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Employee Age and the Work–Family Interface: A Meta-Analysis and Framework Integrating Life Span and Life Course Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

Research on the relationship between age and the work–family interface (WFI) is critical to effective human resource management. Yet, findings remain inconsistent and lack theoretical integration. We conducted a meta-analysis ($k = 256$, $n = 186{,}109$) integrating lifespan and life course perspectives to develop a model of the relationship between age and the WFI. Drawing on socio-emotional selectivity theory (SEST), a prevalent lifespan approach, results reveal a significant linear relationship between age and the WFI, with variation contingent on the construct and directionality. Age was negatively associated with work-to-family conflict, family-to-work conflict, and family-to-work enrichment, and positively associated with work-to-family enrichment and work–family balance. We integrated a life course view to examine how personal (gender, race, age cohort), situational (job, marital status), and contextual (national, global) factors moderate these relationships. Declines in work-to-family conflict with age occurred for men but not women, suggesting a widening gender gap for older compared to younger workers. The negative association between age and work-to-family conflict was stronger than for family-to-work conflict among older adults (over age 50 cohort) and professionals. Younger adult workers under 30 reported significant work-to-family conflict. The relationship between age and the WFI was significantly moderated by national (U.S., Non-U.S.) and global (Global North, Global South) contexts, with the strength of age-related patterns in work–family conflict varying by gender and job status. Our results highlight that future HRM studies and organizational practice should focus on advancing age-inclusive policies to better address the increasingly varied age and work–family relationships across many employee subgroups.

1 | Introduction

Rapid workforce aging in major economies such as the U.S., the E.U., and China (Nagarajan et al. 2019; White et al. 2018) are reshaping work–life (W-L) dynamics, driving the critical need for Human Resource Management (HRM) researchers and practitioners to improve understanding of the relationship between employee age and the work–family interface (WFI) to enhance policies and practices (Halvorsen et al. 2020). At early and mid-life age stages, employees' plummeting birth rates and delayed or forgone family formation are creating social and financial crises, particularly in major industrialized world economies (Toossi 2015), by creating labor supply gaps and declining funding of retiree and other social welfare benefits. At later life

stages, nonwork pressures are growing, as the World Health Organization has projected that 22% of the world's population will be over the age of 60 years by 2050, a statistic doubling from 2015, reflecting a substantial increase in employee caregiving and health demands (WHO 2024).

Despite growing awareness of these dramatic workforce shifts, the advancement of understanding on how employers can improve support of these transforming work–family experiences as employees age over their careers is being held back by a lack of cumulative theoretical and empirical integration, as findings are mixed and scattered across various literatures. The purpose of this study is to incorporate theory and research from the lifespan and life course perspectives on aging in order to ground a meta-analytical review on the relationships between age and the various constructs within the work–family interface. Our study provides insights to foster the development of HRM policies that will improve support for older workers, workers at different ages, and an increasingly age-diverse workforce.

Given the proliferating effects of an aging workforce on employment trends (Allen and Finkelstein 2014), we seek to address several critical gaps in the existing literature. First, we disentangle the mixed findings on age and the work–family interface. Although there has been growth in the study of the work–family interface within the human resources (HR) and management literatures in recent years (Allen and Eby 2016; Kossek et al. 2021), including meta-analytic reviews (e.g., French et al. 2018; Kossek et al. 2011; Michel et al. 2010; Shockley et al. 2017), "none have included age or family stage variables" (Allen and Finkelstein 2014, 376) as a substantive variable of study. Moreover, Thrasher et al. (2016) describe current scholarly understanding of the relationship between age and work–family conflict as "nebulous", indicating a lack of theoretical or empirical understanding. For example, individual studies have reported a range of conflicting findings: from positive (Buonocore et al. 2015; Li et al. 2015; McManus et al. 2002) to negative (Eagle et al. 1998; Shockley and Allen 2013) to nonsignificant relationships (Blanch and Aluja 2009; Derks et al. 2016; Kim and Gong 2017).

Given these limitations in the current literature, there have been calls for more research on the role that chronological age plays in employee experiences of the workplace (e.g., Kulik et al. 2014), including the work–family interface (Allen and Finkelstein 2014). We draw on a prevalent lifespan perspective, socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen 1992, 1998), to conduct one of the first comprehensive meta-analytic reviews with explicit hypotheses about the direct relationships that age is expected to have with the work–family interface for three often studied constructs: work–family conflict (WFC, FWC), work–family enrichment (WFE, FWE), and work–family balance (WFB). Conceptually, this meta-analysis is important because little work has been done to develop the theoretical rationale explaining why age should be related to these outcomes. Empirically, this research is important in that meta-analyses have been shown to be a valuable approach for adding to evidence-based understanding for HRM by addressing variability in the strength and direction of cumulative effect sizes across studies, and to examine theory relevant to particular work–family relationships (Pindeck et al. 2017). Practically speaking, our study is important because the workforce is aging rapidly and is becoming more age diverse (Baltes and Young 2007; Truxillo et al. 2015). Many workers are also continuing to work later in life (Baltes and Young 2007; Toossi 2015). Younger and older workers are working together more so today than ever before. These trends make it important to better understand how age is related to the WFI (Baltes and Young 2007) to advance HR initiatives.

We integrate theorizing on the relationship between age and the WFI, which is scattered across disciplines and often siloed between two prominent frameworks: the "lifespan" perspective (e.g., Carstensen 1992, 1998) and "life course" perspective (e.g., Antonucci et al. 2010). In doing so, we answer calls from scholars (Zacher and Froidevaux 2021) to integrate lifespan and life course views and apply this to the study of the work-family interface. While lifespan scholars tend to focus on main effects relevant to broad workforce aging trends, life course scholars examine how individual life course factors (e.g., personal, situational, contextual characteristics) intersect with and shape the WFI to enhance or reduce these aging patterns. Integrating lifespan and life course theories, as shown in Figure 1, helps us better understand relationships between age and the WFI over the life span, and the boundaries of these relationships for employees with varying life course factors.

Below, we first examine the main overall relationship between age and the commonly used measures of the WFI. Then we examine individual employee moderators (i.e., life course factors such as gender) for which we had sufficient sample size (typically WFC) that are scattered across disciplinary literature, to provide new insights for why age might be differentially related to certain work–family outcomes for individuals with varying socio-demographic backgrounds. We also consider contextual factors that are under-addressed, such as national context (U.S. vs. Non-U.S) and global context (Global North vs. Global South). Finally, we explore a person-centered approach defined as the "clustering of people with shared characteristics or situations" (Woo et al. 2018, 816) to explore several life course measures in context, such as how gender or job status is related to work–family conflict between Global North versus Global South countries.

2 | Socioemotional Selectivity Lifespan Theory, Age, and the Work–Family Interface

From the *lifespan* perspective, the most commonly evoked theory is Socioemotional Selectivity Theory (SEST; Carstensen 1992, 1998), a psychological development theory. SEST links variation in an individual's prioritization of goals (i.e., instrumental and socioemotional) and how an individual perceives time (i.e., their present or future perspective) to aging. It assumes that a key factor determining the selection or pursuit of these goals is an individual's perception of time. Younger individuals typically perceive time as being more open-ended and prioritize instrumental goals (i.e., knowledge acquisition). In contrast, older individuals perceive time as being more limited and, as a result, prioritize socioemotional and relational goals (Carstensen 1998). The theory also assumes that individuals' subjective perceptions of future time gradually change from being perceived as relatively more limitless to more limited as people age over

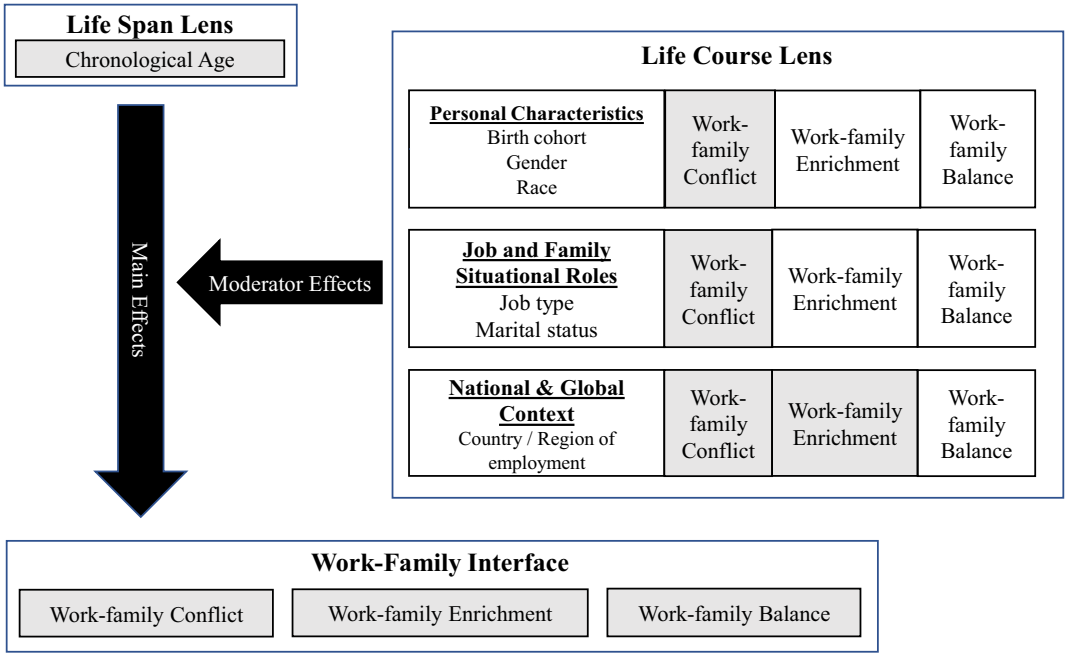

FIGURE 1 | A lifespan and life course perspective on aging and the work-family interface. (1) This framework suggested from patterns we saw in our review of 233 articles and 186,109 employees. The variables in the boxes are illustrative but by no means exhaustive. (2) The shaded areas indicate relationships we were able to test with available data, and where there is the clearest empirical support. The unshaded areas represent literature gaps we identified that need to be addressed in future empirical research to validate.

the lifespan. These changes alter individuals' prioritization of tasks (e.g., knowledge acquisition) toward relational goals involving positive socio-emotional experiences, a tradeoff relevant to work–family conflict (Baltes et al. 1999; Lockenhoff and Carstensen 2004). We argue that these changes in prioritization of tasks, combined with other changes, such as changes in affect as one ages, drive employee outcomes. Based on these SEST concepts, below we discuss how age is expected to relate to the typical measures assessing the work–family interface.

2.1 | Age and Work–Family Conflict

Work–family conflict has been defined as when the expectations and demands from one's work role interfere with the demands from one's family role (Greenhaus and Beutell 1985). Based on SEST and empirical support from existing research, we argue that the increased tendency of individuals to place a greater focus on socioemotional goals (Carstensen 1992; Super 1980) and the quality of social relationships, as they get older, will lead to a decrease in work–family conflict. First, theory and research based on SEST suggest that one's focus on career growth motives occurring at a younger age shifts toward more security and social motives at an older age (Carstensen 1998). These social motives often manifest as an increased emphasis on allocating time toward family relationships and leisure activities and a life outside of work (Bramble et al. 2019; Evans and Bartolomé 1984; Rudolph et al. 2013). When individuals place an increased priority on socioemotional goals over task goals, they are aligning these goals with their own internal values and needs related to work and family (Kanfer and Ackerman 2004). The increase in prioritization of familial social relationships is associated with an increase in the availability of social support (derived from one's family domain) that helps to reduce work–family conflict (Michel et al. 2010).

Second, workers are likely to have developed emotional regulation strategies that are effective for their own life circumstances (Blanchard-Fields 2007; Hill et al. 2014). The enhanced focus on socioemotional goals as workers' age is related to an increased focus on positive experiences and a decreased focus on the negative aspects of the work environment (Ng and Feldman 2010). For example, Bruine de Bruin et al. (2014) found evidence that older workers cope more effectively with loss and failed plans due to the avoidance of negative thoughts and accumulated knowledge and experiences. Indeed, studies have found evidence that older workers may perceive difficult work situations as less stressful than younger workers because of their experience and confidence in handling work situations (Matthews et al. 2010; Peng et al. 2018). Thus, the prioritization of socioemotional goals (Peng et al. 2018) and improved emotional regulation as one ages is likely to increase positive affect and decrease negative affect and reduce psychological strain, including work–family conflict[1] (Alam et al. 2019; Michel and Clark 2009; Thrasher et al. 2016).

2.2 | Age and Work–Family Enrichment

Work–family enrichment refers to "the extent to which experiences in one role improve the quality of life in the other role" (Greenhaus and Powell 2006, 73). Studies find that older workers tend to report higher levels of work–family enrichment (e.g., Wang et al. 2017) for several reasons. First, it is likely that as one ages, work–family enrichment may increase due to the ability to accumulate more work resources, knowledge, and skills at work

to support the nonwork domain (Greenhaus and Powell 2006). Older workers are also likely to be paid more than younger workers and have more financial resources to support the family role (Hammer et al. 2022). They are likely to be in more senior positions that provide more autonomy and flexibility to enable them to restructure work to support the family role and be able to apply time and energy resources to the family role, which could simultaneously reduce job demands, freeing up more time for family roles (Demerouti et al. 2012). Second, older workers may have more work experiences that develop their skills in prioritizing, managing, and leading job tasks, which are capabilities that they also may be able to apply to the family role. Other individual factors, such as confidence and identity certainty, increase with age (Cate and John 2007). The change in future time perspective that occurs with age may enhance increases in work–family enrichment (Baltes et al. 1999; Henry and Desmette 2018). Therefore, the increased job resources and reduced job demands that individuals experience with increased age should increase work–family enrichment.

2.3 | Age and Work–Family Balance

In contrast to work–family conflict and work–family enrichment, which capture the bidirectional nature (i.e., work-to-family and family-to-work) of negative and positive work–family interactions, *work–family balance* has emerged as a separate construct in research (Valcour 2007). It refers to an "employees' evaluation of the favorability of their combination of work and nonwork roles" (Casper et al. 2018, 197). Scholars have consistently argued that work–family balance is distinct from work–family conflict and enrichment, and is important to study in its own right (e.g., Frone 2003); meta-analytic data have substantiated this argument (e.g., Casper et al. 2018). Work–family balance is more than the absence of conflict and related variables, such as illness, etc. (Casper et al. 2018). Older workers may have increased work–family balance because of their family responsibilities, working conditions, and financial status (Richert-Kaźmierska and Stankiewicz 2016; Tomida et al. 2021).

As workers get older and their children move toward or enter adulthood, they generally will experience a reduction in their family role demands, which allows time to achieve more balance across their various life roles. In addition, older employees are no longer starting out in their careers; thus, they have more stability in their work roles. Having career and financial stability, and social support to assist with work–family issues, also gives older workers the opportunity to experience more balance (Tomida et al. 2021). These arguments indicate that older workers accumulate more social, family, and work resources as they age, which enables more opportunities to experience work–life balance. According to SEST theory, older workers also tend to become more motivated to allocate time for social roles outside of work, including family, which could be related to increases in work–family balance. As workers age, work–family conflict decreases (Thrasher et al. 2016), work–family enrichment increases (Grzywacz et al. 2002), and hence work–family balance is expected to also increase with age (Frone 2003). The application of SEST to understanding how the WFI (work–family conflict, work–family enrichment, and work–family balance) and age relate to each other over the lifespan suggests:

Hypothesis 1(a–e). *Chronological age is negatively related to* (*a*) *work-to-family conflict and* (*b*) *family-to-work conflict; positively related to* (*c*) *work-to-family enrichment and* (*d*) *family-to-work enrichment; and positively related to* (*e*) *work–family balance.*

3 | Integrating Life Course Views on Moderating Factors Influencing Relationships Between Age and the Work–Family Interface

Lifespan perspectives, particularly SEST, offer insights about how an individual's experiences with the WFI over the lifespan may be generally attributable to variation in future time perspectives and socioemotional and task tradeoffs as one ages. Yet this perspective often ignores the personal, social, and situational factors that may socially benefit or hinder a person's life outcomes. While the *lifespan* perspective focuses on general individual psychological development, *life course* views are rooted in sociological approaches that emphasize how aging occurs within a social context, where life social constraints and resources, embedded social roles, and social structures shape individual outcomes over life periods (Mayer 2003). Applying life course theory (e.g., Antonucci et al. 2010), we argue that age influences the WFI through personal (i.e., age cohort group, gender, race/ethnicity), situational (i.e., marital status, job status), or contextual (e.g., nation or region of employment) factors that can shape and alter one's life course. While these commonly examined life course factors intersect with age to create unique work–family dynamics, these relationships are not well integrated into the W-F and HR meta-analytic studies (e.g., Byron 2005; Shockley et al. 2017).

An important limitation of a lifespan perspective is that it does not directly address differences in socio-demographic backgrounds, societal structures and roles, and formal social or institutional structures that are known to affect employees' current or downstream outcomes over the life course. We theorize that these are important factors to consider because they can shape relationships between age and the work–family interface and thus influence the strength of these relationships. Thus, life course theory offers a complementary perspective to lifespan theory as related to the WFI. A key life course concept that is relevant for understanding variation in relationships between age and WFI is the notion of "linked lives", which suggests that an individual's work and nonwork life experiences are "linked" to others, such as family members or partners who may be ongoing care recipients or have their own careers (Zacher and Froidevaux 2021). For example, primary family caregivers may have more time constraints on their availability for work hours or job gaps, which may influence their career achievement.

A life course view of aging examines how factors that affect groups of individuals will affect the subsequent life trajectories of individuals (Mayer 2003; Moen et al. 2008; Zacher and Frese 2009). Lifespan perspectives on aging generally ignore this linked perspective. The changes that individuals experience across the lifespan, for example, as related to future time perspective and emotional regulation, are likely contingent upon or vary across certain personal, situational, and contextual factors and, hence, a life course view. The life course

approach often takes a group-based perspective by examining how a group of people with a shared value, perspective, or a common socio-demographic characteristic may experience life events similarly. Indeed, a number of studies that have approached the study of the work–family interface using an age cohort group approach (e.g., young adult, early middle age, late middle age, older adult) by identifying how various socio-demographics or other life course factors (e.g., students graduating during COVID) can lead individuals from a particular age cohort group to experience the work–family interface differently (e.g., Moen et al. 2008).

Applying a life course view also suggests that individual socio-demographic factors (e.g., gender, race) are likely to shape or bound relationships between age and the work–family interface, since these characteristics often co-vary with job and nonwork experiences (Antonucci et al. 2010; Mayer 2003). Life course theory assumes that individuals' differing life demands, opportunities, and resources are likely to be socially determined in ways that create advantages and disadvantages to shape not only current but also downstream life outcomes as people age. Social contexts are assumed to influence individuals' access to and the distribution of resources, which may be influenced by prior life events (e.g., having a child while in college, or a career gap from leaving the labor force to care for a parent). Resources can come from different sources such as occupational structures (e.g., job roles), nonwork resources (e.g., career support from a spouse), household division of labor (e. g., the domestic roles of women and men), social groups and networks (e.g., minorities, gender), and national policies and norms regarding work–family supports (Carroll and Mayer 1986; Esping-Andersen 1999).

3.1 | Personal Demographic Factors

3.1.1 | Age Cohort Group

Based on a life course perspective, "a cohort is a group of persons who were born during the same time period and who experience particular social changes within a given culture in the same sequence and at the same age" (Hutchinson 2010). Studies of cohort effects examine trends or relationships reflective of "populations born at a particular point and time, but which is independent of the process of aging" (Blanchard et al. 1977, 137). Related to the concept of generational groups, which generally span 20 years, cohorts or age groups reflect a shorter time period—often 10 years (Hutchinson 2010).

The life course literature contends that aging is influenced by one's social context, which can include not just demographics, but also age-graded factors, such as historical context, as well as institutions, social roles, and societal norms (Gee et al. 2007). This being the case, previous studies have used age cohort and generational group as moderators of relationships between age and various outcomes (e.g., Bell 2014; Leuty and Hansen 2014). In sum, while age and cohort age groups are different conceptually and operationally, they have been studied in the life course literature both separately and together (e.g., Bell 2014; Gee et al. 2007; Riley and Johnson Fonner 1972).

While the exact definition of older workers[2] varies across sources and may continuously change as careers and life spans continue to lengthen, scholars have consistently posited that one's life stage or age group, should moderate the relationship between age and work–family conflict (Mayer 2003; Moen et al. 2008; Zacher and Frese 2009). Support for this assumption that the strength of the relationship between age and the WFI may differ by age cohort also comes from Baltes' (1968, 145) seminal research noting that "age development can systematically differ among cohorts." Such an association is consistent with Bronfenbrenner's ecological (Bronfenbrenner 1979) view of adult development suggesting that individuals over the life course are differentially exposed to and shaped by systems in which they are embedded. Thrasher et al. (2016) argue that, because of this, the levels of family and work role stressors change across the life course as well. A cohort analysis examines how the strength of the relationship between age and work–family interface experiences varies across an age group. For the workplace, these groups might include: early adult workers (age cohort of less than 30 years), early middle age employees (cohort of 30–39 years), late middle age (cohort of 40–49 years), and older adults (cohort of over 50 years). Research traditionally assumes that, in comparison with younger and older worker age cohort groups, work–family demands are highest among middle-aged workers, because middle age is a time in life where individuals are jointly focused on career and family development (Allen and Finkelstein 2014; Huffman et al. 2013). In contrast, workers in the empty nest stage of life experience the lowest levels of work–family demands (Martinengo et al. 2010). Studies of academics found that being older protected workers from likely negative effects of work–family conflict on life satisfaction (Mauno et al. 2013). Consistent with these arguments are studies showing that older worker cohort groups (e.g., empty nesters in the 50–60 age group) tend to experience decreasing levels of work–family demands, compared to younger cohort groups (e.g., early adults in the under 30 age cohort) (e.g., Huffman et al. 2013; Martinengo et al. 2010). Based on the life course view, we predict that:

Hypothesis 2. *The negative relationship between age and work-to-family conflict and family-to-work conflict will be moderated by age cohort group, such that the relationship will be stronger for those in older age cohort groups and weaker for those in younger age cohort groups.*

3.1.2 | Gender

A life course perspective suggests that the relationship between work–family conflict and age differs between men and women as they age, creating a gender gap in family demands that is greater among older workers than younger workers. Specifically, the overall rate of decline in the negative relationship between age and work–family conflict is likely to be lower for women than for men. The reason for the growing gender gap in nonwork demands as employees age is that women compared to men have (1) a different life cycle of caregiving where they have a greater likelihood of on-going or increasing caregiving burden at the same time that their work hours may be stable or increasing; and (2) differences in family structures

where women often have less access to a partner who is able to provide nonwork support.

It is well-established that the gender gap in carrying out unpaid family care and other domestic demands remains persistent across all ages (Glynn 2018). A cross-national time expenditure study by the International Labor Organization (ILO) not only reported that women spend on average nearly 20% of their day on care and other domestic labor versus 8% among men, it identified different patterns between men and women in how time is distributed to work and care demands as they age (Charmes 2019). For women from their period of entering the labor market in their 20s to their 60s, in most countries, family demands stayed constant or sometimes even increased, unlike men's demands. This trend is due even in Nordic countries, where gender equality is high, women's care demands did not necessarily decline. The reason for this growing gender gap in domestic labor is due to women's greater likelihood to take on additional care responsibilities (e.g., elder care, adult care for spouse, older children, sandwiched care for both children and adults). While these additional unpaid care demands were being taken on, typically at an earlier age, compared to men (Labbas and Stanfors 2023), middle-aged and senior women also worked longer hours compared to younger women. Some may be returning to the labor force full time after having either taken a family leave or worked reduced hours for child care earlier in their careers (Charmes 2019). Yet men's family demands overall did not necessarily increase until they were over 65 years, coinciding with retirement or reduced work (Charmes 2019).

Studies also show that even if working men have family demands, these care needs are less intensive and less frequent, than the family demands of working women as they age (Barzallo et al. 2024; Ophir and Polos 2021). For example, working women are typically the primary caregiver for elderly adults and family with special needs. These additional roles can involve negative and unpredictable care demands involving illness, hospitalization, or death. Such care roles may not be taken on voluntarily, which can have negative ramifications for mental health (Mize and Kincaid 2025), work–family conflict (Kossek, Noe & Colquitt, 2001), and career experiences (Plagnol and Easterlin 2008). Additional evidence of general differences in older women and men's differing care demands as they age is provided by Hill et al. (2014) study findings that older men reported significantly less awareness and use of work–life programs and less family-to-work conflict than older women.

Finally, older women also often have different family structures and are less likely to have a partner providing family support than older men or younger men and women. Studies show that older women are more likely to live alone compared to older men, as a greater percentage of women choose, if divorced or widowed, not to remarry as they age (Span 2016). At the same time, older women are also retiring later than in the past (Bailyn et al. 2025; Span 2016). Based on the life course view, we predict that:

Hypothesis 3. *The negative relationship between age and work-to-family conflict and family-to-work conflict will be moderated by gender, such that the relationship will be weaker for women and stronger for men.*

3.1.3 | Race

Two interrelated sets of life course factors may account for differences by race: differences in life stressors and reasons for working into older age. Life stressors tend to decrease across later stages of adulthood, due to employment becoming more stable and children growing into independence (Almeida and Horn 2004; Thrasher et al. 2016). However, non-Whites tend to experience higher levels of life stressors than Whites across the lifespan due to conditions beyond an individual's control, such as systemic institutional racism (Scott-Jones and Kamara 2020) and social inequalities (Iceland and Ludwig-Dehm 2019; Yang 2008). Those who identify as non-White may also have fewer resources to manage stressors (e.g., Turner and Marino 1994). While many individuals are working longer into older age due to financial insecurity (AARP 2013), workers who identify as non-White are at higher risk for not having pension plans and having little to no retirement benefit plans and/or retirement savings (Rhee 2013). Thus, while increased age is associated with a shift in socioemotional goals prioritizing family over work, those who identify as non-White may have fewer opportunities to do so than Whites.

Such patterns also relate to recent theorizing on work–family intersectionality, which considers how different combinations of sociodemographic variables such as race and age may be relevant to how individuals manage the WFI and differentially shape work–family dynamics to make individuals more likely to experience stigmatization, higher work–family demands, and lower access to resources to support the work–nonwork nexus over the life course (Kossek et al. 2023). Based on the life course view, we predict that:

Hypothesis 4. *The negative relationship between age and work-to-family conflict and family-to-work conflict will be moderated by race, such that the relationship will be weaker for non-Whites and stronger for Whites.*

3.2 | Work and Family Role Situational Factors

Job status (i.e., professional, white-collar workers) affects one's social status, privilege, and access to formal workplace supports that can be helpful for managing work and nonwork roles. Professionals enjoy higher social status and privileges, such as higher pay, greater job autonomy, and the ability to access resources to facilitate the balance of work and family (e.g., private childcare; Gorman and Vallas 2020). As professionals progress in their careers, the rewards from these favorable job conditions (e.g., steady salary growth, advancement in careers with little to no delay less physically demanding work) are cumulative, often at faster rates than those of non-professional workers (Hsu 2018). Moreover, non-professionals such as lower-level service workers have decreased access to flexible work schedules for work–family needs, which can lead to increased work–family conflict over the lifespan (e.g., Kossek and Lautsch 2017).

While increased age is typically associated with a shift toward socioemotional goals that include the prioritization of family over work, non-professionals may have fewer opportunities to follow this lifespan trajectory than professional workers. The

shift toward more socioemotional goals that comes with age and that reduces work–family conflict is more realistic for professional workers. It is easier to shift one's time, attention, and resources away from work as one ages when one has the resources of a professional worker, such as higher pay, greater job autonomy, and the ability to access resources to facilitate work and family balance. Non-professional workers face different job demands than professional workers, which can increase work–family conflict (Muse and Pichler 2011), such as more physically demanding work. Based on the life course view, we predict that:

Hypothesis 5. *The negative relationship between age and work-to-family conflict and family-to-work conflict will be moderated by job status, such that the relationship will be weaker for non-professionals and stronger for professionals.*

3.3 | Marital Status

Differences in the relationship between age and work–family conflict by marital status are based on two main factors: socioeconomic status and social support. Persons who are married often have higher socioeconomic status, which provides them with greater financial resources to help manage work and family responsibilities (e.g., childcare) as well as more opportunities for social interaction (Dean et al. 1994; Fry and Parker 2021). Persons who live with a spouse report higher levels of social support than those without a spouse (Liese et al. 1989; Soulsby and Bennett 2015). Moreover, having a positive marital relationship provides an individual with an important source of social support that can help buffer the effects of stress, facilitate better performance between work and family roles (Cutrona 1996; Røsand et al. 2012), and help maintain psychological health (Saltzman et al. 2020). Individuals who are married also have more opportunities and access to social networks to shift socioemotional goals away from work toward family life than unmarried persons (Stokes and Moorman 2018). In addition, the social support individuals garner through marriage can be an important channel for increased positive affect with age and decreased negative affect with age (Verstaen et al. 2020). Based on the life course view, we predict that:

Hypothesis 6. *The negative relationship between age and work-to-family conflict and family-to-work conflict will be moderated by marital status, such that the relationship will be weaker for unmarried individuals and stronger for married individuals.*

National and global socio-economic context: Although often the location of the employee as a moderator is often underconsidered by HR scholars, national and global socio-economic institutional contexts vary significantly across countries, shaping intersecting cultural, legal, and economic forces that influence the relationship between employee age and the work–family interface (WFI). For instance, nations differ in laws mandating employer-provided leave for family or sick care or the right to request flexible work arrangements (Kossek and Kelliher 2023). Similarly, variations in economic development (e.g., industrialization levels), social infrastructure (e.g., nationalized elder or childcare legal policies and systems), and cultural values surrounding gender equality and work–life balance further shape the availability and utilization of organizational work–family policies (Kossek and Ollier-Malaterre 2013; Ollier-Malaterre 2009; Ollier-Malaterre and Foucreault 2017).

These socio-economic factors differentially influence how the WFI is experienced as well as labor force participation patterns across gender and age groups. Below, we theorize how the interplay between age and the WFI differs across samples from the U.S., other nations, and regions such as the Global North and Global South.

3.4 | National Context

Given national context may capture differences in the availability of socio-economic institutional structures that shape the relationship between age and the WFI, we compare U.S. and non-U.S. samples. The U.S. is an outlier among developed nations, lacking federally mandated paid family and sick leave and offering more limited legal protections compared to other industrialized nations such as Canada, the U.K., and the E.U. (Kossek and Ollier-Malaterre 2013). U.S. workers are culturally expected to work long hours and prioritize work over personal life as ideal workers, taking less annual time off compared to their counterparts in other nations (Kossek et al. 2021; Ollier-Malaterre 2009). While federal-level work–family policies in the U.S. lag behind many other industrialized nations, an uneven patchwork of state-level initiatives (e.g., sick leave) has emerged to address the growing needs of an aging workforce to influence work–family outcomes (Boushey 2014). Such movements to support paid sick leave at the state level are related to the aging of the workforce (Piszczek and Berg 2014). Below we provide evidence on why national work–family policies are increasingly important to older workers, and therefore, given the lower protections in the U.S., we expect there will be higher increases in work–family conflict and lower increases in work–family enrichment among U.S. workers as they age, compared to workers in countries with more robust work–family policies (Dobrow et al. 2016).

Older workers are more likely to need paid family and sick leave and flexible time off policies, for a variety of reasons, such as taking care of elderly parents, managing their own health challenges, and addressing the rising demands of their own and sandwiched caregiving responsibilities (Chen 2016; Heymann et al. 2024). While younger workers may also benefit from such policies, research suggests that older workers face distinct challenges that intensify the importance of these resources as they age. First, caregiving demands for aging parents tend to peak during mid-to-late career stages, contributing to higher levels of work–family conflict for this demographic compared to younger workers (Duxbury and Higgins 2013). Second, the lack of comprehensive age discrimination protections in the U.S. exacerbates the burden for older employees, particularly those who need flexible or extended leave for caregiving or health-related reasons (Marchiondo et al. 2017). Unlike younger workers, who may still rely on informal family networks or shorter leaves, older workers are often constrained by these systemic limitations, which amplify the work–family interface challenges they experience (Wainwright et al. 2018). Finally, the cumulative effects of limited policy support disproportionately affect older workers

in the U.S. compared to countries with more robust family leave frameworks, such as many in the European Union, where age-specific needs are explicitly recognized and supported (Cooney and Dykstra 2011; Rippon et al. 2015). These combined factors illustrate why policies such as paid sick leave and family leave hold heightened importance for older workers, with their absence creating more pronounced disparities in work–family outcomes as workers age in the U.S. versus the non-U.S. context.

Hypothesis 7. *The negative relationship between age and work–family conflict (family-to-work, and work-to-family) will be moderated by U.S. country context, such that the relationships will be weaker for U.S. workers and stronger for non-U.S. workers.*

Hypothesis 8. *The positive relationship between age and work–family enrichment (work-to-family, family-to-work) will be moderated by U.S. country context, such that the relationships will be weaker for U.S. workers and stronger for non-U.S. workers.*

4 | Exploratory Research Questions

In response to reviewer comments, we developed several research questions[3] to complement the analyses undertaken to test our hypotheses. First, we explore whether relationships between age and the WFI differed between employees in the Global North (developed industrialized countries) or the Global South (developing and underdeveloped countries). The terms "Global North" and "Global South" are used by the United Nations and provide a meaningful way to group countries based on broad configurations of social, economic, and political characteristics (UNCTAD 2002). This additional analysis allows us to complement and move beyond U.S. versus non-U.S. country comparisons.

Next, we rely on a person-centered approach (Woo et al. 2018) to examine how multiple life course factors come together to bound the relationship between age and work–family conflict. Work–family conflict was our focal criterion for these analyses, given the need to leverage a large enough number of samples. We chose sets of life course factors that were theoretically interesting and for which we had sufficient numbers of samples. We examine how the relationship between age and work–family conflict differs between men and women across national context (U.S. vs. non-U.S.), global context (Global North vs. Global South), and job status.

Exploring global context: Global North countries generally have more economically and technologically developed infrastructures with market-based economies, greater political stability with more democratic institutions, greater gender equality, and declining birth rates, and are wealthier with their citizens enjoying a higher standard of living (Kowalski 2020). Countries in the Global North include, but are not limited to, the United States, Canada, U.K., the European Union, Israel, Japan, South Korea, Australia, Russia, and New Zealand (Geneva Graduate Institute, n.d.). Global South countries have contrasting political, economic, and social trends. For example, they are commonly more dependent on agriculture, their citizens have fewer opportunities for educational and economic development, experience fewer political freedoms and stable governing bodies resulting in more internal country contexts (e.g., war), have lower gender equality and higher birth rates resulting in more family caregiving demands, and have poorer transportation and health care infrastructures (Kowalski 2020). Countries in the Global South are typically in Latin America, the Caribbean, South America, Africa, and Asia (excluding Japan and South Korea) (Geneva Graduate Institute, n.d.). Workers in the Global South generally have fewer formal family and medical leave policies for time off than workers in the Global North (World Policy Analysis Center 2018). Considering these factors in total suggests that the negative relationship between age and work–family conflict should be weaker for Global South and stronger for Global North samples.

Research Question 1. *Is the relationship between age and the WFI moderated by global context (Global North vs. Global South)?*

Exploring a person-centric approach: *Gender differences across national and global contexts.* Although work–family conflict (work-to-family, family-to-work) generally decreases as individuals age, we contend that this negative relationship between age and work–family conflict will vary based on gender and national context, such that relationships will be strongest for non-U.S. men and weakest for U.S. women. Although both U.S. men and women may be affected by the lack of formal policy supports, such as mandated paid leave, employed women in the U.S. will experience slower levels of reduction in work–family conflict and family–work conflict as they age compared to U.S. men. This is because over the life course, women continue to spend more time managing care (Glynn 2018) and exert higher levels of emotional and mental labor carrying out family load demands than men (Wayne et al. 2023).

Next, we explored whether the relationship between age and work–family conflict is experienced differently by men and women across different global contexts. We expect that this relationship will be strongest for men in the Global North and weakest for women in the Global South. Women employed in the Global South are faced with greater barriers to employment, education, caregiving support, and gender equality challenges than those in the Global North. These challenges do not decrease as women age. Societal factors remain constant or may become worse as women age because they face accumulating educational, job, and traditional family role demands that create ongoing conflicts between their family and work demands. Global North men are likely to have the strongest reduction in work–family conflict as they age. One rationale for this is that men in the Global North do not face the considerable economic, social, and political infrastructure challenges that Global South men and women face. They also tend to have systematically lower involvement in managing family role demands as they age compared to Global North women.

Research Question 2. *Do men and women experience the relationship between age and work–family conflict differently across national (U.S. & Non-U.S.) and global contexts (Global North vs. Global South)?*

Exploring a person-centric approach: *Gender differences across job status.* Last, we explored whether the relationship between age and work–family conflict will be experienced differently by

men and women based on job status. We expect that the relationship will be strongest for men in professional jobs and weakest for women in nonprofessional jobs. Men in professional jobs are likely to enjoy the most favorable job and life conditions to manage the WFI—compared to women in professional jobs and men and women nonprofessionals. Men in professional jobs enjoy the highest levels of pay and job flexibility, which gives them more financial and job autonomy resources to manage the WFI (Roos 1981). These job conditions also increase the likelihood of having either a nonworking spouse or one whose career is not primary, thus making it easier to manage the WFI. In contrast, nonprofessional women have the least financial resources and autonomy to manage WFI as they are more likely to be in lower-paid and less flexible jobs. They are less likely to have a nonworking spouse to help manage the WFI and are more likely to face discrimination and health risks on the job (Elser et al. 2018).

Research Question 3. *Do men and women experience the relationship between age and the WFI differently across job status?*

5 | Method

5.1 | Inclusion Criteria and Literature Search

Consistent with prior work–family meta-analyses (e.g., French et al. 2018; Shockley and Singla 2011), we included studies examining the relationship between age and work–family conflict (i.e., work-to-family and family-to-work). Published studies were identified through comprehensive searches of PsycINFO, PubMed, JSTOR, Academic Search Premier, and Business Source Premiere. Additionally, dissertations and theses were located via the ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database. Search terms included (a) age-related keywords (age, aging, older adult, lifespan) and (b) work–family interface keywords (negative spillover, positive spillover, work–family conflict, work–family enrichment, work–family balance). Age and work–family conflict keywords were combined for a comprehensive search of the existing studies, resulting in 1034 potentially relevant studies for inclusion.

Studies were included if they (a) measured chronological age, (b) assessed work–family interface constructs as noted above, and (c) reported an effect size or provided sufficient data to compute one. General bi-directional measures of work–family conflict were excluded to ensure accurate population estimates, as prior research demonstrates that directional measures (e.g., work-to-family and family-to-work conflict) provide greater reliability (Kossek and Ozeki 1998). After removing duplicates and studies that failed to meet inclusion criteria, 233 journal articles, dissertations, and these were coded, yielding 256 samples and data from 186,109 workers for meta-analysis. A full list of included studies is available in Appendix S1 of the supplemental files.

5.2 | Coder Training, Process, and Coding Approach

A detailed codebook and instructional manual were created by the author team, which includes two experts in meta-analysis. Training sessions led by one of the experts were conducted to familiarize all coders with the procedures. An initial set of 10 articles was coded collectively to ensure coding reliability, with discrepancies identified and resolved through team discussion. Next, 50 randomly selected articles were double-coded, yielding an inter-coder agreement rate of over 95%. Discrepancies were addressed through reexamination of the original studies and discussed among the coders. Given the high consistency observed and the straightforward nature of the coding variables, the remaining articles were coded by a single coder. A random check of 25 articles (approximately 15% of the remaining set) was performed to verify coding accuracy. These procedures adhere to established meta-analytic standards (Dieckmann et al. 2009; Orwin 1994) and are consistent with methodologies employed in recent studies published in premier journals (Shockley et al. 2017; Swift and Wampold 2018).

5.3 | Coding Approach

We coded variables including sample size, effect size, and reliability for work–family conflict measures, distinguishing between work-to-family and family-to-work conflict. We also coded several study-level characteristics to test our moderator hypotheses. First, we categorized mean age into five groups: under 30, 30–39, 40–49, over 50, and 55+. Second, gender was recorded as the percentage of males and females in the sample, with additional focus on samples that were predominantly male or female (80% or more) for detailed gender analyses. Third, we coded race based on the percentage identified as White or Caucasian. Fourth, we identified the country for each sample, with 110 samples from the U.S. and 146 from other countries. Samples with mixed or unclear country data were excluded from national context analyses. We used the United Nations ECOSOC classification (United Nations, Organization in Special Consultative Status with ECOSOC 2024) to differentiate countries into the Global North or South. Fifth, marital status was noted as the percentage married. Sixth, job status was classified as either professional or non-professional, based on job requirements, standardized training, and prior classifications (Department of Labor 2019; Roehling and Bultman 2002). Examples of professional jobs included accountants and nurses, while administrative support and construction work were classified as non-professional.

5.4 | Meta-Analytic Procedures

Effect size metric and modeling procedures: We used the correlation coefficient between age and work–family conflict as the primary effect size metric, as it was the most commonly reported in the included studies. Conventional meta-analytic techniques were employed to assess effect size centrality and homogeneity (Hedges and Olkin 1985; Hedges and Vevea 1998). Population estimates were calculated following the psychometric meta-analysis procedures outlined by Hunter and Schmidt (2004). All analyses utilized random effects models (Lipsey and Wilson 2001) and were conducted using the *psychmeta* package in R (Dahlke and Wiernik 2019).

For each effect size, we report the number of samples (k), the number of workers (N), the sample-size weighted estimate (r), the population estimate corrected for measurement error (ρ) (Hunter and Schmidt 2004), and the 95% confidence interval (CI) around the uncorrected estimate for significance testing (Whitener 1990).

Non-independent effect sizes: Work–family interface (WFI) measures, such as work–family conflict, often include multiple dimensions (e.g., time-, strain-, behavior-based conflict), leading to non-independent effect sizes in several studies. Following established meta-analytic practices, non-independent effect sizes were transformed into composite correlations (Hunter and Schmidt 2004) and treated as single effect sizes (Rosenthal and Rubin 1986).

5.5 | Moderating Effects of Sample Characteristics

We tested our moderation hypotheses by analyzing effect sizes with categorical sample-level moderators. When categorization of moderators was not possible due to reduced sample size, we used continuous moderators in weighted least squares regressions (Steel and Kammeyer-Mueller 2002). We ran separate regression models for each moderating variable because few studies reported data on all moderators. We first examined the life course moderator of age group by comparing relationships between older and younger employee age groups. Then moderation analysis was conducted with the personal demographic (i.e., gender—males and females; and race—White and non-White), situational (i.e., job status—professionals only samples, compared to other samples; and marital status—married and not married), and sociodemographic context (i.e., national context –the United States and outside of United States) life course factors. To address exploratory research questions, we compared effect sizes between Global North and Global South countries. Gender-based analyses examined differences in U.S. versus non-U.S. samples, Global North versus Global South countries, and professional versus non-professional job roles.

6 | Results

The meta-analytic relationships between age and the work–family interface are reported in Tables 1 (main effects), 2–4 (moderators), and 5 and 6 (person-centric analyses).

6.1 | Main Effects

Hypotheses 1a and 1b proposed a negative relationship between age and work–family conflict, which was supported by our meta-analytic results. Specifically, age was significantly and negatively associated with both work-to-family conflict ($\rho = -0.037$; 95% CI [−0.049, −0.024]) and family-to-work conflict ($\rho = -0.056$; 95% CI [−0.074, −0.038]), confirming that work–family conflict decreases with age, regardless of direction. For work–family enrichment (Hypotheses 1c/1d), we found a significant positive relationship between age and work-to-family enrichment ($\rho = 0.039$; 95% CI [0.001, 0.078]) but a significant negative relationship between age and family-to-work enrichment ($\rho = -0.056$; 95% CI [−0.098, −0.015]), providing support for Hypothesis 1c but not Hypothesis 1d. Finally, we found that age was positively associated with work–family balance ($\rho = 0.122$; 95% CI [0.092, 0.152]), supporting Hypothesis 1e.

6.2 | Moderation Effects

We examined work–family conflict and work–family enrichment in both directions when sample size permitted. However, moderating effects for work–family balance could not be assessed due to insufficient studies incorporating age.

6.2.1 | Personal Demographic Factors

6.2.1.1 | Cohort Age Group. Hypothesis 2 proposed that the cohort age group moderates the relationship between age and work–family conflict. To test this, we categorized samples

TABLE 1 | Results of meta-analysis of age and work–family outcomes.

	k	*N*	*r*	*p*	95% CI LL	95% CI UL	80% CV LL	80% CV UL
Work–family conflict (Hypothesis 1a/1b)								
Work-to-family	244	165,031	−0.033	−0.037	−0.049	−0.024	−0.154	0.081
Family-to-work	117	67,218	−0.051	−0.056	−0.074	−0.038	−0.171	0.059
Work–family enrichment (Hypothesis 1c/1d)								
Work-to-family	30	18,139	0.034	0.039	0.001	0.078	−0.082	0.160
Family-to-work	20	8153	−0.049	−0.056	−0.098	−0.015	−0.148	0.035
Work–family balance (Hypothesis 1e)								
	7	19,616	0.115	0.122	0.092	0.152	0.085	0.159

Abbreviations: k = number of independent effect sizes; N = total individuals across all samples; r = sample size weighted correlation, not corrected for measurement error; ρ = sample size weighted correlation corrected for measurement error; 95% CI = 95% confidence interval; 80% CV = 80% credibility interval.

TABLE 2 | Moderators of the relationships between age and work–family conflict.

	k	*N*	*r*	ρ	95% CI LL	95% CI UL	80% CV LL	80% CV UL
Moderator: age group (Hypothesis 2)								
Young adult (< 30 years)	11	6153	0.058	0.064	0.004	0.126	−0.072	0.201
Early middle age (30–39)	90	50,833	−0.034	−0.036	−0.057	−0.015	−0.152	0.079
Late middle age (40–49)	77	74,022	−0.038	−0.040	−0.060	−0.021	−0.142	0.062
Older adult (> 50 years)	12	6770	−0.094	−0.108	−0.189	−0.026	−0.270	0.055
Moderator: gender (Hypothesis 3)								
Women	27	22,625	0.055	0.061	0.019	0.103	−0.069	0.191
Men	15	9299	−0.085	−0.092	−0.131	−0.054	−0.166	−0.019
Moderator: job status (Hypothesis 5)								
Professional workers	28	24,434	−0.061	−0.066	−0.096	−0.037	−0.155	0.022
Moderator: national context (Hypothesis 7)								
Non-U.S.	126	87,559	−0.023	−0.025	−0.042	−0.008	−0.136	0.086
U.S.	98	63,192	−0.054	−0.058	−0.079	−0.037	−0.179	0.063
Moderator: Global North vs. *South context (Hypothesis 8)*								
Global North	169	127,139	−0.038	−0.041	−0.056	−0.027	−0.155	0.073
Global South	46	13,737	−0.004	−0.002	−0.043	0.038	−0.161	0.156

	K	*B*	SE	95% LL	95% UL	B	R^2
Continuous moderators[a]							
% Married (Hypothesis 6)	168	−0.001	0.001	−0.002	0.001	−0.086	0.008
% White (Hypothesis 4)	61	−0.001	0.001	−0.001	0.001	−0.016	0.003

Note: k = number of independent effect sizes; *N* = total individuals across all samples; *r* = sample size weighted correlation, not corrected for measurement error; ρ = sample-size weighted correlation corrected for measurement error; 95% CI = 95% confidence interval; 80% CV = 80% credibility interval.
[a]There is no Q-stat or confidence intervals for these continuous percentage moderators.

into four age groups: under 30, 30–39, 40–49, and 50+ years. Consistent with prior research (Ng and Feldman 2008, 2012) and the Age Discrimination in Employment Act (EEOC 2020), workers aged 40 and above were classified as older workers. Figure 2 presents an illustration of the general pattern of results between age and work–family conflict over the lifespan, indicating that work–family conflict is generally diminished for older age cohort groups.

For young adult workers in the under 30 cohort, age was positively associated with work-to-family conflict (ρ = 0.064; 95% CI [0.004, 0.126]) and positively but non-significantly related to family-to-work conflict (ρ = 0.037; 95% CI [−0.173, 0.246]). Among early middle-age workers in the 30–39 cohort, age was significantly negatively related to both work-to-family conflict (ρ = −0.036; 95% CI [−0.057, −0.015]) and family-to-work conflict (ρ = −0.033; 95% CI [−0.058, −0.007]). Similar negative relationships were found for workers in the late middle-age 40–49 age cohort: work-to-family conflict (ρ = −0.040; 95% CI [−0.060, −0.021]) and family-to-work conflict (ρ = −0.082; 95% CI [−0.114, −0.050]). The strongest negative associations were observed in the older adult 50+ age cohort for both work-to-family conflict (ρ = −0.108; 95% CI [−0.189, −0.026]) and family-to-work conflict (ρ = −0.186; 95% CI [−0.315, −0.056]). These findings do not fully align with the conventional expectation that work–family conflict peaks in mid-life, as work-to-family conflict was highest for workers under 30. However, the results are consistent with the hypothesis that conflict declines among workers in older adult cohort age groups, in the empty-nest stage, or nearing retirement. Thus, Hypothesis 2 received mixed support.

6.2.1.2 | **Gender.** Hypothesis 3 proposed that gender moderates the relationship between age and work–family conflict. To test this, we analyzed effect sizes from samples composed entirely of men or women (minimum *k* = 3), removing confounds from mixed-gender data. Results showed that for women, age was positively associated with work-to-family conflict (ρ = 0.061; 95% CI [0.019, 0.103]), while for men, the relationship was negative (ρ = −0.092; 95% CI [−0.131, −0.054]). This suggests that as individuals age, work-to-family conflict *increases for women* but *decreases for men*. For family-to-work conflict, age was negatively related for both women (ρ = −0.090; 95% CI [−0.148, −0.032]) and men (ρ = −0.099; 95% CI [−0.196, −0.003]), with a slightly stronger effect for men. These findings suggest that while both genders experience a decline in family-to-work conflict as they age, work-to-family conflict follows a different

TABLE 3 | Moderators of the relationships between age and family–work conflict.

	k	*N*	*r*	ρ	95% CI LL	95% CI UL	80% CV LL	80% CV UL
Moderator: age group (Hypothesis 2)								
Young adult (< 30 years)	4	4132	0.032	0.037	−0.173	0.246	−0.171	0.244
Early middle age (30–39)	49	25,139	−0.030	−0.033	−0.058	−0.007	−0.127	0.062
Late middle age (40–49)	37	27,301	−0.075	−0.082	−0.114	−0.050	−0.196	0.032
Older Adult (> 50 years)	4	1439	−0.159	−0.186	−0.315	−0.056	−0.275	−0.095
Moderator: gender (Hypothesis 3)								
Women	13	3756	−0.081	−0.090	−0.148	−0.032	−0.185	0.005
Men	6	2298	−0.091	−0.099	−0.196	−0.003	−0.207	0.008
Moderator: job status (Hypothesis 5)								
Professional workers	14	6284	−0.037	−0.041	−0.102	0.02	−0.166	0.085
Moderator: national context (Hypothesis 7)								
Non-U.S.	47	21,688	−0.026	−0.028	−0.057	0.001	−0.139	0.082
U.S	62	40,743	−0.063	−0.070	−0.095	−0.044	−0.186	0.047
Moderator: Global North vs. *South context (Research Question 1)*								
Global North	86	55,656	−0.049	−0.053	−0.075	−0.031	−0.173	0.066
Global South	17	4851	−0.054	−0.059	−0.107	−0.012	−0.147	0.028

Abbreviations: *k* = number of independent effect sizes; *N* = total individuals across all samples; *r* = sample size weighted correlation, not corrected for measurement error; ρ = sample size weighted correlation corrected for measurement error; 95% CI = 95% confidence interval; 80% CV = 80% credibility interval.

TABLE 4 | Moderators of the relationships between age to both work–family and family–work enrichment.

	k	*N*	*r*	ρ	95% CI LL	95% CI UL	80% CV LL	80% CV UL
Work-to-family								
Moderator: national context (Hypothesis 8)								
Non-U.S.	18	12,665	0.029	0.034	−0.022	0.090	−0.106	0.173
U.S	12	5474	0.045	0.053	0.003	0.102	−0.022	0.128
Moderator: global context (Research Question 1)								
Global North	23	15,540	0.021	0.023	−0.019	0.066	−0.093	0.140
Global South	5	2323	0.094	0.099	0.006	0.192	0.011	0.187
Family-to-work								
Moderator: national context (Hypothesis 8)								
Non-U.S.	10	4816	−0.071	−0.078	−0.147	−0.010	−0.190	0.034
U.S	10	3337	−0.018	−0.022	−0.073	0.029	−0.065	0.021

Abbreviations: *k* = number of independent effect sizes; *N* = total individuals across all samples; *r* = sample size weighted correlation, not corrected for measurement error; ρ = sample size weighted correlation corrected for measurement error; 95% CI = 95% confidence interval; 80% CV = 80% credibility interval.

trajectory, increasing for women but decreasing for men. Thus, Hypothesis 3 received mixed support.

6.2.1.3 | Race. Hypothesis 4 proposed that race would moderate the relationship between age and work–family conflict. However, weighted least squares regression analyses indicated that the proportion of White participants in a sample was not a significant moderator for work-to-family conflict ($\beta = -0.016$, $p = 0.898$) or family-to-work conflict ($\beta = -0.019$, $p = 0.908$). Thus, we did not find support for Hypothesis 4.

6.3 | Situational Job and Family Factors

6.3.1 | Job Status

Hypothesis 5 proposed that job status (i.e., professional worker samples vs. all samples) would moderate the relationship between age and work–family conflict. Results indicated that age was significantly and negatively related to work-to-family conflict among professional workers (ρ = −0.066; 95% CI [−0.096, −0.037]), with a stronger effect than in the overall

TABLE 5 | Research Questions 1–3: person-centric analyses for age and work–family conflict.

	k	*N*	*r*	ρ	95% CI LL	95% CI UL	80% CV LL	80% CV UL
Moderator: gender + U.S. vs. *Non-U.S. Context (Research Question 2)*								
Women, Non-U.S.	21	21,141	0.059	0.065	0.025	0.105	−0.042	0.172
Women, U.S.	15	3471	−0.016	−0.016	−0.114	−0.081	−0.232	0.199
Men, Non-U.S.	18	9070	−0.067	−0.073	−0.106	−0.040	−0.133	−0.012
Men, U.S.	8	3413	−0.110	−0.121	−0.185	−0.057	−0.199	−0.042
Moderator: gender + Global North vs. *South Context (Research Question 2)*								
Women, Global North	28	22,275	0.045	0.050	0.015	0.085	−0.058	0.158
Women, Global South	6	2002	0.108	0.120	−0.107	0.348	−0.188	0.428
Men, Global North	17	9948	−0.086	−0.094	−0.130	−0.058	−0.166	−0.023
Men, Global South	9	2535	−0.050	−0.053	−0.108	0.001	−0.095	−0.012
Moderator: gender + job status (Research Question 3)								
Women, professional	10	3160	−0.037	−0.039	−0.113	0.036	−0.155	0.078
Men, professional	7	2430	−0.115	−0.124	−0.223	−0.024	−0.255	0.007

Abbreviations: *k* = number of independent effect sizes; *N* = total individuals across all samples; *r* = sample size weighted correlation, not corrected for measurement error; ρ = sample-size weighted correlation corrected for measurement error; 95% CI = 95% confidence interval; 80% CV = 80% credibility interval.

TABLE 6 | Research Questions 1–3: person-centric analyses for age and family–work conflict.

	k	*N*	*r*	ρ	95% CI LL	95% CI UL	80% CV LL	80% CV UL
Moderator: gender + U.S. vs. *Non-U.S. context*								
Women, Non-U.S.	6	1885	−0.058	−0.063	−0.174	0.048	−0.189	0.063
Women, U.S.	11	2549	−0.108	−0.123	−0.188	−0.057	−0.209	−0.036
Men, Non-U.S.	8	1498	−0.012	−0.012	−0.092	0.067	−0.083	0.058
Men, U.S.	5	2060	−0.076	−0.083	−0.231	0.065	−0.245	0.079
Moderator: gender + Global North vs. *South Context*								
Women, Global North	13	2917	−0.088	−0.100	−0.167	−0.033	−0.210	0.010
Women, Global South	3	1373	−0.078	−0.084	−0.345	0.178	−0.256	0.089
Men, Global North	7	2327	−0.062	−0.068	−0.181	0.045	−0.220	0.084
Men, Global South	6	1231	−0.024	−0.026	−0.121	0.070	−0.096	0.045
Moderator: gender + job status								
Women, professional	3	891	−0.003	−0.002	−0.372	0.369	−0.256	0.253
Men, professional	5	2134	−0.044	−0.047	−0.175	0.082	−0.183	0.089

Abbreviations: *k* = number of independent effect sizes; *N* = total individuals across all samples; *r* = sample size weighted correlation, not corrected for measurement error; ρ = sample-size weighted correlation corrected for measurement error; 95% CI = 95% confidence interval; 80% CV = 80% credibility interval.

sample (ρ = −0.037; 95% CI [−0.049, −0.024]). This suggests that work-to-family conflict declines more sharply with age among professional workers. However, for family-to-work conflict, age showed a non-significant relationship among professional workers (ρ = −0.041; 95% CI [−0.102, 0.02]), whereas the overall sample showed a significant negative association (ρ = −0.056; 95% CI [−0.074, −0.038]). This suggests that family-to-work conflict remains relatively stable for professional workers as they age. Overall, these findings provide mixed support for Hypothesis 5.

6.3.2 | Marital Status

Hypothesis 6 proposed that marital status moderates the relationship between age and work–family conflict. However, weighted least squares regression analyses indicated that the proportion of married individuals in a sample did not significantly moderate the relationship between age and work-to-family conflict (β = −0.086, *p* = 0.251) or family-to-work conflict (β = −0.166, *p* = 0.110). Therefore, we did not find support for Hypothesis 6.

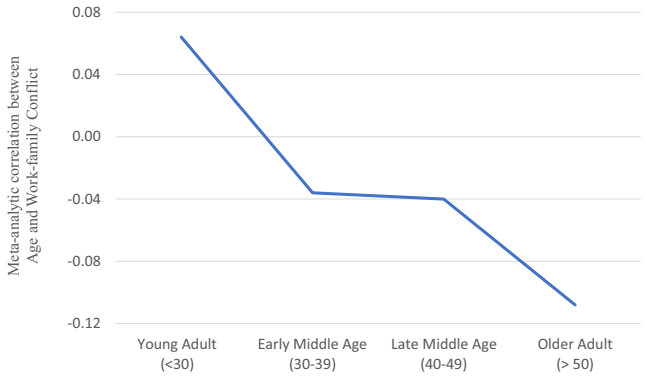

FIGURE 2 | Work–family conflict across age cohorts.

6.3.3 | National and Global Socio-Economic Context

6.3.3.1 | United States and Non-U.S. Employee Samples. Hypothesis 7 proposed that working in the U.S. moderates the relationship between age and work–family conflict. Results showed that age was significantly and negatively related to work-to-family conflict in both U.S. samples ($\rho = -0.058$; 95% CI [−0.079, −0.037]) and non-U.S. samples ($\rho = -0.025$; 95% CI [−0.042, −0.008]), with a stronger effect in U.S. samples. Age was also significantly negatively associated with family-to-work conflict in U.S. samples ($\rho = -0.070$; 95% CI [−0.095, −0.044]) but nonsignificant in non-U.S. samples ($\rho = -0.028$; 95% CI [−0.057, 0.001]). Hypothesis 8 examined whether working in the U.S. moderates the relationship between age and work–family enrichment. Results showed that age was significantly and positively related to work-to-family enrichment in U.S. samples ($\rho = 0.053$; 95% CI [0.003, 0.102]) but not in non-U.S. samples ($\rho = 0.034$; 95% CI [−0.022, 0.090]). The relationship between age and family-to-work enrichment was nonsignificant in U.S. samples ($\rho = -0.022$; 95% CI [−0.073, 0.029]) but significant and negative in non-U.S. samples ($\rho = -0.078$; 95% CI [−0.147, −0.010]). Thus, we did not find support for Hypotheses 7 or 8.

6.3.3.2 | Global North and Global South. Research Question 1 explored whether global context (i.e., comparing samples from the Global North and Global South) moderates the relationship between age and the work–family interface. Results showed that for Global North samples, age was significantly negatively related to work-to-family conflict ($\rho = -0.041$; 95% CI [−0.056, −0.027]), whereas this relationship was non-significant for Global South samples ($\rho = -0.002$; 95% CI [−0.043, 0.038]). For family-to-work conflict, significant negative associations were found for samples from the Global North ($\rho = -0.053$; 95% CI [−0.075, −0.031]) and Global South ($\rho = -0.059$; 95% CI [−0.107, −0.012]). Regarding work–family enrichment, age was not significantly related to work-to-family enrichment for Global North samples ($\rho = 0.023$; 95% CI [−0.019, 0.066]) but showed a significant positive relationship for Global South samples ($\rho = 0.099$; 95% CI [0.006, 0.192]). The results provide partial support for the research question.

6.3.3.3 | Gender in Country Context, Global Context, and Job Status. Research Question 2 examined whether the relationship between age and the work–family interface (WFI) varies by gender across national and global contexts, and Research Question 3 explored whether these relationships differ by gender and job status.

For national context, results showed that the relationship between age and work-to-family conflict was non-significant for women in U.S. samples ($\rho = -0.016$; 95% CI [−0.114, 0.081]) but was significant and positive for women in non-U.S. samples ($\rho = 0.065$; 95% CI [0.025, 0.105]). In contrast, age was significantly negatively related to work-to-family conflict for men in both U.S. ($\rho = -0.121$; 95% CI [−0.185, −0.057]) and non-U.S. samples ($\rho = -0.073$; 95% CI [−0.106, −0.040]). For family-to-work conflict, age was significantly negatively related for women in U.S. samples ($\rho = -0.123$; 95% CI [−0.188, −0.057]), whereas the relationship was non-significant for women in non-U.S. samples ($\rho = -0.063$; 95% CI [−0.174, 0.048]). Among men, the relationship between age and family-to-work conflict was non-significant in both U.S. ($\rho = -0.083$; 95% CI [−0.231, 0.065]) and non-U.S. samples ($\rho = -0.012$; 95% CI [−0.092, 0.067]). These results show that gender differences in age relationships to the WFI vary based on national context.

For global context (i.e., Global North vs. Global South), age was significantly and positively related to work-to-family conflict for women in Global North samples ($\rho = 0.050$; 95% CI [0.015, 0.085]) but nonsignificant for women in Global South samples ($\rho = 0.120$; 95% CI [−0.107, 0.348]). Among men, age was significantly negatively related to work-to-family conflict in Global North samples ($\rho = -0.094$; 95% CI [−0.130, −0.058]) but non-significant in Global South samples ($\rho = -0.053$; 95% CI [−0.108, 0.001]). For family-to-work conflict, age was significantly negatively related for women in Global North samples ($\rho = -0.100$; 95% CI [−0.167, −0.033]) but nonsignificant for women in Global South samples ($\rho = -0.084$; 95% CI [−0.345, 0.178]). Among men, the relationship between age and family-to-work conflict was nonsignificant in both Global North samples ($\rho = -0.068$; 95% CI [−0.181, 0.045]) and Global South samples ($\rho = -0.026$; 95% CI [−0.121, 0.070]). These findings suggest that gender differences in the relationship between age to the WFI also vary based on global context.

Research Question 3 examined gender and job status as moderators. Age was not significantly related to work-to-family conflict for women in professional jobs ($\rho = -0.039$; 95% CI [−0.113, 0.036]), but the relationship was significant and negative for men professionals ($\rho = -0.124$; 95% CI [−0.223, −0.024]). For family-to-work conflict, age was nonsignificant for women ($\rho = -0.002$; 95% CI [−0.372, 0.369]) and men ($\rho = -0.047$; 95% CI [−0.175, 0.082]) in professional jobs.

7 | Discussion

This investigation advances understanding of the relationship between employee age and the work–family interface by synthesizing the lifespan and life course perspectives in an integrative model. We used meta-analytic methods with a comprehensive dataset of 186,109 workers from 256 samples to clarify the relationship between age and work–family conflict. Our goal was to address two key problems with previous research on the

relationship between age and the WFI: mixed empirical findings and a lack of theoretical integration. Specifically, our findings help to (a) advance understanding of how workers experience the WFI as they age over the lifespan; and (b) account for the influence of intersecting life course factors shaping the strength of this relationship. We also used person-centered analyses (Woo et al. 2018), clustering employees with shared characteristics into subpopulations to explore how factors operate together to explain how age links to the WFI.

Overall, our results support the value of integrating life span, life course, and person-centered approaches to investigate the relationship between age and the work–family interface. Grounded in a life span approach, the findings indicate a significant negative relationship between age and work–family conflict (both work-to-family and family-to-work) and a positive relationship between age and work–family balance. We also found a positive significant relationship between age and work-to-family enrichment, however, unexpectedly our results showed a significant negative relationship between age and family-to-work enrichment.

These results indicate that the dynamics of enrichment and age relationships differ from work–family conflict or balance. Enrichment relationships between age and work and family roles are opposite in directionality as one ages. While work positively enriches the family role as one ages, the family role negatively enriches work. Such findings suggest the need for HR researchers to use multiple measures in studies to understand employees' complex and shifting organizational support needs for the WFI as they age.

Our findings also align with Greenhaus and Powell's (2006) theorizing that the antecedents of work–family enrichment differ from those for work–family conflict. For some employee subgroups, fewer enriching experiences from outside of work are experienced as they age, which is consistent with the negative results for the relationship between family-to-work enrichment. One explanation for these results might relate to the rise in the number of working caregivers (mostly women) managing older adult care with limited preparation or choice. Studies indicate that over half (51.4%) of adult children who cared for aging parents and 60.3% for spouses did not perceive they had a choice to be a caregiver (Schulz et al. 2012). Individuals who take on additional life roles (e.g., caregiving) involuntarily experience lower well-being, such as higher levels of stress, physical strain, and poor health (Mize and Kincaid 2025). Another reason for these negative family-to-work enrichment findings might be that as employees age, increasing numbers are more likely to experience the loss of family or friends from age or illness, which results in decreased social capital and psychological support. A recent study found that 100% of individuals over age 65 experienced the death of someone very meaningful to them (Collins-Pisano 2023). When these losses occur, individuals may not recover quickly from the grief or recover at all, harming family–work enrichment. These caregiving and loss variables were often unmeasured in studies we identified and should be measured in future studies.

Turning to life course views of aging in order to understand how these factors interact with our hypothesized linear relationships, our findings indicate that the strength of the relationship between age and work-to-family conflict is weakened for women as they age, as they do not experience similar declines relative to men. A possible explanation for these results is that the persistent gender gap in how much domestic/family caregiving labor is performed by men versus women may be greater among older than younger workers. This is due to women compared to men as they age, (1) taking on increasing caregiving burdens at the same time their work hours are steady or increasing; and (2) having different family structures (e.g., more single-person, single parent, dual-career households), resulting in lower access to nonwork support. Compared to men, women as they age are also more likely to be in lower-level jobs that lack schedule autonomy to self-manage work–family demands, which may affect the rate of decline of work–family conflict over the life course.

For employees overall, the negative relationship between age and work–family conflict was stronger in Global North samples, which suggests that work conflicts may be declining at a lower rate in the Global South compared to the Global North. Surprisingly, the positive relationship between age and work-to-family enrichment was stronger in U.S. samples, while non-U.S. samples had a stronger negative relationship between age and family-to-work enrichment. These findings suggest that the work role is experienced as transferring important skills, emotions, and other resources to family roles to a greater extent in the U.S. as people age, but less so in other countries. Consistent with the results noted above, we found women in the Global North were more likely to experience increasing work–family conflict as they age, rather than the expected decreasing work-to-family conflict. Taken together, these contextual differences suggest cross-cultural variation in work–family support policies, and job, infrastructure, and socio-economic conditions are significantly influencing WFI age experiences.

We also found significant moderating effects of age cohort group (e.g., older adult over 50, young adult under 30) and job status (professional, nonprofessional). The findings indicate that the relationship between age and reductions in work-to-family conflict is stronger for older workers and professionals; however, no similar declines were found for family-to-work conflict. These results suggest that negative spillover from the work role to the family is more prevalent as one ages for younger adults and nonprofessional workers, but not for family-to-work spillover.

8 | Contributions to Theory and Research

Our paper offers insights that strengthen the understanding of age and the work–family interface in multiple ways. First, our study and model help to integrate age factors holistically into theorizing on the work–family interface. In doing so, we address calls to integrate lifespan and life course theory (Zacher and Froidevaux 2021) to understand an understudied meta-analyzed construct, work–family conflict, and its derivations (W–F enrichment, W–F balance), which are growing in importance in the HR and management fields. Previous research has undertheorized and under-empirically investigated age comprehensively as an influence on work–family conflict, enrichment, and balance. Age has typically been treated by researchers as an empirical moderator at best, but most often only as a control

variable. Our integrative model helps to explain why age over the lifespan should be negatively related to the psychological strain caused by work-to-family conflict, as well as its positive relationship to work–family balance and enrichment. Importantly, we then integrate life course theory to add a nuanced understanding of how the strength of these relationships varies due to workers' different personal, situational, and contextual factors. The theoretical assumptions that work–family conflict declines as one ages are dependent on whether one is a woman, an older worker, a professional worker, a U.S. or non-U.S. employee, or a Global North or Global South employee.

Our paper highlights the importance of theorizing and empirically testing how such diversity in life course factors may bound expected work–family relationships over the lifespan. The HRM literature has underexamined whether men and women, professionals or nonprofessional workers, or employees in different age cohorts (young adults at the start of their careers, mid-career, or older adults) vary in how they experience the WFI as they age. This is a critical gap as work–family conflict is a core job attitude that relates to job satisfaction, turnover, performance, health and safety, and need for and use of HR policies (e.g., health, work–family) (Allen and Eby 2016; Kossek et al. 2021).

Secondly, future studies must address the common assumption that work–family conflict declines as one ages, as this is not necessarily true for many key employee groups, such as women and those in nonprofessional—often hourly jobs—groups that can overlap. Research must examine why most women do not experience declines in work–family conflict as they age, unlike men, and *why the gender gap may actually be larger* for older than younger workers. Studies are needed to provide improved understanding of the job and nonwork support factors and HRM conditions influencing how and why the domestic and caregiving labor many women do continues over the life course, such that their conflicts never end. Our results with women in the Global North and non-U.S. countries indicate increased work–family conflict as they age. Yet women in the Global North and U.S. experienced decreased family–work conflict as they age. Women in the Global South had no significant relationships between age and work–family conflict variables. These mixed results suggest that there are differences in gender experiences of the age-WFI nexus because of societal, cultural, and national characteristics that continue to be overlooked in much research. It is possible that large countries in the Global South that have mandated retirement ages that are younger than those in other countries may skew or change results because there are fewer older adult workers in samples. For example, in China, the retirement age for women is 50 (World Bank Group 2024). Future studies should use longitudinal person-centered analysis to examine intersectional differences for different groups of men and women as they age that relate to life course factors such as age group, job status, race and ethnicity, marital status, family caregiving demands, and national/global context. Studies also should examine cultural differences, such as how individuals from countries that are likely to have collectivistic and communal cultures may experience aging and WFI relationships differently. Spector et al. (2007) surmised that because employees in collectivistic countries are more likely to emphasize social networks and connections, including those at work, work–family conflicts that negatively impact interpersonal relationships at work might be experienced as more stressful and seen more negatively, regardless of age, than in other countries. In Global North and Global South countries, the gender disparities and expectations between men and women may be vastly different and influence WFI–age relationships.

Third, theoretically, our integration of socio-emotional selectivity theory (SEST) a life span theory, provided grounding that is helpful for the HRM field to draw on in future work in order to better understand and explain how age is related to employee attitudes and outcomes to support related changes in socioemotional goals (Baltes et al. 1999; Lockenhoff and Carstensen 2004). An important implication of our study is that aging is related to shifting one's goals across the lifespan and managing the changes in psychological strain that one experiences with work and family roles. This suggests that SEST is not only related to proximal changes as individuals age (e.g., changes in goal prioritization, emotional affect), but also directly relates to distal psychological strain outcomes (e.g., changes in work–family conflict), which future studies should explore as well as probe why age is negatively related to family–work enrichment. Future research can build on this study to more precisely tease out how age and its systematic relation to other life course factors shape work–family interface dynamics, which link to HR outcomes from retirement adjustment (Wang et al. 2011) to job stress, health, productivity, and turnover. Such improved integration would help the HR field develop and study more theoretically based innovative HR initiatives and supervisor strategies to better address age–WFI dynamics.

9 | Implications for Human Resources Management Policy and Practice

Although experts writing on future aging policy predict many individuals may experience up to a 60-year career, as more and more people live to be over a hundred years old (Pinsker 2021), many employers have not updated policies and cultures to reflect this new reality. We provide practical implications directly from our findings, followed by a section on relevant but underused best HR practices as a springboard for employer innovation.

First, our findings show that employees across age groups and intersecting personal, situational, and contextual backgrounds are having increasingly varied WFI experiences in work–family conflict, enrichment, and balance. Employers need to include these varied measures on employee climate surveys to be able to proactively monitor where work–family dynamics are trending and not trending well, and conduct HR analytics analyzing the life course demographic subgroup moderators we identified. This will help them pinpoint where they might need to intervene or improve the effectiveness of existing policies and better support occupational health. It is important to first analyze these baseline age and WFI relationships in order to design HR policies, improve existing ones, or pilot interventions to see which are more effective across the workforce and for subpopulations in order to improve these dynamics. HR policies are likely to be ineffective if these baseline relationships between age, life course characteristics, and WFI outcomes are not understood.

Second, our study provides clear evidence that employees across several key demographics (women, younger workers,

nonprofessionals) are not experiencing work–family roles positively. There are many unnuanced subgroup differences intersecting with age that many employers are either unaware of or are not addressing effectively. Our paper's findings suggest that different employee groups need more or different kinds of help than they may currently have from their employers to improve WFI relationships. We identify the following specific trends that supervisors and policymakers need to address, some of which are unexpected.

Younger workers report higher unfavorable WFI outcomes, which is counter to conventional wisdom that work–family conflict peaks at mid-life. Employers need to investigate whether younger workers are afraid to take up policies due to bias, are unaware of how to access existing policies, or if there are simply policy gaps not being addressed.

Employees in nonprofessional jobs are significantly more likely to experience more negative WFI dynamics as they age, unlike those in professional jobs, which have more job autonomy built into them. This suggests the need for tailored supports to underserved, low-skill, and low-wage workers to help them navigate the work–family interface (Muse and Pichler 2011).

Women consistently have more negative work–life outcomes than men over their careers. Surprisingly, we found an increasing gender gap in work–family conflict that may be higher for older than younger workers, which is one that employers may not be effectively addressing. Many work–family supports are focused on parental support, which likely occurs during ages 20s–30s. Granted, this is a critical policy issue, given the rising cost of child care and the ongoing need for flexible scheduling. Yet our study shows employers need to significantly improve work–family support far beyond childbearing years.

The findings that as men age are significantly more likely to report lower work-to-family conflict, unlike most women samples, were consistently replicated broadly (U.S., non-U.S., Global North samples, men in professional jobs). Given these clear differential relationships, it is important for HR managers to monitor gender differences in work–family conflict and how to better resolve such differences, which contribute to ongoing challenges in women's leadership advancement. While improved implementation of flexibility policies while advancing in a career could mitigate such differences (Kossek and Lautsch 2017), as discussed below, work–life flexibility policies have not been broadly or fully embraced by employers. Studies show they are underrepresented in workforce groups we identified as having higher work–family conflict: junior workers, women, and those in nonprofessional jobs (Golden 2009).

Taken together, these trends suggest there is clear evidence for the need for major improvements in employer initiatives to better address the needs of these specific populations by identifying how to improve the design of work to reduce work–family conflict. Employers should pilot organizational interventions that give improved support and choice over how to integrate (or segment) work and family roles over different life stages. Many workers, for example, likely want more or different work–life supports that employers may not be offering, supporting, or even actively resisting (e.g., return to the office mandates).

Third, our findings suggest that HR leaders and scholars need to expand fundamental assumptions underlying who needs work–family support and their design. Employers need to move away from assuming homogeneity in WFI–age dynamics, that work is the main priority for employees, or that they can continue to offer limited customization of work–life supports. Employers need to review existing HR, work–family policies, health, and career systems to consider how to better address growing heterogeneity in WFI–age experiences, which studies show is increasingly seen as not fairly fitting employees' needs (Halvorsen et al. 2020). Yet employment policies have historically been designed based on assumptions of homogeneous or predictable patterns of work–family conflict and age relationships linking to career transitions (Kossek et al. 2021). Such beliefs may be limiting the effectiveness of policies. Our results provide a wake-up call to rethink and systematically evaluate whether current practices are meeting the needs of a wide range of employees. The data suggest there needs to be more latitude to customize supports within jobs and between career stages for many subpopulations.

Finally, our results suggest employers need to better understand how to tailor benefits communication to specific audiences to increase policy effectiveness and take up, as we identified many groups that experienced negative WFI experiences. These results need to be communicated to line managers who may be under-attuned to these issues and unsure how to adapt in managing people, teams, and communicating with subordinates.

The above findings provide a foundation for future HR policy innovation. Employers could use our measures as baseline indicators to evaluate the WLI experiences of subpopulations, customize and improve initiatives, and as pre- and post-measures of whether policies and supervisors are effective. Below are HR best practices that are well-researched, but often underused, employer strategies to extend the preceding practical implications.

First, *increasing the use of customized, flexible work arrangements, when bundled with other HR flexibility strategies* (e.g., *flexibility in task and job autonomy, flexibly-tailored work and nonwork learning opportunities*) can help employers adapt to the work–life needs of different age groups (Burke and Ng 2006; De Menezes and Kelliher 2017). Reduced-load and part-time work, including a phased return to work after childbirth, illness, or retirement, are options that have been around for decades but that many employers may not be offering or fully supporting (Kossek and Ollier-Malaterre 2020). Although enhanced flexibility in job redesign to reduce workloads has been underused at all career stages to reduce work–family conflict, it is highly effective when jointly engaging line managers, the employee, and HR (Kossek and Ollier-Malaterre 2020). Reduced-load arrangements involve job crafting to enable employees to customize jobs to be able to focus on tasks that are most aligned with their interests, skills, and values. These arrangements can have many employer benefits: turnover reduction, staffing backup, and team development, as members learn and take on new responsibilities from the redesigned jobs (Kossek et al. 2016). Such arrangements support caregiving demands by enabling incremental shifts from full-time work to reduced load or vice versa to support shifting configurations of work–nonwork demands and interests at different life stages. For example, by giving time to pursue nonwork

interests, reduced-load work encourages older employees to work longer and not retire (Vander Weerdt et al. 2025). Early and mid-career workers can use reduced-load work for nonwork needs (e.g., school, personal health), which reduces work–family conflict and turnover (Kossek et al. 2016). To support younger employees' nonwork needs, HR could work with managers to organize work to provide as much autonomy as possible in job tasks, coupled with flexible arrangements because autonomy is highly valued but often lacking for younger employees (Zacher et al. 2018). Finally, because of higher physical strain for many nonprofessional jobs, consistent with our findings that work–family conflict does not decrease for nonprofessionals, the informal flexibility to have choice varies between strenuous and less strenuous tasks, is another form of flexibility valued by older workers (Atkinson and Sandiford 2016). Overall, many companies have developed best practices to be more flexible in many ways to support the WFI and the age needs we identify, but they have not mainstreamed these practices.

Second, HR should invest in *supervisor training interventions and coaching*. Companies generally have not proactively invested in developing leadership skills in managing work–life issues (Kossek et al. 2023). Supervisor training, when delivered as an organizational leadership strategy designed to increase family supportive supervisor behaviors (Hammer et al. 2011) and supervisor support of sick and family leaves (Kossek et al. 2024) can reduce work–family conflict, psychological distress, and improve health. Such training socializes leaders on the value of supporting age-diverse work–life needs. It can integrate SEST principles on the importance of supporting employees' different and shifting instrumental and relational goals across the lifespan. Supervisors should be trained on how to jointly support younger workers work–family conflict needs in addition to their likely interest in instrumental goals, such as the attainment of job-relevant knowledge, career success, and finding mentors (Winter and Jackson 2014). Training can also increase awareness of caregivers and older adults' prioritization of relational goals, from needing more time off for child and adult care or to travel (Thrasher et al. 2016). HR departments should train managers to not discriminate based on life course factors such as gender (Kossek and Pichler 2008), while coaching them that this does not mean that different groups (e.g., men vs. women) are treated more favorably.

A third strategy that should be considered by HR leaders to support employees as they age is *employee resource network groups (ERGs), which could be coupled with workforce work–life needs assessments*. ERGs are workers who come together with a shared purpose or identity (Schlachter et al. 2023). Although historically these groups were created based on shared social identities (e.g., gender, race, sexuality, etc.), given growing DEI backlash in some countries, we suggest that ERGs could be broadly adapted to have additional formats and purposes based on age and work–life needs. For younger workers, such groups may focus on ways to reduce work–life stressors (e.g., how to prepare easy weekday meals; perform yoga, find housing, exercises to learn how to better emotionally regulate), satisfaction with child care assistance. Mid-career worker groups may need help in learning ways to reduce work–family conflict by better managing caregiving and schooling of children while advancing in careers. Older workers may need peer support on how to better pursue socio-emotional goals related to maintaining health and wellness, adult care, and interacting with family as they move toward retirement.

For multinationals, given our findings on global and national context differences in age and work–family conflict, ERGs might examine how workers in different locations experience WFI differently, and whether there is a need to provide support to supplement the national context. For example, HR leaders may consider the lack of support in the U.S. for paid time off and child care compared to other OECD countries, and design policies that ensure some level of equity. Studies show U.S. workers face the largest disadvantages of parenthood (Glass et al. 2016). Regarding Global South findings, innovative policies might be developed to foster WFI support for items not directly related to work but critical to living life, such as housing, transportation, and access to education in countries where infrastructure is lacking.

10 | Study Limitations and Additional Research Directions

First, most of the primary studies included in our meta-analysis did not utilize research designs that infer causality between age and work–family conflict, which is a limitation when interpreting the results of this study. Future research should seek to use research designs that are capable of establishing causal relationships (e.g., within-person, longitudinal, or experimental intervention designs). Nevertheless, our theorizing is consistent with the existing theoretical causal order of these relationships, namely that age is a factor that influences WFI outcomes (as opposed to the opposite). Second, our analyses were limited by the variables reported in primary studies and whether these studies reported an effect size between age and these measures of the work-family interface. These measurement and effect size limitations directly influenced the variables in our analysis and limited our ability to examine other important variables such as the extent of dependent care (child, older adult) and employees' own mental and physical health needs. We encourage HR researchers to increase inclusion of age and family care demands, and the availability and usage of HR policies suggested (e.g., flexibility, leader training, ERGs; work–family–life policies) in measures and analyses beyond sample description. They should also start to use measures commonly used by employers, such as work–family balance, which the unshaded area in Figure 1 identified as needed, in addition to work–family enrichment. Third, future studies would also benefit from improved regular documentation of where the country sampling is occurring. Studies may also benefit from including brief descriptions of country-specific HR factors or country policies that may influence age and work–family variables, such as the legal right to request paid and unpaid time off for family leave or flexible working, mandatory retirement ages, and government-supported retirement and health care plans. These country specifics are often not part of articles and would provide important context.

Finally, given the ways in which some of the moderator variables were measured in primary studies included in the analysis, our ability to tease apart finer-grained differences based on some life course moderators was limited. As an example, we had to treat race as % White, which does not allow us to determine

how relationships between age and work–family conflict differ across races in a granular way. Similarly, we dichotomized countries in two ways: the United States and outside of the United States, and the Global North and the Global South, which prevents more nuanced comparisons between countries. If studies are able to diversify their samples by gender, race, and country, and their intersectionality with job and family structures, these comparisons may be possible in future research. We recognize the challenges of collecting data from workers, especially when there are strong employee privacy protection laws, such as in the EU, compared to the U.S., and even more substantial difficulties in gathering racial identity EU data from workers. Voluntary disclosure of racial–ethnic identity should be strongly encouraged in future work–family and age studies to enhance sample sizes for research.

In conclusion, this study has advanced the argument that HRM research needs to update policies and scholarship to be more responsive to the increasingly complex employee personal, situational factors, and country contextual influences on the relationship between age and the work–family interface. Future HRM research and practice must focus on advancing age-inclusive policies to better address employees' increasingly varied age and work–family relationships.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Endnotes

[1] The work–family literature has distinguished between various types of work–family conflict, including time-based, strain-based, and behavior-based work–family conflict, as well as elucidated the differences in its directionality (i.e., work-to-family vs. family-to-work). Our theoretical perspective, grounded in socioemotional selectivity theory (SEST; Carstensen, 1992), provides a similar prediction across these three types of work–family conflict as a general construct.

[2] The definition of what is an older worker varies (Truxillo et al. 2015). For instance, in the U.S. the age of 40 is used as a cutoff in legal anti-discrimination law (Ng and Feldman 2008, 2012). Yet some studies use the older worker age cutoff of 55 (Thrasher et al. 2016).

[3] We were encouraged by one of the reviewers to explore how multiple life course factors might bound the relationship between age and the WFI. Consequently, we developed exploratory research questions to address this comment. As such, our exploratory results must be viewed with caution as some of the k values were small for these analyses, with the smallest being 3 independent effect sizes.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section. **Appendix S1** Studies included in meta-analysis.