The relationship of social support to the work-family balance and work outcomes of midlife women

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper seeks to examine the relationship of a network of social support for midlife women with their attitudes toward work-family balance and work outcomes, including job satisfaction, organisational commitment, and career accomplishment.

Design/methodology/approach – A total of 1,089 women between the ages of 35 and 50 across three organizations were surveyed and then 72 of them interviewed.

Findings – Results indicate that the women generally received more personal social support than work-based social support and more instrumental than expressive support from all sources. Work-based social support was positively associated with job satisfaction, organisational commitment, and career accomplishment; personal social support was also associated with job satisfaction and organisational commitment. Work-family balance may partially mediate the relationship between social support and work outcomes.

Originality/value – Much of what is known about work-life issues centers on the work-family conflicts of younger women with children. Perceptions are explored of work-life balance among women at midlife, an understudied population with significant work and personal responsibilities. This study contributes to research by examining the relationships among the full network of social support, work-family balance, and work-related outcomes, as well as the nature of this support for working women. The combination of quantitative and qualitative methods provides substantive insights into the complexity of these relationships for women at midlife.

Keywords Social behaviour, Gender, Women, Work study, Family life

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Social support has positive consequences for improving health, reducing stress, and mitigating work-family conflict (Cohen and Syme, 1985; Cutrona and Russell, 1990; Deelstra *et al.*, 2003; House, 1981; Kets de Vries, 1999; Viswesvaran *et al.*, 1999). Research suggests that social support in the workplace, such as the support of supervisors and coworkers, has a positive impact on work outcomes, such as job satisfaction (Allen, 2001; Goff *et al.*, 1990; Savery, 1988). Studies also show that social support outside of work, such as that provided by spouses and friends, may have

a positive impact on work-family balance by reducing work-family conflict (Carlson and Perrewe, 1999; Greenhaus and Parasuraman, 1994). Previous studies have focused on social support from either the work or family domain; however, as boundaries between work and home decrease (de Janasz *et al.*, 2003; Grzywacz and Marks, 2000; Wallen, 2002) it is critically important to consider the relationship of the entire social support network with work-family balance and work-related outcomes. We contribute to the literatures on social support, work-life, and careers by focusing on midlife women whose social support network and work-family issues have been understudied when compared to that of younger employees.

Women at midlife, often characterised as part of the sandwich generation, have personal and work-related needs that likely call for social support inside and outside the work arena. Work-family balance is a key issue as they deal with the potentially conflicting demands of their careers, children and child care, elder care, and other personal life issues. Social support is a critical resource for working women to enable their continued success in both work and family domains. Women at midlife typically take stock of the priorities in their lives and make adjustments that allow them to align their activities with their internal values; this often involves increasing the time they devote to family (Apter, 1995; Gallagher, 1993; Grambs, 1989; Jacobs, 1998; Jacobson, 1995; Marshall, 1995; Wolfe *et al.*, 1990).

In this paper, we contribute to the literatures on social support and careers by examining the complete range of social support experienced by midlife women from both work-based and personal sources and testing how these relationships are linked to work-family balance as well as a variety of work outcomes. In addition, we contribute to the work-life literature by including qualitative analysis of the social support experienced by midlife women to get a richer, more in-depth understanding of their experiences as they attempt to balance work and family obligations. Our study addresses two research questions:

RQ1. Is social support associated with work-family balance and work outcomes for midlife women?

RQ2. What is the nature of social support for working women at midlife?

Theoretical background and hypotheses
Social support and midlife women
Schulz and Rau (1985) proposed that personal support exchanges vary at different life stages, from young adult to old age. Their research propositions included the following:

> For young adults, the parents are the primary source of tangible aid and friends are the major source of informational and emotional support, with other relatives playing a secondary role. For middle-aged individuals, the spouse is a primary provider of both tangible aid and emotional support, with friends, colleagues, and neighbors providing most of the informational support. In old age, adult children and the spouse, if living, provide most of the tangible aid. Informational and emotional support is provided by a variety of sources, including children, formal organisations, such as organized religions, specialized support groups, and friends (Schulz and Rau, 1985, p. 143).

Our research questions relate their propositions about middle-aged individuals specifically to midlife working women.

As the babyboomers reach midlife, they have swelled the ranks of workers; for example, the percentage of the labor force between the ages of 35 and 54 has increased from 42 percent in 1990 to 47 percent in 2004 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2004). "This age group is significant not just because of its numbers but also because of its power in society and its seniority in the workforce" (Wallen, 2002, p. 71). Working women at midlife experience a variety of unique challenges that may include providing care for older children, elderly parents, and/or spouses, sustaining their marriages in the face of the opposite pulls of overload and complacency, juggling various roles, and demonstrating continued career competence as work becomes more routine and less stimulating (Whelan-Berry and Gordon, 2000; Wallen, 2002). These challenges likely differ from those faced by younger employees, particularly women, who have younger children, fewer elder care responsibilities, newer marriages, and newly attained career achievements (Gordon and Whelan, 1998). The midlife women generally realise that they can no longer be superwomen and must set clearer limits and boundaries (Hall *et al.*, 1996; Gordon and Whelan, 1998). As the number of female workers at midlife who value both work and home domains continues to grow, there is an increasing urgency for managers and organisations to understand and retain this population because of the their accumulated knowledge, performance, and contribution as employees. Losing these women from the work force because balancing work and family has become too difficult has significant consequences for the availability of sufficient and productive human capital in organisations.

Midlife working women may rely on social support provided through various relationships, developed in both their personal and professional roles, to achieve work-family balance. Although some research has addressed the general issues faced by midlife workers (Kruger, 1994; Levinson, 1978; O'Connor and Wolfe, 1991) and the more specific issues experienced by midlife women (Apter, 1995; Gordon and Whelan, 1998; Grambs, 1989; Jacobson, 1995; Levinson, 1996; Marshall, 1995), this work has not systematically examined the relationship between a midlife woman's network of social support and her work-life balance and other work outcomes. We contribute to research on this increasingly important demographic group by testing the relationships among the full network of social support, work-family balance, job satisfaction, organisational commitment, and career achievement. In addition, we study in more depth the types of support that midlife women perceive to be most important as a way of better understanding the opportunities for managers and organisations to support midlife women in their continued productivity and to suggest avenues for future research.

Social support

Social support has been studied extensively in the literatures on stress and social networks (Hall and Wellman, 1985; Viswesvaran *et al.*, 1999). It is conceptualised as the structure of relationships as well as the flow of resources provided by relationships (Greenhaus and Parasuraman, 1994). Individuals may have an on-the-job social support network as well as a personal or non-work based network of supportive relationships.

In the management literature, social support has been primarily addressed in terms of mentoring. Mentoring relationships provide social support in the form of both career development and psychosocial assistance (Kram, 1985), paralleling Lin's (1986) instrumental and expressive support dimensions derived from a review of the stress

and health literature. The most recent conceptualization of mentoring by Higgins and Kram (2001) suggests a developmental network perspective, arguing that individuals may receive assistance from many people at any time. They posit that diverse relationships may combine to provide a range of supportive functions. Thus, both the traditional social support and recent mentoring literatures suggest that individuals receive social support from people in various roles at work, including senior colleagues and peers, as well as at home, from family and community members.

Social support has been analysed as an antecedent, a direct effect, a mediator, and a moderator (Katz and Kahn, 1978; Sarason *et al.*, 1990; Viswesvaran *et al.*, 1999). Most studies distinguish the domain of work-based social support from personal (non-work) social support, as relationships in one domain can attenuate negative consequences or accentuate positive consequences from the other domain (Carlson and Perrewe, 1999; Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985; Greenhaus and Parasuraman, 1994). In general, however, the impact of work-based supportive relationships has been separated from the impact of personal supportive relationships; the first have been linked to work outcomes and the latter to family outcomes. One exception is reported in a study by Savery (1988), which links social support from both domains to turnover intentions and stress. We have found no studies, however, that examine the relationships among the full range of social support (from work-based and personal sources) and work-family balance and work-related outcomes, and our study addresses this deficiency in the literature.

Work-based social support. Social support at work may come from the organisation at large, immediate supervisors, and coworkers. Studies on organisations have equated support to work-family practises and viewed it as part of "family friendliness" (Jahn *et al.*, 2003). When support is viewed in this way, organisations address (or ignore) the issue of support for the balance between work life and family life through their policies, benefits, culture, and career paths (Gordon *et al.*, 2002; Hall and Richter, 1988). In a survey of a variety of occupations, employees who perceived their organisations as less family-supportive experienced more work-family conflict, less job satisfaction, less organisational commitment, and greater turnover intentions than those who perceived their organisations as more family-supportive (Allen, 2001).

Employees differentiate support from the organisation and the support they receive from their immediate work group or supervisor (Allen, 2001; Jahn *et al.*, 2003; Self *et al.*, 2005). Both the immediate manager and peers are sources of social support that help relieve occupational stress and reduce turnover (Buunk and Verhoeven, 1991; Savery, 1988). Allen (2001) found that supervisory support had both direct and indirect effects on employee job attitudes, and because supervisors administer organisational family-supportive benefits, their willingness to allow employees to take advantage of these benefits influenced job attitudes as well. Goff *et al.* (1990) found that supervisory support in an organisation providing daycare was associated with lower degrees of work-family conflict and absenteeism for parents with children under the age of five. Kram and Isabella (1985) found that peer relationships at work vary from those who exchange information about work and the organisation to those who provide confirmation and emotional support. Ducharme and Martin (2000) found evidence that the social support of peers enhances the job satisfaction of all workers. Considered together, existing research suggests that a supportive organisational environment and supportive relationships at work may have a significant association with the work outcomes for employees; however, no other studies have specifically examined the

work-based social support of midlife women with their unique challenges and requirements.

Personal social support. Social support outside of work may come from an employee's spouse or partner, parents, siblings, children, extended family, and friends. Husbands contribute in a variety of areas, including earnings and personal financial management (Kate, 1998), home and family responsibilities (Baron, 1987; Bonney *et al.*, 1999), career management and support (Gordon and Whelan-Berry, 2004; Hertz, 1999), and interpersonal support (Becker and Moen, 1999). Studies of working couples have found that, although household chores and child care duties may not be equally divided, women were generally satisfied with their husband's contributions (Biernat and Wortman, 1991), and spousal support significantly influences job satisfaction and stress (Bures and Henderson, 1995). To balance the many demands of home and work, couples collaborate to attend to all of their obligations (Barnett and Rivers, 1996). Family, friends, and neighbors may also play significant roles for women who actively juggle the demands of work and home. Adams *et al.* (1996) found that family-based social support was negatively associated with family interfering with work, a dimension of work-family conflict. These relationships also provide support that reduces work-family conflict by reducing time demands and stress (Greenhaus and Parasuraman, 1994; Seers *et al.*, 1983).

In this paper, we explore the full range of supportive relationships to understand how this network of support affects midlife women's ability to balance both work and family demands as well as achieve career success. We assume that support operates by influencing an individual's appraisal of circumstances at work and home. An individual's perceptions concerning available support, rather than its actual availability, may be a stronger predictor of effective coping or achievement of desirable outcomes (Cohen and Syme, 1985). We provide empirical evidence of perceived professional and personal social support for midlife women and demonstrate whether such support is linked to work-family balance and work outcomes. We also explore the functions of each type of support received from varying sources for midlife working women.

Social support, work-family balance, and work outcomes

Social support and work-family balance. "Few people would deny that the unequal division of labor in the home continues to be a major obstacle to equal achievement outside the home" (Young, 2004, p. A15). Midlife women with enduring careers have surmounted such obstacles to varying degrees of success as reflected in the continuity of their participation in the workforce. Although as a group their achievement may not fully parallel that of men, many of these women have succeeded in their careers and have achieved some type of work-family balance while maintaining their careers (Tischler, 2004).

Research suggests that work-family balance is composed of a lack of conflict between work and family domains, as well as the positive spillover between the two sets of responsibilities (Frone, 2003; Grzywacz and Marks, 2000; Kirchmeyer, 1992; Kossek and Ozeki, 1999; Marks, 1977; Netemeyer *et al.*, 1996; Rossi, 2001; Sieber, 1974). Work-family conflict is typically dysfunctional and occurs when demands from participation in one domain interfere or are incompatible with demands from participation in the other domain (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985; Greenhaus and Parasuraman, 1994). In contrast, spillover from one role to another can be functional because participation in multiple domains can

enrich the personal resources available for use in other domains (Kirchmeyer, 1992; Marks, 1977). The positive spillover from family to work domains often includes the supportive nature of family relationships and the ability to use skills and attitudes acquired at home while on the job (Crouter, 1984). Conceptually, we argue that conflict and spillover may be distinct from balance in that it is possible for a woman who experiences work-family conflict to also experience work-family balance because she is capable of managing such conflicts. Therefore, we measure work-family balance directly instead of using the lack of conflict as a proxy for perceived balance, and we suggest that social support functions as a resource that women draw on to achieve balance between work and family domains. Thus, we propose the following hypotheses:

H1a. Work-based social support is positively associated with work-family balance for midlife working women.

H1b. Personal social support is positively associated with work-family balance for midlife working women.

Social support and work outcomes. Enhanced resources and confidence that are associated with work- and personal-based social support likely result in individuals being better able to perform and feeling more satisfied with all aspects of their life. For example, work-based social support has been shown to be positively related to job satisfaction (Ducharme and Martin, 2000; Savery, 1988). Kirchmeyer (1992) found that time spent in the non-work domains of parenting and community work was also positively associated with job satisfaction.

Organisational commitment focuses on the extent that individuals identify with organisational goals, value organisational membership, and plan to work diligently at achieving the organisational mission (Mowday *et al.*, 1979; Welsch and LaVan, 1981). Individuals feel an increased sense of commitment to their organisation when organisational involvement is seen as enriching other life domains, such as family (Steffy and Jones, 1988). Research has also shown that personal relationships, such as time spent parenting and support from family and friends, are positively associated with organisational commitment (Dornstein and Matalon, 1989; Kirchmeyer, 1992).

Supportive relationships make career advancement and success more likely for women. Work-based relationships may be instrumental in supporting career advancement in managerial roles (Kram, 1985; Scandura, 1992) and creating feelings of inclusion in professional roles (Gersick *et al.*, 2000; Mor Barak and Levin, 2002) that indicate career accomplishment. In midcareer, supervisors and peers, including coworkers or friends, offer benefits that may be critical to career success, such as networking, maintaining visibility, and enhancing reputation (Kram and Isabella, 1985; Gersick *et al.*, 2000; de Janasz *et al.*, 2003). Besides, providing additional time for career-related activities, spouses may offer career advice (Gordon and Whelan-Berry, 2004). We link these various findings to propose the following hypotheses:

H2a. Work-based social support is positively associated with the work outcomes of job satisfaction, organisational commitment, and career accomplishment for midlife working women.

H2b. Personal social support is positively associated with the work outcomes of job satisfaction, career accomplishment, and organisational commitment for midlife working women.

Work-family balance as a mediator. Research on federal employees suggests that family-friendly policies at work may decrease work-family conflict, improving work-family balance and in turn job satisfaction (Saltzstein *et al.*, 2001). Work-based social support has been positively related to job satisfaction directly and through work-family conflict as a mediating variable (Carlson and Perrewe, 1999). Gordon *et al.* (2002) found that working women at midlife recalibrate their work and family priorities to ensure that they are achieving their desired balance between these domains. In this study, we test whether work-family balance is the mechanism through which both work-based and personal social support for women at midlife correlate with the work outcomes of job satisfaction, career accomplishment, and organisational commitment. Thus, we test the following hypotheses:

> *H3a.* Work-family balance mediates the relationship between work-based social support and the work outcomes of job satisfaction, organisational commitment, and career accomplishment for midlife working women.

> *H3b.* Work-family balance mediates the relationship between personal social support and the work outcomes of job satisfaction, organisational commitment, and career accomplishment for midlife working women.

The nature of social support for midlife women. Our second research question addresses the nature of social support for midlife women. In a review of the social support literature, Lin (1986) categorised several studies to develop a definition with both a social and a support element. Focusing on the individual and his or her perceptions of support, social elements include the source of support, such as the community, social networks, or partners, while support elements include instrumental and expressive dimensions (House and Kahn, 1985). Thus, to further understand the nature of social support we will consider both the source of the supportive relationship and the type of support given. Because there is limited research on the nature of social support and work-life balance for midlife women, we conducted a qualitative investigation of social support for this group.

Methodology
Data sites
Data were collected from three organisations, two in health care and one in financial services. The two health care organisations, located in the Northeastern and Southeastern US, respectively, have emergency, hospital, and clinic facilities (doctors' offices and outpatient services) in all areas of medicine. Both have a disproportionate number of women employees, particularly in nursing, allied health professions, other patient care, and office support staff. Because the hospitals operate 24/7, many professional-level employees work outside the standard 9-5 workday. Shift work for all but medical office, clerical, management, and administrative staff is common, and part-time employment is possible for a number of jobs. The financial services organisation, located in the Northeastern US, offers an array of financial services, including insurance policies, pension-fund management, and investment opportunities. It has a relatively equal number of men and women employees, although the support staff is more often female than male. Most employees work a normal 9-5 workday, and part-time work is not common. The company is often listed among the top area companies for women employees because of their work-life benefits. While including

participants from multiple organisations should improve our ability to generalise, in preliminary ANOVA analysis we found significant differences between at least two of three organisations in the women's job satisfaction and organisational commitment; therefore we controlled for organisation in our analysis.

Survey

Sample. Since, this paper focuses on midlife, we have included surveys from women who were 35-50 years old, following the life developmental stages outlined by Levinson (1978, 1996). We received surveys from 1089 such women across the three organisations, approximately a 25 percent return. In management research a response rate in the range of 25 percent is consistent with other external surveys of all employees or all employees of multiple companies (for similar examples, see Chrobot-Mason, 2004; Ramus and Steger, 2000). More important is whether the received survey sample is representative, and we reviewed the surveys received from each organisation to ensure representation of the overall population. The average woman in the sample was 43 years old, Caucasian, and had attended college and obtained either an associates or bachelors degree. She also was married, for an average of 15 years, and had children. About 94 percent of the women worked full-time. The women had been employed by their current organisation for 11 years on average, and 70 percent had worked throughout their career without significant time off from the workforce. The women in our sample described themselves as being "in very good health." Most frequently, the women interviewed had total household income of $75,000-100,000 and individual income of $45,000-54,999.

Variables

Social support. We used a multi-part item from the survey to measure the network of social support. It asked respondents to rate "how much do each of the following help you to balance your work and non-work activities," for seven sources of support. Respondents rated each source of support on a five-point Likert scale from "none" to "a great deal." Work-based social support is an additive index that measures employees' perceptions of support from their supervisors, coworkers, and organisation. Personal social support is an additive index that measures employees' perception of support from their spouse or partner, extended family, friends, and neighbors. The separation of work-based from personal sources of social support is consistent with prior research and was retained based on a matched pair t-test which indicated that the means are statistically different for the two domains of social support ($t = 56.44$, $p < 0.000$). The level of each social support construct is determined by the sum of responses of nonequivalent items. We do not report α coefficients because as a measure of reliability α is defined as the degree of interrelatedness among items in a scale. Since, more than one factor is responsible for the correlations within each domain of support, α is inappropriate for these indices (Cortina, 1993; Delery, 1998).

Work-family balance. Work-family balance consisted of two items ($\alpha = 0.72$) created for this study in order to measure balance directly rather than assuming the absence of conflict is the equivalent of balance. Respondents rated "how difficult is it for you to balance work and non-work responsibilities," on a five-point Likert scale from "very easy" to "very difficult," and "overall how would you rate your work and family balance," on a five-point Likert scale from "poor" to "excellent."

Job satisfaction. The job satisfaction scale included a general job satisfaction item and McDonald and MacIntyre's (1997) previously validated ten-item scale ($\alpha = 0.88$). Respondents rated items such as "Overall, I am satisfied with my job," and "I feel good about my job," on a five-point Likert scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree."

Organisational commitment. The organisational commitment scale is Allen and Meyer's (1990) seven item affective commitment scale, which reflects the employees' emotional attachment to an organisation ($\alpha = 0.91$). Respondents indicated the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with items such as "I would be very happy to spend the rest of my career with this organisation," and "I really feel as if this organisation's problems are my own," on a five-point Likert scale from "not at all" to "a great deal."

Career accomplishment. The career accomplishment scale, developed for this study, consisted of a six-item scale ($\alpha = 0.84$). Respondents rated items such as "I feel that I am productive in my career," and "My career requires that I work very hard," on a five-point Likert scale from "not at all" to "a great deal."

Control variables. We assessed age, whether or not respondents had children under the age of 18 or elder care responsibilities (each coded 1 for yes and 0 for no), their level of education (high school degree, some college, associates degree, college degree, or advanced degree), individual income (in five categories), household income (in four categories), and organisation.

Interviews

Totally, 72 women between the ages of 35 and 50 were interviewed. Interview participants were randomly selected from survey respondents to compose a group that was representative of the age range and the three organisations. This sub-sample was primarily managers and professionals although some full-time support staff was included. The interviews lasted between one and two hours and included questions about participants' background, work-life balance, career experiences and transitions, and overall attitudes. Questions included the following: how do you currently juggle all that you do? What do you see as key to your successfully juggling work, career, family, and life? How does your organisation help or hinder your ability to successfully juggle work and family? Is there anything specific that helps you manage work and family balance at this point? How satisfied are you with your ability to effectively balance work, family, and life? Has your approach to balancing or juggling work, family, and life changed over the years?

Interview analysis

Each interview was transcribed in preparation for analysis. We used content analysis assisted by HyperResearch software to analyse the interviews. As a qualitative method, content analysis is used for making replicable and valid inferences from data to their context by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics (Holsti, 1969; Krippendorff, 1980). The purpose of this methodology is to look for common ideas and patterns in participants' responses (Rossman and Rallis, 1998). We focused on the manifest content of the data by examining it for relationships among categories and implications (Eisenhardt, 1989; Sandelowski, 2001). The unit of analysis was the sentence or groups of sentences that form a complete thought, and sometimes an entire paragraph could be captured by one code. We used a hierarchical coding scheme, grouping subcodes for types of social support under codes for the

source of support and then within the work-based or personal domain of support. In addition, we categorised the functions of social support from each source using Lin's (1986) two dimensions of support, instrumental and expressive. We counted the number of participants who mentioned each source and type of support. We also counted the number of times each function was mentioned, thus gauging its relative importance (Lee, 1999). Then data in each category were examined for qualities, relationships to other data, and implications (Morgan, 1993).

Results

We used the survey data to compute the average support reported by the women to allow us to compare the extent of work-based versus personal support. To do this, we first divided the average sums for work-based and personal social support by the number of sources in each index, three and four, respectively. The women indicated that they received more personal social support (Mean = 2.55) than work-based support (Mean = 1.41). Table I reports the means, standard deviations, and correlations among all variables for the sample. No correlation is sufficiently high to preclude the effective use of hierarchical regression analysis for testing the hypotheses in this study.

Our qualitative data allow us to further extend the description of the sources of support that the women reported, as shown in Table II. We analysed the nature of social support using Lin's (1986) two types of support:

(1) instrumental, which focuses on career development; and

(2) expressive, which emphasizes psychosocial support.

Both work-based and personal sources of support provided both types of support, instrumental and expressive. In addition, both sources more often provided instrumental than expressive support. For example, 68 percent of the women reported instrumental support from their spouses or partners whereas only 28 percent reported expressive support from this source.

The relationships among social support, work-family balance, and work outcomes
Social support and work-family balance. We tested *H1a* and *H1b*, that work-based and personal social support are positively associated with work-family balance for midlife working women, using hierarchical regression, as shown in Table III. Control variables were entered in the first step in each regression. Whether the women had children, level of education, and individual income were negatively associated with work-family balance (see Model 1 in Table III). No other significant relationships were found between control variables and work-family balance. Both work-based and personal social support were associated with work-family balance (Models 2 and 3); hence *H1a* and *H1b* are supported.

Social support and work outcomes. We tested *H2a* and *H2b*, that work-based and personal social support are positively associated with job satisfaction, organisational commitment, and career accomplishment for midlife working women, using hierarchical regression, as shown in Tables IV-VI. Control variables were entered in the first step in each regression. Individual income and company were associated with job satisfaction, organisational commitment, and career accomplishment. Age was associated with organisational commitment and career accomplishment. Elder care was also associated with career accomplishment (see Model 1 in each table). Work-based social support was positively associated with job satisfaction,

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Age	42.59	4.52					
2. Children under 18	0.77	1.03	-0.12^{***}				
3. Elder care	0.22	0.42	0.12^{***}	-0.06			
4. Education	3.53	1.36	-0.00	0.07^{*}	-0.02		
5. Individual income	2.64	1.16	0.06^{*}	-0.09^{**}	0.00	0.38^{***}	
6. Household income	2.44	1.15	0.06^{*}	0.06	-0.06	0.36^{***}	0.58^{***}
7. Company 1	0.50	0.50	0.04	0.13^{***}	-0.04	0.16^{**}	-0.16^{***}
8. Company 2	0.35	0.48	-0.10^{***}	-0.10^{**}	0.04	-0.10^{***}	0.29^{***}
9. Company 3	0.15	0.35	0.08^{**}	-0.05	0.00	-0.10^{***}	-0.17^{***}
10. Work-based social support	1.41	2.05	-0.02	-0.05	-0.01	-0.04	-0.05
11. Personal social support	2.55	3.10	-0.08^{*}	0.04	-0.02	0.06	0.04
12. Work-family balance	2.97	1.60	0.02	-0.11^{***}	-0.04	-0.13^{***}	0.15^{***}
13. Job satisfaction	3.52	7.00	0.02	0.01	-0.06	-0.04	0.04
14. Organisational commitment	3.21	6.59	0.07^{*}	-0.03	0.06	-0.02	0.08^{*}
15. Career accomplishment	3.80	4.23	0.08^{**}	-0.07^{*}	0.07^{*}	0.10^{**}	0.23^{***}

Variable	Mean	SD	6	7	8	9	10
1. Age	42.59	4.52					
2. Children under 18	0.77	1.03					
3. Elder care	0.22	0.42					
4. Education	3.53	1.36					
5. Individual income	2.64	1.16					
6. Household income	2.44	1.15					
7. Company 1	0.50	0.50	0.06				
8. Company 2	0.35	0.48	0.12^{***}	-0.74^{***}			
9. Company 3	0.15	0.35	-0.23^{***}	-0.42^{***}	-0.30^{***}		
10. Work-based social support	1.41	2.05	-0.09^{**}	-0.13^{***}	0.06	0.01^{**}	
11. Personal social support	2.55	3.10	0.02	0.02	0.03	-0.06	0.36^{***}
12. Work-family balance	2.97	1.60	-0.08^{*}	-0.05	0.03	0.04	0.10^{***}
13. Job satisfaction	3.52	7.00	-0.03	-0.10^{**}	0.02	0.11^{***}	0.29^{***}
14. Organisational commitment	3.21	6.59	-0.04	-0.17^{***}	0.05	0.17^{***}	0.23^{***}
15. Career accomplishment	3.80	4.23	0.06	-0.06^{*}	0.01	0.07	0.13^{***}

Variable	Mean	SD	11	12	13	14	15
1. Age	42.59	4.52					
2. Children under 18	0.77	1.03					
3. Elder care	0.22	0.42					
4. Education	3.53	1.36					
5. Individual income	2.64	1.16					
6. Household income	2.44	1.15					
7. Company 1	0.50	0.50					
8. Company 2	0.35	0.48					
9. Company 3	0.15	0.35					
10. Work-based social support	1.41	2.05					
11. Personal social support	2.55	3.10					
12. Work-family balance	2.97	1.60	0.13^{***}	0.72			
13. Job satisfaction	3.52	7.00	0.12^{***}	0.27^{***}	0.88		
14. Organisational commitment	3.21	6.59	0.13^{***}	0.16^{***}	0.58^{***}	0.91	
15. Career accomplishment	3.80	4.23	0.05	0.08^{*}	0.49^{***}	0.47^{***}	0.84

Notes: The number of respondents may vary somewhat for each item. α reliabilities are reported on the diagonal. $^{*}p < 0.05$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{***}p < 0.001$

Table I.
Means, standard deviations, and correlations for all variables ($N = 1089$)

| | Instrumental support | | Expressive support | |
	Number of women	Percentage of women	Number of women	Percentage of women
Work-based sources				
Supervisor	30	42	13	18
Coworker	13	18	9	13
Organisation	60	83	36	50
Personal sources				
Spouse/partner	49	68	20	28
Other family	42	58	10	14
Friends	2	3	4	6
Neighbors	3	4	0	0
Hired babysitters	5	7	0	0

Table II.
Frequency counts of women who identified sources and types of social support ($N = 72$)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Age	0.02	0.02	0.03
Children under 18	-0.13^{***}	-0.13^{***}	-0.10^{*}
Elder care	-0.06	-0.06	-0.06
Education	-0.09^{*}	-0.10^{*}	-0.11^{*}
Individual income	-0.13^{**}	-0.13^{**}	-0.15^{**}
Household income	0.03	0.03	0.04
Company 2	0.04	0.04	0.04
Company 3	0.04	0.04	0.02
Work-based social support		0.08^{*}	
Personal social support			0.17^{***}
R^2	0.05	0.06	0.07
Adjusted R^2	0.04	0.05	0.06
F	4.69^{***}	4.95^{***}	5.40^{***}
F change		4.46^{*}	18.65^{***}

Notes: Standardized coefficients – $^{*}p < 0.05$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{***}p < 0.001$

Table III.
Regression of social support on work-family balance

organisational commitment, and career accomplishment (Model 2 in each table); hence *H2a* was supported. Personal social support was positively associated with job satisfaction and organisational commitment, but not with career accomplishment (Model 3 in each table); hence *H2b* was partially supported.

Work-family balance as a mediator of social support and work outcomes. We tested *H3a* and *H3b*, that work-family balance mediates the relationship between work-based and personal social support and job satisfaction, organisational commitment, and career accomplishment for midlife working women, using hierarchical regression as shown in Tables IV-VI. Work-family balance is positively associated with job satisfaction, organisational commitment, and career accomplishment (Model 4 in each table). The coefficients for work-based social support regressed on work outcomes (Model 2 in each table) were slightly reduced with the addition of work-family balance to the model (Model 5 in each table). These results suggest that work-family balance might partially mediate the relationships between work-based social support and work outcomes, although the size of the reduction is so small that

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Age	0.02	0.03	0.02	0.01	0.02	0.02
Children under 18	0.00	−0.01	−0.04	0.04	0.02	−0.01
Elder care	−0.06	−0.05	−0.01	−0.05	−0.04	−0.00
Education	−0.06	−0.06	−0.06	−0.03	−0.03	−0.04
Individual income	0.11*	0.12*	0.11*	0.16**	0.15**	0.15**
Household income	−0.04	−0.03	−0.04	−0.05	−0.03	−0.05
Company 2	0.02	0.03	0.03	0.01	0.02	0.02
Company 3	0.11**	0.09*	0.09*	0.10**	0.08*	0.09*
Work-based social support		0.29***			0.27***	
Personal social support			0.13**			0.09*
Work-family balance				0.25***	0.25***	0.24***
R^2	0.03	0.11	0.04	0.09	0.17	0.10
Adjusted R^2	0.02	0.10	0.02	0.08	0.16	0.08
F	2.54**	10.00***	2.70**	8.13***	14.40***	6.33***
F change		63.53***	10.13**	51.04***	58.09***	24.33***

Table IV.
Regression of social support and work-family balance on job satisfaction

Notes: Standardized coefficients – $^*p < 0.05$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{***}p < 0.001$

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Age	0.08*	0.10**	0.12**	0.08*	0.10**	0.12**
Children under 18	0.01	0.00	−0.02	0.03	0.03	−0.00
Elder care	0.06	0.07	0.07	0.07	0.08*	0.08*
Education	−0.02	−0.00	0.01	0.00	0.02	0.03
Individual income	0.09*	0.09	0.08	0.12**	0.11**	0.10*
Household income	−0.06	−0.05	−0.07	−0.07	−0.06	−0.08
Company 2	0.08*	0.10*	0.11*	0.07	0.09*	0.11*
Company 3	0.22***	0.22***	0.22***	0.22***	0.21***	0.21***
Work-based social support		0.23***			0.22***	
Personal social support			0.16***			0.13**
Work-family balance				0.18***	0.16***	0.15***
R^2	0.07	0.14	0.10	0.10	0.16	0.12
Adjusted R^2	0.06	0.13	0.09	0.09	0.15	0.11
F	7.48***	12.84***	7.98***	9.68***	13.84***	8.79***
F change		42.75***	17.06***	24.95***	31.43***	15.96***

Table V.
Regression of social support and work-family balance on organisational commitment

Notes: Standardized coefficients – $^*p < 0.05$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{***}p < 0.001$

even partial mediation is not strongly supported (Baron and Kenny, 1986). The coefficients for personal social support regressed on work outcomes (Model 3 in each table) are also changed for job satisfaction and organisational commitment with the addition of work-family balance to the model (Model 6 in each table) indicating that work-family balance might partially mediate these relationships, although here too the size of the reduction is so small that even partial mediation is not guaranteed. Hence, our results at most partially support *H3a* and *H3b*. We also tested work-family balance as a moderator to address research findings that social support functions as a buffer (Sarason *et al.*, 1990; Viswesvaran *et al.*, 1999); however, this interaction was not significant for any work outcomes.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Age	0.09^*	0.09^*	0.10^{**}	0.08^*	0.09^*	0.10^*
Children under 18	-0.04	-0.05	-0.04	-0.03	-0.03	-0.03
Elder care	0.09^{**}	0.08^*	0.09^*	0.10^{**}	0.08^*	0.09^*
Education	0.02	0.03	0.04	0.03	0.04	0.04
Individual income	0.29^{***}	0.29^{***}	0.29^{***}	0.31^{***}	0.30^{***}	0.31^{***}
Household income	-0.07	-0.05	-0.07	-0.08^+	-0.05	-0.07
Company 2	-0.06	-0.06	-0.07	-0.07	-0.06	-0.08
Company 3	0.09^*	0.09^*	0.08	0.08^*	0.09^*	0.08
Work-based social support		0.13^{***}			0.12^{**}	
Personal social support			0.04			0.02
Work-family balance				0.09^{**}	0.09^*	0.09^*
R^2	0.10	0.12	0.10	0.11	0.13	0.11
Adjusted R^2	0.09	0.11	0.09	0.10	0.11	0.10
F	10.43^{***}	10.73^{***}	8.13^{***}	10.07^{***}	10.16^{***}	7.90^{***}
F change		12.61^{***}	0.98	5.84^*	8.83^{***}	2.96^+

Notes: Standardized coefficients – $^*p < 0.05$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $^{***}p < 0.001$

Table VI.
Regression of social support and work-family balance on career accomplishment

The nature of social support

As noted above, we first analysed the nature of social support using Lin's (1986) two types of support, instrumental and expressive (Table II). We further categorised the functions of each type of social support and found that the functions varied by source, as illustrated in Table VII, which also includes representative examples of the functions of each type of support provided from both work-based and personal sources, as well as frequency counts for each distinct mention of that function.

The most common kinds of work-based instrumental support were creating flexible schedules and offering benefits and human resources policies that met the women's needs. In contrast, personal instrumental support focused more on child care and financial support. The function of expressive support also differed for work-based and personal sources. Work-based expressive support most commonly included understanding the needs of the midlife women and supporting their performing family responsibilities. Personal expressive support, on the other hand, was primarily either support for the woman's career or provision of emotional support. Many of the women discussed the necessity of their full network of support (from both work and personal sources) for achieving work-family balance and maintaining their careers.

Discussion

Social support has been explored for many years in different literatures; however, research has fragmented work and personal sources of support and linked these sources to different outcomes. Our study integrates the sources of support to demonstrate that the full network of support has consequences for work-family balance and work outcomes. When we juxtapose the qualitative data with the quantitative data, a complex picture of the relationship of social support to the work-family balance and career attitudes of women at midlife emerges. We did not ask a separate question that focused solely on social support in our interviews; yet the women clearly identified it in their responses to questions about their work and life responsibilities, how they effectively

Table VII.
Functions of social
support for working
women at midlife
($N = 72$)

Sources of social support	Types of social support	
	Instrumental	Expressive
Work-based sources		
Supervisor	*Flexible schedule (30)*	*Understanding (8)*
	If an emergency comes up, the staff themselves, and I think that by management affording this opportunity as far as the flexibility goes, that filters down to people's peers and they will say, if somebody has a last minute thing to do, there's all sorts of swapping going on in order to accommodate people	Also I think it depends on who you work for. My superior is really nice; very, very understanding. And so you have that as a big plus
		Supportive of family/juggling (8)
		A supportive husband and a supportive boss. The boss is no problem because she is juggling too, and all the other nurses are too
		Support of career (5)
		My director has been supportive and allowed me to attend conferences or meetings and keeping us up to date on current issues
Coworker	*Cover for you (6)*	*Share life experiences and understand (9)*
	We all know what our responsibilities are, we work well together as a team, and I know that if I have an emergency that comes up, one of my coworkers is there and willing to help pick up and fill in and take care, and I do the same for them when they are not there	I felt like they were my family because you actually spend more waking hours with these people at work, and they were very helpful when I had changes going on in our life, when our son left home for college
	Flexibility with scheduling changes (7)	
	I cannot speak for the whole organisation, but in my area, everybody works things out. And if you need time off or if you need to come in late or something, they work it out for you too	

(continued)

Sources of social support	Types of social support	
	Instrumental	Expressive
Organisation	*Benefit, including day care, retirement planning, training, education, health insurance, fitness centers, meals vacation (62)*	*Understanding culture/environment (28)*
	I think they care about the people that work here and you can see the retirement system, they have changed things to have a 401K account, it gives you a lot of flexibility because you can choose a program where the fund is managed or you can do it all yourself. I think we have decent health insurance benefits, and we have life insurance that we can buy, optional. I really think they have tried hard to provide stuff	This is probably the best employer I have had. And it is part of the culture, especially in administration, but it has been great. If you need time off for something, all you have to do is request it, they are very understanding, and they trust you to juggle successfully at work too
	Flexible schedule (54)	*Supportive of family/juggling (19)*
	Being flexible with the schedule and allowing me to determine what my needs are has been good. So between the vacation time and the flex time, to be able to juggle like that really helps	Everybody is so supportive, the chairman, president, everybody. They called up and said, "You stay home when you need to stay home. You come in when you can come in." So it is really an environment where there is not that added pressure that you are supposed to be at work instead of doing other things
	Policy (8)	
	The policy is very generous. We have dependent medical leave, so if you need to be off for family, all types of available things to be off and have your job protected and your benefits paid	

Table VII.

Table VII.

Sources of social support	Types of social support	
	Instrumental	Expressive
Personal sources		
Spouse/partner	*Childcare (52)*	*Support of career(17)*
	While he was at work it was my responsibility; when he was there, he would chip in and feed one of them while I was feeding another one or something like that. He helped with their baths. If we went somewhere- of course, we had two babies essentially, and he would have a baby and I would have a baby. We worked together	And I do go in the direction that there is challenges and that is interesting to me, and not just repetitive things that I have done before just because it would work out better for his schedule. And he is supported that
	Household chores (31)	*Emotional support (9)*
	You do not find a lot of men that will do what he is always done. He will cook, and he will help. He washes clothes, he will vacuum clean, he is probably a better housekeeper that I am	Sense of humor! A very supportive husband. Although he works lots and lots of hours, he is very supportive, very understanding and he never comes home in a bad mood, so that's really key
	Financial support (3)	
	I have the feeling that if I was out of a job for a few months, he would help me along until I could get back into another job. So that is a good feeling, it is a little more secure	

(continued)

Sources of social support	Types of social support	
	Instrumental	Expressive
Other family members	*Childcare (39)* And the resources I had available to me, between my sister – like I said, I have five sisters. One of them was always at home. I always had at least one sister who was at home and my in-laws, so I always had care-givers that were family *Financial support (3)* When I did work, we moved out of their house, and I just bought a house of my own. So they are helping me now with the mortgage	*Emotional support (5)* And I guess being comfortable. And with family support, I have always had family and friends to support me. So I have never really felt like I am hanging out there and going to fail *Support of career(5)* I like working here. I am glad; my father is the one that kind of directed me for what field I should go in, and which college
Friends	*Childcare (2)* So she was only with a caretaker for an hour or two, it was my mother's best friend so it was someone I could trust. I never had to pay for daycare	*Emotional support (4)* I have a very strong group of friends, both married friends, couples, and single female friends that I have known for a very long time, so that's kind of like my support group
Neighbors	*Childcare (3)* And I can remember leaving my son home sick when he was like nine, by himself because I came to work. And I had a neighbor check in on him	
Hired babysitters	*Childcare- flexible scheduling (5)* The babysitter was great too. If I ever had to work late, or came home late, it was not a big problem	

Table VII.

balanced those responsibilities, and what facilitated their doing so. Thus, their responses illustrate the strong salience of social support for them.

The relationship between social support, work-family balance, and work outcomes
Our results suggest full support for the hypotheses that both work-based and personal social support are associated with work-family balance. In addition, work-based social support was associated with all of the work outcomes tested, and personal social support was associated with job satisfaction and organisational commitment. These results are consistent with research on the workplace (Allen, 2001; Ducharme and Martin, 2000) and on spouses (Gordon and Whelan-Berry, 2004), but previous studies were limited by including sources of support from only one domain. This study includes relationships from both domains illustrating the relevance of an individual's complete network of work-based (organisation, manager, and coworkers) and personal relationships (spouse or partner, other family members, friends, and neighbors). These results suggest that the sources of support are important and may reinforce each other to facilitate work-family balance. Future research should further explore the nature of this interaction as a way of showing organisations how to provide effective support and informing individuals how to invest their personal resources.

Both work-based social support and work-family balance are associated with job satisfaction, organisational commitment, and career accomplishment. These results suggest that organisations should continue to offer supportive organisational policies and train managers and other employees to identify and implement ways they can support midlife women's efforts in balancing work and family. Personal social support is also associated with job satisfaction and organisational commitment, but not with career accomplishment, of midlife women. These results are consistent with research indicating that extra-work conditions and relationships affect work (Near *et al.*, 1980). Organisations need to understand that not only does organisational support encourage desired work outcomes, such as job satisfaction and organisational commitment, but so does personal social support. Organisations might explore ways to allow their employees to provide the personal support needed by others in their network, such as through providing flexible work hours, job sharing, or part-time employment, which would allow female employees to find ways to share childcare or eldercare responsibilities with other midlife women. Organisations can contribute to an ongoing cycle of support among individuals and groups. It is somewhat surprising that personal support is not associated with career accomplishment given its relationship to job satisfaction and organisational commitment. Perhaps, the women make the link between non-work support and the immediate, short-term requirements of the job and organisation, but not the longer-term commitments associated with their careers. Future studies might show a link and so should examine such a possibility.

We found partial mediation of work-family balance on the relationship between social support and work outcomes, although the effect is small. This may begin to suggest the process by which social support affects work outcomes for midlife women. Although we expected that social support would be positively associated with work-family balance, which in turn would be associated with work outcomes, the weakness of the partial mediation suggests that the mechanism of influence between social support and work outcomes is more direct. Future research should test this relationship with other samples to validate that a direct rather than indirect relationship exists.

The nature of social support
Our results indicate that the women perceive that they experience a higher overall level of personal social support than work-based social support. Most likely, this difference exists because women feel more comfortable asking for support outside the workplace. The women might expect that they will be viewed as less committed to their job if they explicitly request support from the organisation itself, supervisors, or coworkers to facilitate work-family balance. Further, because of their experience in the workplace and the extent to which work-family was just becoming a salient issue for their generation, these women more likely sought support from outside rather than inside the workplace.

Our interviews indicate that the women received both instrumental and expressive support from the organisation, supervisors, coworkers, spouses, family, and friends. The specific functions of support within these categories are quite different based on the source. Instrumental support from the work domain, especially supervisors and coworkers, helps women when it facilitates flexible scheduling and fosters the security that someone will cover for them if they need to miss work for family obligations or emergencies. In contrast, instrumental support from the family domain is primarily childcare from spouse or partner, family, friends, neighbors, babysitters and financial support from spouses or partners and other family members. Expressive support from the organisation, supervisors, and coworkers is important when it is supportive of family and demonstrates an understanding of when the women need to juggle demands from the work and home domains. In the personal domain, women cited emotional support, from spouses or partners, other family members, and friends, as important. Support for their careers was especially important from their spouses or partners, as well as from other family members.

Although we would expect personal support to provide primarily expressive functions, such as emotional support and encouragement, the instrumental nature of this support is most common for women at midlife. This finding, the degree to which women discuss instrumental functions from personal sources, is somewhat unexpected and suggests ecologies of relationships that provide mutually reinforcing support. Women who understand the type of support that they require can look to diverse sources to provide support, even choosing multiple sources to reinforce the required social support. Similarly, organisations can encourage networks of support in which organisational policies and management training help identify the array of sources and types possible.

Limitations and directions for future research
Our study confirms the relationships of both work-based and personal support to work-family balance and work outcomes for midlife women. Most research, including the study reported here, uses perceptual measures to assess social support. Although perceptions typically reflect the objective situation, the actual support women receive from work-based and personal sources may vary somewhat from the perceived support they attribute to these sources. Future research might first compare the subjective and objective measures and then evaluate any differences in their relationship to work-family balance and work outcomes.

Our study looked at all women between the ages of 35 and 50 in three organisations. Although these organisations varied by industry and geographical location,

an expansion of the study sample to include additional industries and locations would be valuable. Similarly, our sample was almost entirely composed of Caucasian women. Expanding the sample to include men along with other racial and ethnic groups, whose attitudes and experiences with social support may differ, would be valuable.

This survey provides insight into important relationships among the variables in our model. Common methods variance is a limitation to the use of one survey instrument; however, the addition of qualitative data that support the link between social support and work-life balance helps to alleviate this issue. Because the relationships among variables are associations, a longitudinal design is required to more accurately determine the direction of causality. Future research should focus on assessing the relationships over time, which would also offer the opportunity for obtaining insight into the dynamics of the work-family interface as it evolves and changes.

We used our qualitative results to begin to understand the functions of the social support provided. Further, analysis of these functions and their frequencies with a larger and more diverse sample would be beneficial. Similarly, the development of additional instruments to measure the type, source, and functions of social support would be a useful direction for future research. This development would allow us to conduct research that links the type of social support to work-family balance or work outcomes. Future research should also examine the differential impact of instrumental and expressive support for midlife working women.

Conclusion
This research has taken the next step in unbundling the impact of social support on work outcomes. In particular, we have contributed to the literatures on social support, work-life issues, and careers by linking the complete network of social support, from work and home, to the work-life balance and career outcomes of midlife working women. We have indicated a spillover from support outside the workplace to the work-related outcomes of job satisfaction and organisational commitment. Midlife women can benefit from their organisations increasing the work-based social support they provide through crafting responsive organisational policies and training managers and coworkers to provide support. Midlife women can also benefit from seeking and accepting assistance from organisations, family, and friends, thereby ending attempts to be a superwoman, who singly manages work and home responsibilities.

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