the same measurement units with equal precision for men and women. Moreover, it appears that the standings of the men and the women on the trait are equivalent (i.e., men and women reported equal levels of work-home interface).

Table 4.11
Comparative Fit Index and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation across Five Levels of Measurement Invariance for the Revised Work-Home Interface Model (Calibration Sample)

	CFI	ΔCFI	RMSEA	ΔRMSEA
Configural	1.000		.012	
Weak	.997	.002	.026	-.014
Strong	.994	.003	.033	-.006
Strict	.994	.000	.027	.005
Means	.992	.001	.029	-.002

4.4. Measurement Invariance of the Relationships Scale

The evaluation of the measurement invariance of the Relationships Scale proceeded in the following steps: (a) Separate confirmatory factor analysis of the Relationships Scale for men and women (a simple one-factor model was fitted), (b) in the event of unsatisfactory fit

modification of the measurement model, and (c) sequential fitting of increasingly constrained measurement invariance models (using the revised measurement model as the base model).

4.4.1. *Confirmatory Factor Analysis of the Relationships Model for Men and Women*

Table 4.12 contains the fit statistics of the baseline one-factor model of the eight Relationships items for men and women. Largely, the fit statistics were similar across the two groups. For both men and women, the null hypothesis of perfect fit had to be rejected: Men, S-B $\chi^2(20) = 167.184$, $p < .001$; Women, S-B $\chi^2(20) = 103.709$, $p < .001$. The SRMR indicated satisfactory fit for both groups, the CFI and the TLI suggested moderately good fit for both groups, but the RMSEA suggested unacceptable fit.

Table 4.12
Fit Statistics of the Baseline Relationships Model for Men and Women (Calibration Sample)

	S-B χ^2	*df*	*p*	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	90% CI Lower	Upper	SRMR
Men	167.184	20	<.001	.923	.893	.152	.131	.174	.052
Women	103.709	20	<.001	.935	.909	.138	.113	.165	.046

Both the absolute and comparative fit indices suggest the elimination of weak items (rel5, rel6, rel7 and rel8) to produce an improved model that will better fit the data. Table 4.13. below showcases the fit statistics of the revised four-item Relationships Scale containing items rel1, rel2, rel3, and rel4. Confirmatory factor analysis of the reduced four-item Relationships Scale produced highly satisfactory fit statistics (see Table 4.13). The null hypothesis of perfect fit was rejected: Men, S-B $\chi^2(2) = 8.271$, $p = .016$; Women, S-B $\chi^2(2) = 12.081$, $p = .002$. However, the CFI, TLI and SRMR pointed to excellent fit for both men and women. The RMSEA, however, remains a poor fit. Nevertheless, the comparative fit indices seemed to suggest an improved model that better fits the data, by way of eliminating items rel1, 2, 3 and 4.

Table 4.13

Fit Statistics of the Revised Relationships Model for Men and Women (Calibration Sample)

	S-B χ^2	df	p	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	90% CI Lower	Upper	SRMR
Men	8.271	2	.016	.993	.980	.094	.034	.164	.014
Women	12.081	2	.002	.980	.939	.158	.080	.248	.023

Note. The revised measurement model contains four items, namely rel1, rel2, rel3, and rel4.

4.4.2. *Measurement Invariance of the Revised Relationships Model for Men and Women*

Tables 4.14 and 4.15 summarise the fit of the five increasingly constrained models of measurement invariance across the men and women. Chi-square difference tests in Table 4.14 indicate that none of the imposed constraints led to a statistically significant deterioration in fit ($p > .05$). In addition, the lowest BIC value was obtained for the most constrained model (equal latent means, error variances, intercepts, and loadings), which also indicates that the added constraints did not lead to weaker fit.

Table 4.14

Bayesian Information Criteria and Chi-square Statistics across Five Measurement Invariance Levels for the Revised Relationships Model (Calibration Sample)

Level	BIC	χ^2	df	$\Delta\chi^2$	Δdf	Δp
Configural	10699	38.0	4			
Weak	10679	39.0	7	.94	3	.816
Strong	10655	45.6	10	6.74	3	.081
Strict	10641	49.4	14	1.83	4	.768
Means	10636	51.1	15	1.77	1	.183

Table 4.15, which summarises the results of comparisons of the CFI and RMSEA across different levels of measurement invariance also indicates that the added constraints did not lead to a meaningful reduction in fit. Taken as a whole, the results indicate that the reduced Relationships Scale measures the same trait in the same measurement units with equal precision for men and women. Moreover, it appears that the standings of the men and the

women on the trait are equivalent (i.e. men and women reported equal levels of relationships).

Table 4.15

Comparison of the Comparative Fit Index and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation across Five Levels of Measurement Invariance for the Revised Relationships Model (Calibration Sample)

	CFI	ΔCFI	RMSEA	ΔRMSEA
Configural	.988		.123	
Weak	.989	-.001	.089	.033
Strong	.988	.001	.079	.010
Strict	.990	-.002	.062	.017
Means	.989	.001	.061	.001

4.5. Measurement Invariance of the Complete Measurement Model

The subsequent section will combine all three of the revised and constrained measurement invariance models, in the form of the complete measurement model for men and women, to depict whether the complete model proves to have good fit.

4.5.1. Confirmatory Factor Analysis of the Complete Measurement Model for Men and Women

Table 4.16 contains the fit statistics of the complete measurement model for men and women. Overall, the fit statistics were similar across the two groups. For both men and women, the null hypothesis of perfect fit had to be rejected: Men, S-B $\chi^2(62) = 162.142$, $p < .001$; Women, S-B $\chi^2(62) = 108.463$, $p < .001$. The SRMR and RMSEA indicated satisfactory fit for both groups, the CFI and the TLI suggested a close fit for both groups.

Table 4.16

Fit Statistics of the Complete Measurement Model for Men and Women (Calibration Sample)

	χ^2	df	p	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	90% CI		SRMR
							Lower	Upper	
Men	162.142	62	< .001	.966	.958	.057	.046	.068	.056
Women	108.463	62	< .001	.974	.967	.049	.033	.064	.043

4.5.2. Measurement Invariance of the Complete Measurement Model (Calibration Sample)

Tables 4.17 and 4.18 summarises the fit of the five increasingly constrained models of measurement invariance across the men and women. Chi-square difference tests in Table 4.17 indicate that none of the imposed constraints led to a statistically significant deterioration in fit ($p > .05$). In addition, the lowest BIC value was obtained for the most constrained model (equal latent means, error variances, intercepts, and loadings), which also indicates that the added constraints did not lead to weaker fit.

Table 4.17

Bayesian Information Criteria and Chi-square Statistics across Five Measurement Invariance Levels for the Complete Measurement Model (Calibration Sample)

Level	BIC	χ^2	df	$\Delta\chi^2$	Δdf	Δp
Configural	34116	328	124			
Weak	34055	336	134	7.39	10	.688
Strong	34004	353	144	18.56	10	.046
Strict	33925	364	157	6.59	13	.922
Means	33909	369	160	5.14	3	.162

Table 4.18, which summarises the results of comparisons of the CFI and RMSEA across different levels of measurement invariance also indicates that the added constraints across the different levels of measurement invariance did not lead to a meaningful reduction in fit. Generally, the results indicate that the complete measurement model measures the same trait in the same measurement units with equal precision for men and women. Moreover, it appears that the standings of the men and the women on the traits are equivalent.

Table 4.18

Comparison of the Comparative Fit Index and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation across Five Levels of Measurement Invariance for the Complete Measurement Model (Calibration Sample)

Level	CFI	ΔCFI	RMSEA	ΔRMSEA
Configural	.969		.054	
Weak	.970	-.001	.051	.002
Strong	.968	.001	.051	.001
Strict	.970	-.002	.047	.004
Means	.970	.000	.047	.000

4.5.3. *Confirmatory Factor Analysis of the Complete Measurement Model of General Work Stress, Work-Home Interface, and Relationships for the Calibration Sample*

Figure 4.1 presents the estimated model parameters and fit statistics of the complete measurement model of general work stress, work-home interface, and relationships for the calibration sample.

Figure 4.1

Standardised Parameters and Fit Statistics of The Complete Measurement Model of Work-Home Interface, Relationships and General Work Stress in the Calibration Sample
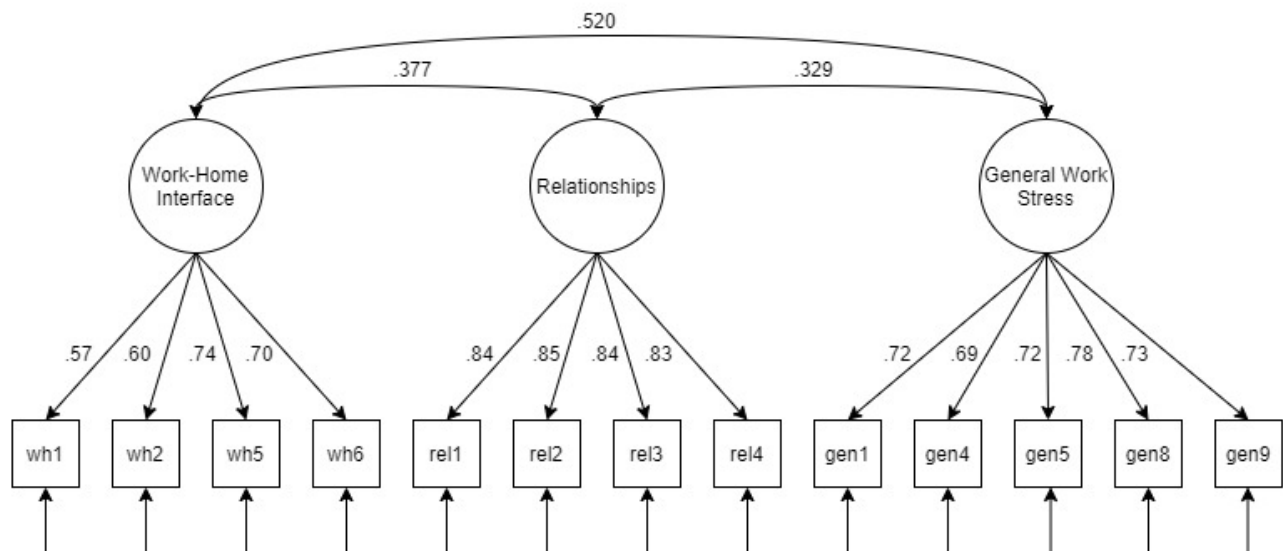
S-B χ^2	df	p	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	90% CI		SRMR
						Lower	Upper	
212.306	62	< .001	.968	.960	.055	.047	.063	.047

Whereas the null hypothesis of perfect fit had to be rejected, S-B χ^2(62) = 212.306, *p* < .001, the SRMR = .047, RMSEA = .055, CFI = .968, and TLI = .960 indicated that the degree of misfit was relatively mild and unlikely to be of substantive or practical significance.

As depicted in the information presented in Figure 4.1, it is evident that each factor was well defined, with standardised factor loadings of the items ranging from .57 (wh1 on work-home balance) to .85 (rel2 on relationships). All factor loadings were statistically significant (*p* < .001). The correlations between the three factors were statistically significant (*p* < .001) and

moderately strong, ranging from .329 (relationships and general work stress) to .520 (work-home interface and general work stress). Overall, the results provide support for the validity of the complete measurement model of general work stress, work-home interface, and relationships for the calibration sample.

4.5.4. Structural Invariance of the Mediation Model across Men and Women (Calibration Sample)

In the paragraphs that follow, the focus falls on the validity and structural invariance of the mediation model (see Figure 4.2 below), which specifies that the effect of work-home balance on general work stress is (partly) mediated by the quality of relationships (synonymous with emotional-social support) in the workplace.

The analysis focuses on the primary research question of the study: Is there a mediating effect; and is this effect the same for men and women? Three increasingly constrained mediation models were tested, namely configural invariance, weak invariance, and regression invariance. The configural invariance model specified the same structural model across both men and women but did not impose any equality constraints on the estimated parameters. The weak invariance structural model imposed the constraint of equal factor loadings across the two groups, but freely estimated the regression coefficients. Finally, the regression invariance parameter imposed the additional constraint of equal regression coefficients between the two groups.

Tables 4.19 and 4.20 summarises the fit of the three increasingly constrained models of structural invariance for the mediation model. Chi-square difference tests in Table 4.19 indicate that none of the imposed constraints led to a statistically significant deterioration in fit ($p > .05$). In addition, the lowest BIC value was obtained for the most constrained model

(regression invariance), and it therefore appears safe to favour the regression invariance model.

Table 4.19
Bayesian Information Criteria and Chi-square Statistics across Structural Invariance Levels for the Mediation Model (Calibration Sample)

Level	BIC	χ^2	df	$\Delta\chi^2$	Δdf	Δp
Configural	33705	328	124			
Weak	33693	336	134	7.39	10	.69
Regression	33691	341	137	3.59	3	.31

Table 4.20, which summarises the results of comparisons of the CFI and RMSEA across the different levels of structural invariance, also indicates that the added constraints did not lead to a meaningful reduction in fit, which again indicates that the regression invariance model is plausible.

Table 4.20
Comparative Fit Index and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation across Levels of Structural Invariance for the Mediation Model (Calibration Sample)

| Level	CFI	ΔCFI	RMSEA	ΔRMSEA
Configural	.969		.054	
Weak	.970	-.001	.051	.003
Regression	.969	.001	.051	.000

Overall, these results indicate that the factor loadings and regression coefficients of the mediation model were invariant across both the men and women. Next, the focus shifts to an evaluation of whether relationships have a mediating effect on the link (relationship) between work-home interface and general work stress.

4.5.5. *Mediation Model of General Work Stress, Work-Home Interface, and Relationships (Total Calibration Sample)*

The hypothesised mediating effect of relationships in the link between work-home interface and general work stress is depicted in Figure 4.2. Figure 4.2 also contains the estimated standardised regression coefficients of the model and a summary of the fit statistics.

Figure 4.2

Mediating Effect of Relationships in the Link Between Work-Home Interface and General Work Stress in the Calibration Sample
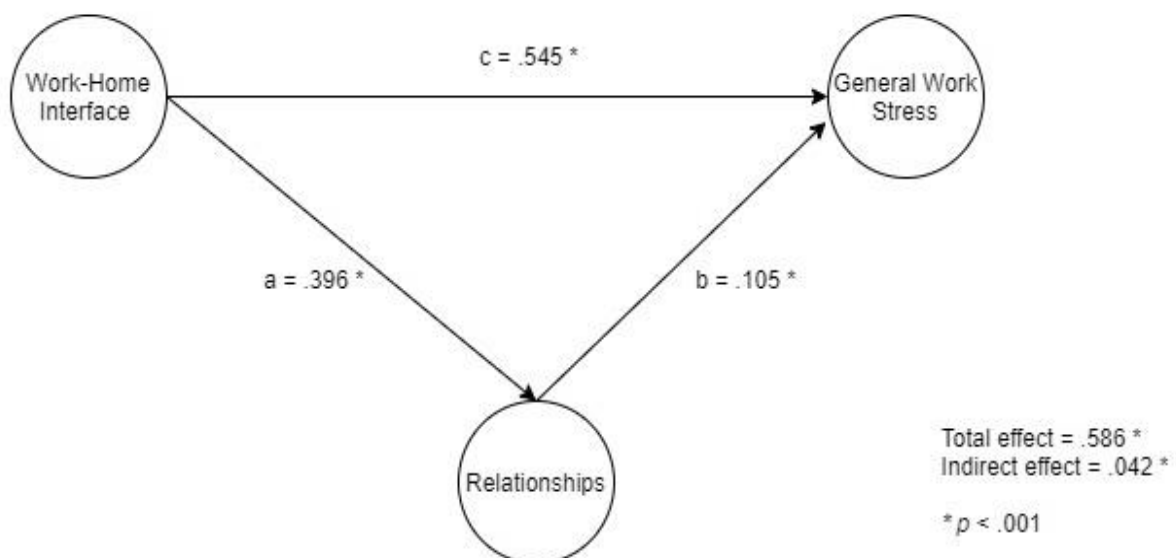
S-B χ^2	*df*	*p*	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	90% CI		SRMR
						Lower	Upper	
246.622	62	< .001	.960	.950	.062	.054	.070	.045

Note. *Effects and regression coefficients are standardised*

Moreover, the null hypothesis of perfect fit had to be rejected: S-B $\chi^2(62) = 246.622$, *p* < .001. The SRMR and RMSEA indicated relatively acceptable fit, while the CFI and the TLI showed a close fit.

As shown in Figure 4.2, the indirect effect of work-home interface on general work stress via relationships was relatively weak ($.396 \times .105 = .042$), but statistically significant ($p < .05$).

4.6. Complete Baseline Revised Measurement Model of General Work Stress, Work-Home Interface, and Relationships (Validation Sample)

Tables 4.21 and 4.22 summarise the fit of the five increasingly constrained models of measurement invariance across men and women. Chi-square difference tests in Table 4.21 indicate that none of the imposed constraints led to a statistically significant deterioration in fit up until the strict invariance model. In addition, the lowest RMSEA and BIC values were observed for the strict invariance model (i.e., equal loadings, intercepts and error terms for men and women), suggesting that this model has the best chance of being successfully replicated in future studies.

Table 4.21

Bayesian Information Criteria and Chi-square Statistics across Measurement Invariance Levels for the Complete Measurement Model (Validation Sample)

Level	BIC	χ^2	df	$\Delta\chi^2$	Δdf	Δp
Configural	34381	411	124			
Weak	34371	420	134	8.71	10	.560
Strong	34363	432	144	12.20	10	.272
Strict	34345	441	157	5.09	13	.973
Means	34536	457	160	18.88	3	.000

Table 4.22, which summarises the results of comparisons of the CFI and RMSEA across different levels of measurement invariance, indicates that the added constraints did not lead to a meaningful reduction in fit. Overall, the results indicate that the complete measurement model measures the same trait in the same measurement units with equal precision for both men and women. Moreover, it appears that the standings of the men and the women on the traits are equivalent. Thus, it is reasonable to conclude that the complete measurement model (validation sample) functions in the same way across men and women and that the scores of the two groups can be compared.

Table 4.22

Comparative Fit Index and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation across Five Levels of Measurement Invariance for the Complete Measurement Model (Validation Sample)

Level	CFI	ΔCFI	RMSEA	ΔRMSEA
Configural	.957		.064	
Weak	.957	.000	.061	.002
Strong	.957	.000	.059	.002
Strict	.959	-.002	.055	.004
Means	.957	.002	.056	-.001

4.6.1. *Confirmatory Factor Analysis of the Complete Measurement Model of General Work Stress, Work-Home Interface, and Relationships for the Validation Sample*

The following section provides information regarding a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) of the complete measurement model of general work stress, work-home interface, and relationships for the validation sample, to further investigate the fit of the complete model. Measurement invariance was found for both men and women across all three revised models, and put together for the best complete measurement model, which is shown in Figure 4.3.

Figure 4.3

Standardised Parameters and Fit Statistics of the Complete Measurement Model of Work-Home Interface, Relationships and General Work Stress in the Validation Sample
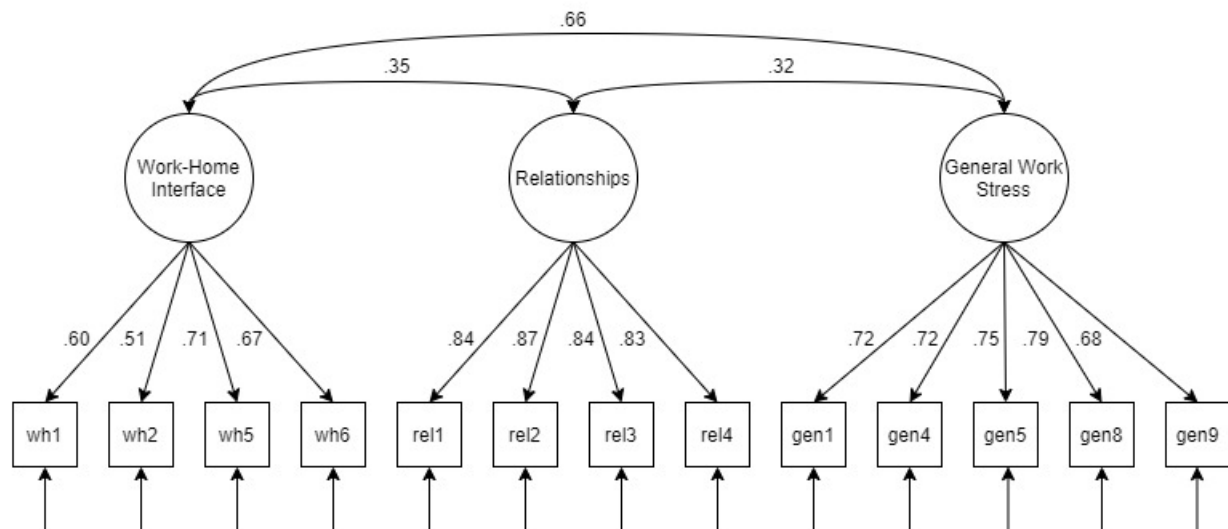
S-B χ^2	df	p	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	90% CI		SRMR
						Lower	Upper	
246.662	62	< .001	.960	.950	.062	.054	.070	.045

Figure 4.3 evidence that the strongest predictor of work-home interface is similar to the calibration sample, wh5 (.71) and the weakest of the four items is wh2 (.51), where in the calibration sample it was wh1. As also seen in the calibration sample, the strongest predictor for the relationships factor is rel2 (.87) and the weakest is rel4 (.83). Lastly, as in the calibration sample, the strongest predictor is gen8 (.79), while the weakest predictor is gen1 (.72) and gen4 (.72) for the general work stress factor.

In addition, each factor was well defined, and each item was statistically significant (*p* < .001) and a satisfactory indicator of its target factor. Furthermore, when work-home interface increases by 1 unit, relationships (synonymous with lacking emotional-social support) increase by 0.35 units and when relationships (synonymous with lacking emotional-social

support) increase by 1-unit, general work stress increases with 0.32 units. Finally, when work-home interface increases by 1-unit, general work stress increases by 0.66 units. The correlations are statistically significant ($p < .05$), therefore indicating that results are reliable.

Moreover, as in the calibration sample, the null hypothesis of perfect fit had to be rejected: S-B $\chi^2(62) = 246.622$, $p < .001$. The SRMR and RMSEA indicated relatively acceptable fit, while the CFI and the TLI showed a close fit. Consequently, the standardised parameters and fit statistics suggest that the complete measurement model, consisting of the revised general work stress, work-home interface and relationship models appear to be of good fit and resemble the output of the calibration sample. It is safe to continue with Structural Invariance Testing of the mediation model across men and women (validation sample) in the following section.

4.6.2. *Structural Invariance of the Mediation Model across Men and Women (Validation Sample)*

Tables 4.23 and 4.24 summarises the fit of the three increasingly constrained models of structural invariance for the mediation model (validation sample). Chi-square difference tests in Table 4.23 indicate that none of the imposed constraints led to a statistically significant deterioration in fit ($p > .05$). In addition, the lowest BIC value was obtained for the most constrained model, and it is safe to favour the regression model $\Delta\chi^2(3) = 2.15$, $p = .54$. Therefore, regression is present in the mediation model (validation sample) and the statistical routes are likely to be similar for both men and women.

Table 4.23
Bayesian Information Criteria and Chi-square Statistics across Structural Invariance Levels for the Mediation Model (Validation Sample)

Level	BIC	χ^2	df	$\Delta\chi^2$	Δdf	Δp
Configural	34794	411	124			
Weak	34734	420	134	8.71	10	.56
Regressions	34717	424	137	2.15	3	.54

Table 4.24, which summarises the results of comparisons of the CFI and RMSEA across different levels of structural invariance, also indicates that the added constraints did not lead to a meaningful reduction in fit, signifying that regression invariance was achieved. Ultimately, when all the indicators of fit are taken together, it appears reasonable to conclude that regression is present, and the statistical routes are the same for men and women.

Table 4.24
Comparative Fit Index and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation across Levels of Structural Invariance for the Mediation Model (Validation Sample)

Level	CFI	ΔCFI	RMSEA	ΔRMSEA
Configural	.957		.064	
Weak	.957	.000	.061	.003
Regressions	.957	.000	.060	.001

4.6.3. Mediation Model of General Work Stress, Work-Home Interface, and Relationships (Men and Women of the Validation Sample Jointly)

The mediating effect of relationships, for both men and women in the validation sample, in the link between work-home interface and general work stress, are jointly presented in Figure

Figure 4.4

Mediating Effect of Relationships in the Link Between Work-Home Interface and General Work Stress in the Validation Sample
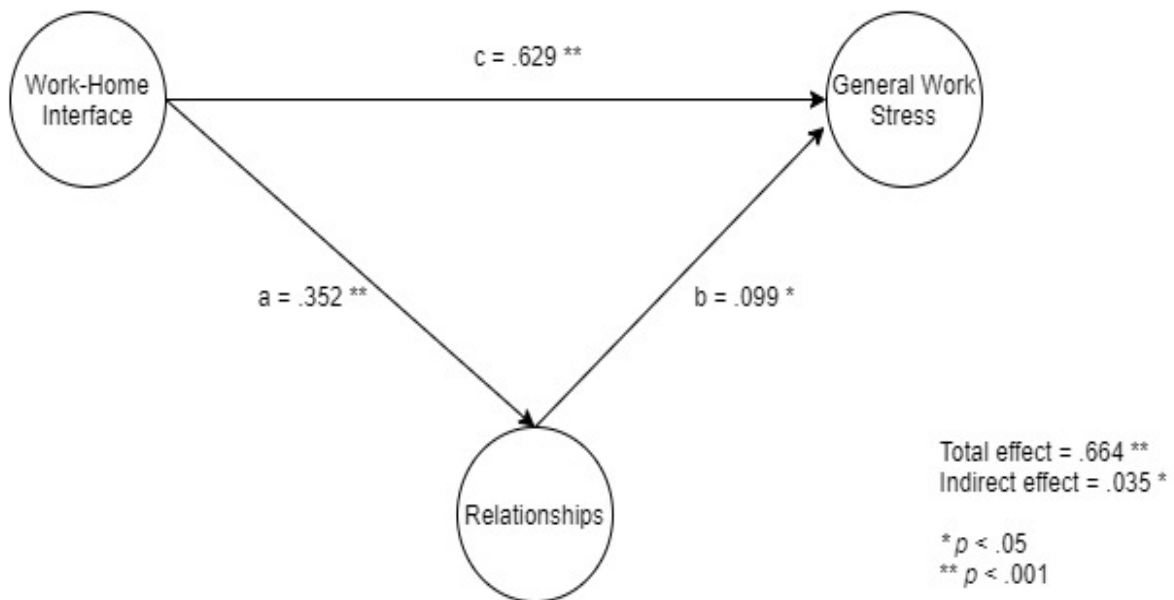
S-B χ^2	*df*	*p*	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	90% CI		SRMR
						Lower	Upper	
246.622	62	< .000	.960	.950	.062	.054	.070	.045

Note. Effects and regression coefficients are standardised

The indirect effect represents that the portion of the relationship between work-home interface and general work stress is mediated by relationships (synonymous with lacking emotional-social support), and appears to be weak (.035), but is nonetheless statistically significant (*p* < .05). Therefore, mediation is present even though it is not robust. As demonstrated in the calibration sample, it may be proved that one way to soften the effect of work-home interface on general work stress can be through an intervention that improves emotional supportive relationships amongst employees at work. Nonetheless, the null hypothesis of perfect fit had to be rejected: S-B χ^2(62) = 246.622, *p* < .000. The SRMR and RMSEA indicated relatively acceptable fit, while the CFI and the TLI showed a good fit.

The study was able to conclude, following data analysis of both the calibration and validation samples, that the presence of measurement invariance and mediation was established with both groups. Additionally, as both samples demonstrated similar results, it is evident that the results obtained are consistent and stable and not therefore due to chance. The findings of this study can therefore be deemed to be dependable, due to valid and reliable statistical results. Due to these findings, it may be reasonably argued that a mediation model of general work stress, work-home interface and relationships of the total sample, including both the calibration and validation samples for men and women, can be constructed as the final model.

4.7. Mediation Model of General Work Stress, Work-Home Interface and Relationships Total Sample (Calibration and Validation for Men and Women)

The mediating effect of relationships, in the link between work-home interface and general work stress for men and women in the total sample, are jointly presented in Figure 4.5.

Figure 4.5

Mediating Effect of Relationships in the Link Between Work-Home Interface and General Work Stress
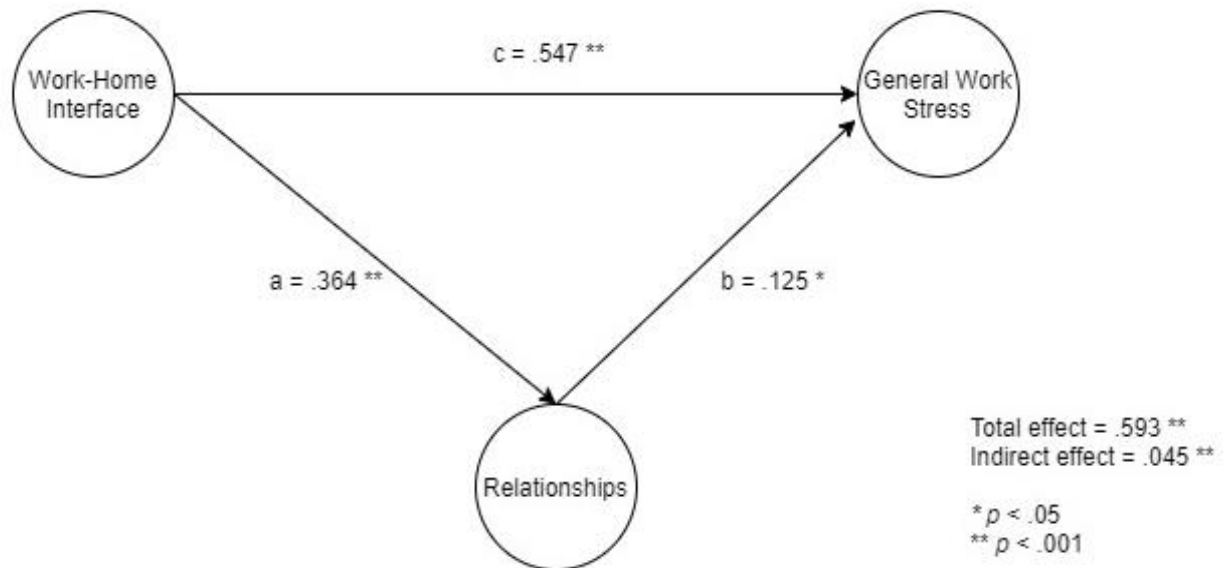
S-B χ^2	*df*	*p*	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	90% CI		SRMR
						Lower	Upper	
399.314	62	< .000	.964	.955	.058	.053	.064	.043

Note. Effects and regression coefficients are standardised

As shown in Figure 4.5, the indirect effect is not strong (.045) but statistically significant (*p* < .05), hence mediation is present even though it is not strong. Nonetheless, the null hypothesis of perfect fit had to be rejected: S-B χ^2(62) = 399.314, *p* < .000. The SRMR and RMSEA indicated relatively acceptable fit, while the CFI and the TLI showed a close fit.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Chapter 1 established that work-life conflict activates the experience of stress which, in turn, undesirably impacts the mental and physical health of working individuals and, eventually, organisational performance (Le et al., 2020; Pasamar et al., 2020; Prescott et al., 2008). Ultimately, the design of effective interventions rely on a solid understanding of the mechanisms through which work-life conflict impacts occupational stress. This set the intention to further investigate potential mediators of the effect of work-life conflict on occupational stress, which in turn could become the focus of potential interventions that aim to mitigate the effect of work-life conflict on the mediator and occupational stress (Eversole et al., 2020). An important additional consideration in this respect is whether the direct and indirect effects of work-life conflict on occupational stress are invariant across men and women, which in turn will inform potential interventions that aim to reduce occupational stress (Handa & Chung, 2019; Trzebiatowski et al., 2018).

Against this background the present study aimed to (a) examine the mediating effect of emotional-support in the workplace in the relation between work-life conflict and occupational stress, and (b) whether this effect is invariant across men and women.

5.1. Discussion of Results

In the following paragraphs the results are discussed by way of inspecting (a) the measurement invariance of the measures of work-life conflict, emotional-social support and

occupational stress across gender, as well as (b) the structural invariance of the paths between three variables across men and women.

5.1.1. *Measurement Invariance*

First, measurement invariance was tested for the calibration sample. The measurement model included separate confirmatory factor analyses of the General Work Stress Scale, Work-Home Interface Scale and Relationships Scale respectively, followed by modifications of the measurement models, and sequential fitting of increasingly constrained measurement invariance models. These three scales were used to operationalise occupational stress, work-home conflict, and emotional-social support, respectively. Results showed that the reduced General Work Stress Scale, Work-Home Interface Scale and Relationships Scale measure the same trait in the same measurement units with equal precision for men and women. Moreover, the complete measurement model evidenced that the standings of the men and the women on the three traits are equivalent (i.e., men and women reported equal levels of general work stress, work-home interface and relationships).

The measurement invariance testing of the calibration sample was replicated in the validation sample. Against this background it appeared reasonable to conclude that the measurement model operates in the same way across men and women and that it safe to examine structural invariance across the two groups.

5.1.2. *Structural Invariance*

The objective of the structural invariance testing was to examine whether the mediating effect of emotional-social support in the link between work-life conflict and occupational stress was invariant across men and women (cf. Gadelrab, 2020). Results across the calibration and

validation samples indicated that the path coefficients of the structural model were invariant across the two groups, indicating that the mediating effect was the same for men and women.

In the paragraphs that follow, the results of the structural invariance analysis are discussed, by first focussing on the secondary research questions of the study (i.e., questions related to each structural path in the model) and then the primary research question (i.e., the mediating effect).

Secondary research questions

The analysis focused on the validity and structural invariance of the mediation model to answer the primary research question and the three secondary research questions. In essence, three increasingly constrained mediation models were tested. Due to a lack of meaningful reduction in fit, the regression invariance model, imposing the additional constraint of equal regression coefficients between the two groups, was favoured by the Chi-square difference test, BIC, CFI and RMSEA in both the calibration and validation sample. Overall, these results indicate that the factor loadings and regression coefficients of the mediation model are invariant across both men and women.

   i.   Does work-life conflict have a direct effect on occupational stress, and is this
           effect the same for men and women?

Results across the calibration and validation samples indicated that work-life conflict has a direct effect on occupational stress and that this effect is invariant across men and women. Combining the two samples yielded a statistically significant standardised effect of.547.

This result accords with previous studies that established that both men and women experience occupational stress due to work-life conflict (Baqutayan, 2011; Bi et al., 2016;

Chopra et al., 2017; Cinamon et al., 2002; Dabbs et al., 2016; Denton et al., 2004; Dong et al., 2020; Grönlund et al., 2018; Klein et al., 2018; Lips, 2018; Rivera-Torres et al., 2013; Trzebiatowski et al., 2018; Wang & Guo, 2020). The present study, however, goes a step beyond by demonstrating in calibration and validation samples that the relations between the latent variables are statistically invariant across men and women groups.

ii.   Does work-life conflict have an effect on emotional-social support, and is this effect the same for men and women?

Results obtained with the calibration and validation samples evidenced that work-life conflict has a statistically significant effect on emotional-social support and that this effect is invariant across the two groups. The total sample yielded a standardised effect of .364. This result accords with previous findings that showed a positive correlation between work-life conflict and lacking emotional-social support (Agarwala et al., 2014; Burk et al., 2013; Jenson, 2016; Kossek et al., 2017). These results are consistent with the idea that the negative effects of work-life conflict can contribute to impaired relationships in the workplace, such that employees with high levels of work-life conflict may experience reduced emotional-social support.

In this respect it appears that sustained work-life conflict may contribute toward the erosion of an important resource for persons in the workplace, namely the relationships they have with colleagues and the emotional-social support that such relationships provide. In turn, this underlines the importance of strategies and interventions that aim to bolster the availability of sources of emotional and social support for employees. Importantly, the results of the present study indicated that the effect of work-life conflict on emotional-support is the same for men

and women, which implies that such strategies and interventions are equally important for both groups.

iii.   Does emotional-social support have an effect on occupational stress, and is this effect the same for men and women?

Across the calibration and validation samples it appeared that emotional-social support has a statistically significant effect on occupational stress, such that persons with reduced emotional-social support report higher levels of occupational stress. Moreover, results across the calibration and validation samples showed that this relationship is invariant across men and women. The total sample yielded a statistically significant but relatively weak standardised effect (.125). Note, however, that this coefficient reflects the effect of emotional-social support on occupational stress conditional on work-life conflict. The unconditional or zero-order correlation of the emotional-social support with occupational stress in the total sample was moderately strong at .329, which underlines the importance of emotional-social support in understanding occupational stress.

These results are aligned with those of various research studies which found a negative relationship between emotional-social support, and occupational stress (Barr et al., 2017; Gerdenitsch et al., 2016; Roohafza et al., 2016). It appears that emotional-social support provides employees with a constructive coping mechanism to effectively deal with job-related stressors (Cortese et al., 2010; Kossek, et al., 2011; Wadsworth et al., 2007). Bolstering this mechanism in the face of eroding factors, such as work-life balance therefore appears to be important.

Previous studies have reported that men and women perceive emotional-social support differently, which can influence the need, credibility, and effectiveness of interventions aimed at improving emotional-social support (Joo et al., 2020; Li et al., 2015; Soman et al., 2016; Whiteman et al., 2013). However, the present study found that the effect of perceived emotional-social support on occupational stress remains gender invariant.

Primary research question

The primary question was whether emotional-social support has a mediating effect on the relationship between work-life conflict and occupational stress and whether this relationship is invariant across men and women. This question is answered with respect to the statistical significance and size of the indirect effect of work-life conflict.

Across the calibration and validation samples a statistically significant but weak indirect effect was detected. The total sample yielded a statistically significant indirect standardised effect of .045. Against this background, it appears that perceived emotional-social support does mediate the effect of work-life conflict on occupational stress, but the mediation is not particularly strong. Whereas the effect of work-life conflict on occupational stress is in part transmitted via the effect of the former on emotional-support, the direct effect of work-life conflict was much stronger.

The finding of a weak effect does not nullify the relevance of emotional-social support as a mechanism through which work-life conflict influences occupational stress, but it does show that several other mechanisms need to be taken into account to obtain a more complete picture. Overall, the results are consistent with the thesis that work-life conflict has the

potential to erode relationships and emotional-social support in the workplace and in turn, that this erosion may contribute to increased occupational stress.

Importantly, the results also show that this effect is consistent across men and women. The structural paths linking the three variables (i.e., work-life conflict, emotional-social support and occupational stress) were invariant across the two groups. As pointed in the preceding paragraphs effect of (a) work-life conflict on emotional-social support, and in turn the effect of (b) emotional-social support on occupational stress was invariant across the two groups. Given that the mediating or indirect effect is the product of a and b (in Figure 4.5) it is reasonable to conclude that the indirect or mediating effect is also invariant. This result suggests that both men and women may benefit from interventions that aim to bolster emotional-social support as job resource.

5.2. Limitations

A possible limitation in this study is the fact that the utilized archival dataset, derived from the Sources of Work Stress Inventory, was done cross-sectionally where the data were collected at a specific point in time. This method of data collection prevents researchers from analysing behaviours over a period of time and produces a challenge with regard to identifying the actual cause and effect (Kostovski et al., 2019).

Additionally, the participants were required to fill in a self-report questionnaire, which can be viewed as highly subjective and may give rise to misleading results, for the individual answers the questions solely based on their perceptions. Research by Kirk (2006) states that self-reported responses could also be misleading, as the participants may feel ashamed to disclose specific personal information due to certain stereotypes, therefore different types of biases may influence the results, such as social desirability bias.

Moreover, it can also be argued that self-report studies are inherently biased, as the participant completes a questionnaire based on his or her feelings at that specific point in time (McNeish & Stapleton, 2014). Therefore, studies relying on voluntary participation may experience bias in their results because of a shortage of respondents, as there might be systematic differences amongst individuals who respond and those who do not (Del Boca & Noll, 2000).

A definite limitation is the fact that the study only used a binary approach, which might be considered unacceptable (in some cases unethical) to conduct gender studies that deliberately exclude the option of non-binary gender groups to identify as such or to participate in research. However, practically, these types of studies will be difficult to carry out with people who do not identify as binary male or female - one needs large numbers of participants, and these people usually represent a very small proportion of the population.

A final limitation in the present study is the fact that the participants' personality and/or coping styles were not taken into consideration, as these could possibly impact their experience of emotional-social supportive interventions. This limitation could influence the study's effectiveness as an intervention to reduce the effects of work-life conflict on occupational stress. The following section explores relevant recommendations for further research, based on these limitations.

5.3. Recommendations for Further Research

A first recommendation is to study the mediating effect of emotional-social support in the link between work-life balance and occupational stress in a longitudinal design. Sedgwick (2014) argues that such a study would be more powerful due to the exclusion of time-invariants, undetected individual variations and examining a specific event's temporal order, as frequent observations at personal levels is used. Employing a longitudinal design will

contribute toward establishing a causal effect of work-life balance on emotional-social support and occupational stress.

A second recommendation is to continue collecting data that takes into account progressive shifts in gender roles and the enduring impact of COVID-19 on work related behaviours. More employees are now required to work from home, for lengthier periods, which will undoubtedly affect work-life conflict levels and increased experiences of occupational stress. Therefore, some participants are likely to present entirely different responses to the Sources of Work Stress Inventory when compared to the time in which the archival data was captured.

A third recommendation is to utilize additional measures of emotional-social support, work life balance and occupational stress, such as reports from supervisors, colleagues, family members and friends. The addition of such measures will serve to solidify the construct validity of the results. Moreover, the inclusion of measures of employees' personality styles, coping mechanisms, and their perceptions of gender-roles view will enable a deeper understanding of the ways in which work-life balance impacts emotional-social support across men and women.

A fourth recommendation is for future studies to broaden the conceptualisation of gender and include those individuals who do not identify as binary male or female. A final recommendation is to embed the structural model in a network of variables that also includes personality variables, which will enable a richer understanding of how work-life conflict and emotional support individually and jointly relate to occupational stress. In this respect one might expect variables such as Extroversion and Agreeableness to be informative regarding

emotional-support, and Neuroticsm and Conscientiousness to be informative with respect to work-life conflict and occupational stress.

5.4.   Conclusion

The primary purpose of this study was to establish if perceived emotional-social support has a mediating effect on the relationship between work-life conflict and occupational stress, and whether that effect is the same for both men and women. The secondary aim was to determine whether the effect of work-life conflict on occupational stress; work-life conflict on perceived emotional-social support; and perceived emotional-social support on occupational stress is the same for men and women.

The results of the study highlight that these relationships are, in fact, gender invariant and emotional-social support does slightly mediate the effect of work-life conflict on occupational stress. These results ultimately generate an awareness of the value of emotional-social support received from managers and colleagues, in the form of constructive interpersonal relationships, at work. This is particularly relevant in the 21st century, where the COVID-19 pandemic is still impacting life as we knew it, specifically in the blurring of work-life boundaries for both men and women (Schieman et al., 2021).

Given the potential vulnerability of relationships in the workplace as a result of work-life conflict, this study suggests a potentially valuable intervention element which can be employed in the workplace, through the incorporation of an emotional-social supportive culture where constructive interpersonal relationships are encouraged. This strategy holds the potential to mitigate, at least in part, the negative effect of work-life conflict on relationships and emotional-social support, which in turn might reduce occupational stress for both men and women.

Through the promotion of emotional-social support in organisations, one can consequently expect occupational stress levels to decrease, holding benefits for organisations as well as for those who are employed. Several studies proved that the creation of an organisational culture, where emotional connections amongst the workforce are fostered and valued, results in improved productivity, employee engagement, job satisfaction, organisational loyalty, and employee well-being (Zak, 2017; Osborne et al., 2017; Nierenberg et al., 2017; Jena et al., 2018).

This points to the importance for adjusted organisational cultures through management practices, that invest in emotionally supportive interventions. It is known that, when employees feel emotionally secure in their work environment by having interpersonal relationships with their colleagues and managers, they are inclined to operate more innovatively, while being more likely to take part in organisational citizenship behaviours and less likely to adopt organisational deviant behaviours (Javed et al., 2019; Bani-Melhem., 2018).

Furthermore, continuing research in these domains will enable managers to implement practical workplace policies or foster the awareness regarding men and women's need for emotional-social support to cope with sources of occupational stress. Consequently, armed with this awareness, employers should be better enabled to employ effective interventions, incorporating emotional-social support, to ultimately reduce occupational stress. The formulation and presence of significant relationships between emotional-social support, work-life conflict and occupational stress can be utilized to develop and employ effective organisational practices and values that create and enhance a supportive organisational climate. In turn, these approaches can increase efficiency, cut costs, boost revenues, and enhance the value of employees' everyday lives (Cohen et al., 2020).

The study also underlines the well-established importance of work-life balance with respect to employees' subjectively experienced occupational stress. Whereas the results pointed to a mediating (or indirect) effect of work-life balance via emotional-social support on occupational stress, the direct effect of work-life balance on occupational stress was stronger. Continuing work on unravelling the paths in which work-life balance influence occupational stress above and beyond the availability or lack of emotional-support is needed. The present study did not examine the causes of work-life balance. Ultimately a better understanding of such causes and in turn the effects that work-life balance has on downstream variables (such emotional support) will contribute toward the design of more effective interventions that aim to reduce occupational stress.

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