

## **Public Employees' Experience of Work-Family Conflict and Emotional Exhaustion: Lessons for Work from Home during the Covid-19 Pandemic in Fiji**

[https://doi.org/10.33318/jpacs.2024.44\(4\)](https://doi.org/10.33318/jpacs.2024.44(4))

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### **Abstract**

This study examines the effect of work-family conflict on emotional exhaustion among Fiji's public sector employees during enforced work-from-home (WFH) due to the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. A quantitative survey was conducted with 100 participants and then empirically analysed via PLS-SEM. Findings revealed that family interference with work (FIW) had a positive and significant effect on the emotional exhaustion of public employees. Similarly, work interference with family (WIF) on emotional exhaustion had the same effect. However, FIW has a more substantial impact on emotional exhaustion compared to WIF. This study highlights key strategies for public policymakers and human resource managers for better work-life balance of public employees in the post-COVID-19 era of enforced WFH. Suggestions are made at the policy level, managerial level and for home-based teleworkers. The theoretical contribution of this study is integrating role theory and conservation of resource theory for a comprehensive explanation for emotional exhaustion due to work-family conflict via resource loss. Studies on flexible working arrangements in Fiji's workforce are rare, and this study is the first of its kind in the context of enforced WFH. The distinct challenges in Fiji's case as barriers to effectively WFH are discussed.

**Keywords:** COVID-19; Emotional Exhaustion; Enforced WFH; Public Sector; Work-family Conflict

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## **Introduction**

Work From Home (WFH) policies became increasingly popular during the global outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, as millions of workers worldwide shifted to telework arrangements (Williamson, Colley & Hanna-Osborne, 2020). WFH is a flexible work arrangement that allows workers to work remotely from home rather than travelling to the office. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the adoption of WFH practices was rare, controversial (Kim & Hollensbe, 2018) and generally not considered a universal policy in organizations (Timsal & Awais, 2020). However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the adoption of WFH was mandated and enforced in workplaces as an attempt to prevent the spread of the virus. To continue important services for the public during the health crisis, workers were allowed to work remotely from home and follow social distancing protocols as directed by national and international health authorities (Belzunegui-Eraso & Erro-Garces, 2020). The concept of WFH, however, was uncommon in the public sector even before the pandemic (Palumbo, 2020). In the public sector in Fiji, WFH materialised due to the nationwide COVID-19 response to physical distancing in the workplace (Ministry of Civil Service, 2020) and the national lockdown imposed by authorities (Ministry of Health and Medical Services, 2020). In public sector organisations, there was no formal WFH policy before the COVID-19 pandemic. As the WFH experiences during the pandemic were poorly documented, little is known about how the public sector employees in Fiji managed the demanding work schedules and family life commitments. WFH was enforced in government workplaces during the COVID-19 outbreak in an unprecedented manner. WFH arrangement was practised from April 2020 until October 2021 (Wilson, Rokoduru, Waqa, & Tawake, 2023). The Public sector employees had no choice but to work from their homes. Since most public sector employees had no prior WFH experience, they struggled to balance work and family roles, further increasing work-family conflict. Work-family conflict refers to a situation in which the work-related responsibilities of an individual worker compete with his or her family responsibilities and vice-versa (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). If the worker spent time and energy on office work, he or she would have had less time and energy left to attend to family responsibilities.

Further research is needed to understand better the impact of the work-family conflict resulting from the enforced movement restrictions and workplace lockdowns, as seen during the COVID-19 lockdown (Anderson & Kelliher, 2020). It is important to understand its impact on the workers' well-being, such as emotional exhaustion across family and social settings (Thompson, Carlson, Kacmar, & Vogel, 2020). In extended families, workers who looked after the elderly and children were more likely to have excessive dependent caring responsibilities when working from home. In Fiji, the family is considered the main support system for elderly members (Seniloli & Tawake, 2015). Many family households consist of multigenerational members, with the elderly, children and close relatives living together. Consequently, in a Fijian household, working members have a demanding social obligation to care for children and elders (Seniloli & Tawake, 2015). Excessive roles outside work result in excessive demand and distraction from work, especially when workers are working from home (Himawan, Helmi, & Fanggidae, 2022). Work-family conflict is a constant competition and struggle to fulfil work role demands and excessive family role demands, which causes workers to be exhausted and stressed out.

In countries where social welfare programs for the elderly and childcare services are well established, the burden on workers' family responsibilities may be reduced. However, in countries like those from Asia and the Pacific, including Fiji, there is an emphasis on the communal

responsibility of extended family members living together to care for children and elders (Himawan, Helmi & Fanggidae, 2022; Seniloli & Tawake, 2015). This family and social setting created a highly demanding and conflicting environment for public sector employees who held additional family responsibilities within extended families as they tried to work from home during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, the home-schooling responsibility would have been challenging for working parents as school teachers are often perceived as the primary supporters of a child's academic learning (Chand, 2017). This added responsibility during the closure of schools and workplaces exerted more demand on teleworking parents, as time and energy were spent towards home-schooling their children while juggling work schedules. Similarly, teleworking parents with toddlers had additional responsibility towards child-rearing and this also demanded more time and attention from them.

This study provides empirical evidence for the effects of work-family conflict on the emotional exhaustion of public sector employees during the unprecedented enforced WFH initiative. These effects are further examined in the context of Fiji's social, cultural, and economic environment shaped by societal expectations for early childhood care and education, workplace norms, social roles and obligations held by extended family members, and economic aspirations of the nation as an upper middle-income economy. This study contributes to the literature in two ways. Firstly, the integration of role theory and conservation of resource (COR) theory adds to theoretical development by generating insights into the relationships between work-family conflict and emotional exhaustion. In combining these theories, this study explains the negative effect of incompatible work and family role demands on emotional exhaustion through the process of resource depletion. The application of these theories in the context of an enforced WFH is new, and therefore, it allows this study to offer novel insights into existing knowledge on the constraints and benefits of WFH. Secondly, this study provides empirical evidence from a public sector workforce in a non-western, small Pacific Island country where WFH was generally unconventional. The study is the first of its kind to examine the relationship between work-family conflict and emotional exhaustion among public sector employees in Fiji. There are no similar studies in other Pacific Island countries on teleworkers' work-family conflict and emotional exhaustion during the pandemic.

### **Fiji Context**

Fiji is an upper middle-income country with a GNI per capita of around \$ 4,492 (USD) in the year 2021 (Asian Development Bank, 2021). The households rely on income streams coming from formal employment in a wide range of sectors, including the public sector (Fiji Bureau of Statistics, 2022). Development and investments in key industries such as tourism, agriculture and manufacturing (including sugar, mineral water, and food) provide employment opportunities in Fiji. Yet, public administration and defence/compulsory social security is Fiji's fourth largest paid employment industry (Fiji Bureau of Statistics, 2022). Fijian civil service is the largest employer, with over 30,000 civil servants, compared to the private sector workforce, which has over 140,000 employees across various private sector organizations (Fiji Bureau of Statistics, 2022). Fijian Civil Service plays a pivotal role in the Fijian economy, given their vast asset base, contributions to GDP, employment generation and provision of public goods and services (Ministry of Finance, 2024).

## **Literature Review**

### **Work-From-Home during the COVID-19 pandemic**

WFH is not a new concept. It was first introduced in 1970 amid the international oil crisis when Jack Nilles and his colleagues published their report on potential savings from decreased locomotion (Golden, Veiga, & Dino, 2008). He originally termed it ‘telework’ and defined it as an activity which includes all work-related substitutions of telecommunications and related information technologies for travel (Collins, 2005). WFH has been defined in various terms over the four decades, namely remote work, flexible workplace, telework, telecommuting and e-working (Bloom, Liang, Roberts, & Ying, 2015). These terms refer to the ability of employees to work in flexible workplaces, especially at home, by using technology (Grant, Wallace, Spurgeon, Tramontano, & Chralampous, 2019). Telework is using ICTs such as smartphones, tablets, laptops, and desktop computers for work performed outside the employer’s premises (Eurofound and ILO, 2017). ICTs allow workers to be more reachable, irrespective of location and even during “non-core” working hours (ILO, 2021). Rather than allowing employees to get better control over the work-life interface, home-based teleworking involves an intensification of work (Kelliher & Anderson, 2010) and an increased technocratic control of managers over remote workers (Bathini & Kandathil, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has made the telework arrangement of WFH a prevailing work arrangement across sectors, including public sector organisations worldwide, to prevent the spread of infection (ILO, July 2020). The Eurofound’s European Working Conditions Survey (27 member countries of the European Union) reported data indicating that WFH during the COVID-19 pandemic negatively affected the work-life balance of public employees due to the increased work-to-life and life-to-work conflicts. Telecommuting during the pandemic triggered employees to feel greater work-related fatigue, which worsened the perceived work-life balance of public employees (Palumbo, 2020). In Northern India, teleworkers experienced emotional exhaustion due to work-life interference (Bhumika, 2020). It was found that women, compared to men, felt more emotional exhaustion due to personal life interference with work when working from home during the pandemic. However, the level of work interference with personal life and emotional exhaustion was similar for both genders.

Researchers found that participative leadership can contribute to the reduction of work interference with personal life, and such influence can decrease the emotional exhaustion experienced by employees (Bhumika, 2020). Working from home may be less stressful and conflicting when supervisors and managers are perceived to be more supportive towards employee work-life issues.

Research showed that WFH is beneficial for working parents with dependent children who require flexibility in meeting their family and work roles (Hokke, et al., 2020; Kaduk, Genadek, Kelly, & Moen, 2019; Troup & Rose, 2012). In Australia, for instance, flexible work arrangements had a positive effect on the health and wellbeing of Australian working mothers and fathers (Hokke, et al., 2020). Lower fatigue and less burnout were observed among Australian working parents who work from home, showed low work-family conflict and distress. Flexible workers effectively control work and family boundaries when working from home (Kossek & Lautsch, 2012). However, the COVID-19 lockdown imposed on workplaces specifically confined workers to work from home only. Consequently, workers had the freedom to choose their work location compared to the pre-pandemic period. The benefits of remote working may not have been evident when WFH was strictly enforced

throughout the pandemic period (Anderson & Kelliher, 2020; Fisher, et al., 2020).

Moreover, as childcare centres and schools were closed during the COVID-19 lockdown, working parents faced additional challenges at home, juggling their work commitments and providing home-schooling to their children simultaneously (Anderson & Kelliher, 2020). Many working parents worked in paid jobs during the enforced WFH. However, some had heightened financial concerns about losing their jobs (Fisher et al., 2020). Work-related challenges of finding a suitable space for work, access to equipment, and reliable internet connectivity would have added stress to working from home during the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic led to workplace changes that forced workers to struggle and maintain a work-family balance with limited support (Anderson & Kelliher, 2020).

### **Role Theory and Conservation of Resource Theory**

Two key theories are the Role theory (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985) and the Conservation of Resource theory (Hobfoll, 1998), provide the theoretical lens for explaining the relationship between work-family conflict and emotional exhaustion:

The Role theory is used to define the roles of individuals such as workers, managers, and family members. The role refers to a set of duties and expectations that relate to the individual's position and status (Martin & Wilson, 2005). Individuals carry out simultaneous roles in their daily lives, such as role accumulation. For instance, an individual can simultaneously be an employee, a spouse and/or a father/mother in his or her family-life domain. The different roles require different time and energy commitments. The responsibilities of different roles in multiple life domains are often incompatible, leading to inter-role conflict (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985).

The COR theory is one of the most cited theories in organizational psychology and organizational behaviour, which has been used to explain social and behavioural issues across the stress spectrum ranging from burnout to traumatic stress (Hobfoll, Halbesleben, Neveu, & Westman, 2018). This theory can also be used to explain the effects of work-family conflict on emotional exhaustion through the process of resource depletion, i.e., work-family conflict situations may cause people to lose (or gain) resources, as well as their psychological well-being (e.g., emotional exhaustion, stress and burnout) as a result of trying to juggle work and family roles (Grandey & Cropanzano, 1999; Nohe & Meier, 2015). The basic tenet of COR Theory (Hobfoll, 1998) is that individuals strive to obtain, retain, and foster activities and objects they would centrally value the most (Hobfoll, Halbesleben, Neveu, & Westman, 2018). Anything valuable for them is called a resource – which serves as a means of obtaining valued ends (Hobfoll, 2001). These resources include object resources (e.g., car, tools for work), condition resources (e.g., employment, tenure), personal resources (self-efficacy and optimism) and energy resources (e.g., credit, knowledge). The COR Theory further indicates that stress occurs when (a) central or key resources are threatened with loss, (b) central or key resources are lost, or (c) there is a failure to gain central or key resources following significant effort (Hobfoll, Halbesleben, Neveu, & Westman, 2018). Resource loss is disproportionately more salient than resource gain and so individuals invest in new or alternative resources in order to protect against resource loss, recover from losses and gain resources (Grandey & Cropanzano, 1999; Hobfoll, Halbesleben, Neveu, & Westman, 2018).

## **Work-Family Conflict**

Work-Family Conflict is considered an inter-role conflict, which shows that work and family roles are mutually incompatible (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). This construct is primarily grounded in Role theory and the scarcity of resource hypotheses. The concept of Work-Family Conflict indicates that the demands for one role would deplete personal resources, such as time, physical or mental energy, thereby leaving insufficient resources to allocate to activities in other roles (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000). Inter-role conflict theory indicates three forms of work-life conflict: time-based conflict, strain-based conflict and behaviour-based conflict (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985), which are further contextualized in two directions: work-to-family conflict (i.e., work interfering with family or **WIF**) and family-to-work conflict (i.e., family interfering with work or **FIW**) (Gutek, Searle, & Klepa, 1991). Under work-family conflict, the demands for individuals' work roles interferes with the ability to satisfy the demands of their family roles and vice versa. Based on this perspective, telework causes workers to make compromises to fulfil incompatible and demanding multiple roles. However, workers might mitigate one kind of conflict at the expense of increasing another form of conflict (Zhang, Moeckel, Moreno, Shuai, & Gao, 2020). During enforced WFH in the COVID-19 lockdown, increased demands from both roles were experienced. The proximity of family and work made it difficult for individuals to fulfil competing demands between their roles. This situation led to work interference with family and vice versa. The competing demands of dual roles of work and family are likely to give rise to negative emotions (Hammer, Cullen, Neal, Sinclair, & Shafiro, 2005). However, Role theory alone is not sufficient in explaining the relationship between work/family stressors and stress outcomes (Jackson & Schuler, 1985); hence it is crucial to integrate Role theory with COR theory.

In line with this perspective, work-family conflict would lead to stress because resources are lost by individuals in the process of juggling demanding work and family roles (Grandey & Cropanzano, 1999; Nohe & Meier, 2015). The COR Theory (Hobfoll, 1989) asserts that individuals use various resources for completing work tasks, such as time, cognitive attention, and physical energy, but they must replenish those resources during breaks to avoid stress (Kim, Park, & Niu, 2017). During WFH in COVID-19, the incompatible demands from the family domain would also compete for these same resources. For instance, cognitive attention time and physical energy are required are also required for, school children's learning, childcare, supervision, and excessive family responsibilities of taking care the elderly. . . Therefore, in the process of juggling work and family role demands, individuals would face resource-depletion of time, cognitive attention, and physical energy. Individuals would face scarcity of resources over time leading exhaustion and stress while working.

To protect or replace the threatened resources, coping behaviours (e.g., leaving the work role) are needed. If no coping behaviours are used, resources may become more and more depleted, resulting in exhaustion (Grandey & Cropanzano, 1999). Furthermore, during the lockdown, telecommuters were less likely to take breaks in between work because they did not have opportunities to walk to a meeting or chat with co-workers over tea breaks (Bilotta, Cheng, Davenport, & King, 2021). These physical demands (over-working) limit telecommuters to replenish resources such as physical energy and cognitive attention, leading to stress and exhaustion. The lack of coping behaviours by telecommuters would deplete these resources, leading to emotional exhaustion. In addition, the prolonged pandemic also heightened employees' social isolation, making it difficult for them to access instrumental and emotional support from organizational leaders and co-workers (Bilotta, Cheng, Davenport, & King, 2021). This limited individuals from accessing and attaining much-

needed personal resources such as social support from supervisors and co-workers to deal with their work-life situations.

### **Emotional Exhaustion**

Work-family conflict often leads to emotional exhaustion (Liu, et al., 2015). Emotional exhaustion is one of the widely discussed components of burnout. The three-component model of job burnout was developed by Maslach and Jackson (1981, 1986) define job burnout as a psychological syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and diminished personal accomplishments that can occur among individuals who work in human service. Schaufeli, Leiter and Kalimo (1995) further conceptualised the three-component model of job burnout as exhaustion, cynicism and decreased professional self-efficacy to other occupations. According to Schaufeli, Leiter and Kalimo (1995), exhaustion is primarily defined as the depletion of mental resources. Previous research generally shows negative consequences of emotional exhaustion, such as reduced job satisfaction (Burke & Greenglass, 1995), reduced organisational commitment (Sethi, Barrier, & King, 1999) and higher turnover of employees (Moore, 2000). Antecedents of emotional exhaustion receiving consistent empirical support include work overload, role conflict and role ambiguity (Burke & Greenglass, 1995; Moore, 2000). Empirical evidence from employees working from home in India during the COVID-19 pandemic shows that remote employees' work interference with personal life and personal life interference with work significantly impacted emotional exhaustion. (Bhumika, 2020). Positive effect between work interference with family and family interference with work on emotional exhaustion was found among teleworkers in Ecuador during the COVID-19 pandemic (Medina, Aguirre, Coello-Montecel, Pacheco, & Paredes-Aguirre, 2021). The construct of emotional exhaustion directly addresses the extent to which individuals feel depleted because of resource loss due to demanding work experiences (Halbesleben & Bowler, 2007). In this research, emotional exhaustion is captured based on the resource depletion process in work-family conflict during enforced WFH in COVID-19. In line with role theory and COR theory, increased incompatible family and work role demands compete for individuals' resources (time, cognitive attention and physical energies), which leads to resource depletion as they juggle to fulfil both role demands. This may eventually lead to emotional exhaustion being experienced by individuals. This study will test two hypotheses:

H1a: During WFH in COVID-19, FIW would have a positive and significant impact on employee emotional exhaustion.

H1b: During WFH in COVID-19, WIF would have a positive and significant impact on employee emotional exhaustion.

### **Research Methodology**

#### **Research Design**

A Quantitative method of survey was employed to collect data from the participants in two public sector organizations in Fiji - the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs (MTA) and the Ministry of Youth and Sports (MYS). The survey focused on employee perceptions of work-family conflict and emotional exhaustion experienced during WFH during the COVID-19 pandemic. An ethical clearance was obtained from the University's Research Ethics Committee which ensured that this research is compliant with the University's human ethics values and principles. Prior to entry into the public

sector organizations, permission was obtained from the Permanent Secretary of both organisations to conduct data collection via survey. All survey participants were thoroughly informed about the purpose of this research, which was detailed at the beginning of the questionnaire.

### **Population sample and data collection**

A pilot study was done of 30 participants. The survey instrument was tested for validity and reliability. The internal consistency reliability of survey items was measured using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability, which showed high internal consistency reliability. The validity of the survey items was measured using convergent and discriminant validity. Both showed good validity. MTA and MYS were selected because the Ministry of Civil Service listed these two as Ministries that can remotely work from home (Fiji Sun, 2020). Once the researcher received approval from the Ministries to do the research, the email addresses of department managers were obtained from the receptionist. A total of 220 survey questionnaires in the English language were distributed and a total of 100 survey responses were received with a 45 percent response rate. The questionnaires were hand-delivered to the public employees during their working hours, and in some cases, they were emailed to the department managers and later sent to their employees. The data collection was done for 6 months (May 2022 – October 2022) after COVID-19 restrictions were lifted in the country. The participants were reminded to answer the questions based on their experience of working from home during the COVID-19 lockdown. The researcher personally collected the answered questionnaires after a week and while some were received via email. Purposive sampling was used to select participants who worked from home during the COVID-19 national lockdown and held only non-managerial intermediate or front-line positions. The sampling is similar to Bhumika's (2020) study. The sampling questions were asked and clarified before the questionnaire was given to the participants. The managers and supervisors of different departments were informed about the purposive sampling criteria and then the researcher was directed to the relevant research participants.

### **Measures**

The questionnaire was designed around a work-family conflict scale (WIF and FIW) (independent variable) and one emotional exhaustion scale (dependent variable). The questionnaire utilized a five-point Likert scale from '1' meaning 'strongly disagree' to '5' meaning 'strongly agree'. Appendix 1 details the questionnaire with the source and Appendix 2 shows the mean and standard deviation.

#### ***Work-family conflict***

A six-item scale was adopted from Carlson, Kacmar, and William (2000) and Carlson and Frone (2003) to measure the work-family conflict. The scale was subdivided into two – work interference with family (WIF) (three-item) and family interference with work (FIW) (three-item). The scales were modified by adding "During COVID-19" at the beginning of the sentence to measure their perceptions of work-family conflict during WFH in the COVID-19 pandemic. Four items from Carlson, Kacmar and William (2000) measured time-based WIF/FIW and strain-based WIF/FIW and two items from Carlson and Frone's (2003) looked at psychological work and family involvement (WIF/FIW). A psychological scale was used for measuring the work-family conflict due to the probable high incidence of the psychological conflict of both work and family roles experienced during WFH. Given the restrictions on physical movement and isolation at home during the lockdown, this form of conflict may be more prevalent.



**Emotional exhaustion**

Three items were adopted from Moore (2000) to measure emotional exhaustion based on the original five-item scale of work exhaustion subscale of the General Burnout Questionnaire (Schaufeli, Leiter, & Kalimo, 1995). The scales were modified by adding “During COVID-19” at the beginning of the sentence to measure their perceptions of emotional exhaustion during WFH in the COVID-19 pandemic. Two items were coined into one item to reduce the number of items in the scale. “I feel emotionally drained from my work” and “I feel burned out from my work” were combined into “During COVID-19, I felt emotionally drained and burned out from my work”.

Table 1. Profile of respondents

<b>Demographic variables</b>	<b>Frequency (n=100)</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	51	51
Female	49	49
<b>Age</b>		
30 below	29	29
31-40	48	48
41-50	20	20
51-60	2	2
60 above	1	1
<b>Ethnicity</b>		
iTaukei	80	80
Indo-Fijians	18	18
Others	2	2
<b>Dependents</b>		
Children	48	48
Elderly	7	7
Both	23	23
None	22	22
<b>Psychological variables</b>		
<b>Education</b>		
Certificate	20	20
Diploma	33	33
Degree	34	34
Postgraduate	8	8
Masters	5	5
<b>Work Experience</b>		
4 or less	46	46
5-10	38	38
11-15	8	8
16 and more	8	8
<b>Domain variables</b>		
<b>Public sector organisation</b>		
Ministry of iTaukei Affairs	54	54
Ministry of Youth and Sports	46	46

## Data analysis and procedure

This study used the partial least square structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) method to analyse quantitative data. This analysis was done in the Smart PLS 4.0 version (Ringle, Wende, & Becker, 2015). PLS-SEM is a widely used data analysis tool in business and social science researches (Hair, Sarstedt, Hopkins, & Kuppelwieser, 2014). This method allows for the analysis of low sample size and non-normal data (Hair, Hult, Ringle, Sarstedt, & Thiele, 2017). Researchers also benefit from the method's high degree of statistical power to show a significant relationship when present in the population compared to covariance-based structural equation modelling (CB-SEM) (Hair, Hult, Ringle, Sarstedt, & Thiele, 2017). While CB-SEM strongly relies on the concept of model fit, this is much less in the case of PLS-SEM (Hair, Risher, Sarstedt, & Ringle, 2019). PLS-SEM primarily focuses on the interplay between prediction to infer the population and theory testing (explanatory characteristics –  $R^2$ ), and results should be validated accordingly (Shumueli, 2010). The assessment of PLS-SEM results involves a two-step approach – evaluation of the measurement model and the structural model assessment (Hair, Hult, Ringle, Sarstedt, & Thiele, 2017). The measurement model component pledges to carry forward further analysis for constructs which meet the suggested benchmark of reliability and validity of constructs. These include indicator reliability, internal consistency reliability (Composite and Cronbach alpha), convergent validity and discriminant validity. The structural model determines the path coefficients and tests their significance.

## Data analysis and results

### Reflective Measurement model assessment

The assessment of the construct's reliability and validity in the measurement model is based on the guidelines of Hair, Risher, Sarstedt and Ringle (2019). All the nine constructs' indicators were kept as it showed a good indicator reliability of more than the recommended loadings of 0.708. Figure 1 shows indicator loading results. The internal consistency reliability criteria of all constructs were also met as Cronbach alpha (CA) (recommended 0.70 above) and composite reliability (CR) (recommended 0.70-0.95) were within the suggested range (Hair, Risher, Sarstedt, & Ringle, 2019). The convergent validity criteria of average variance extracted (AVE) also met the suggested benchmark of values above 0.50, showing good convergent validity. These constructs' reliability and AVE are present in Table 2. Similarly, discriminant validity is also established, exhibited in Table 3. All the construct's heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) values are less than the 0.85 threshold. Thus, all the constructs are conceptually different.

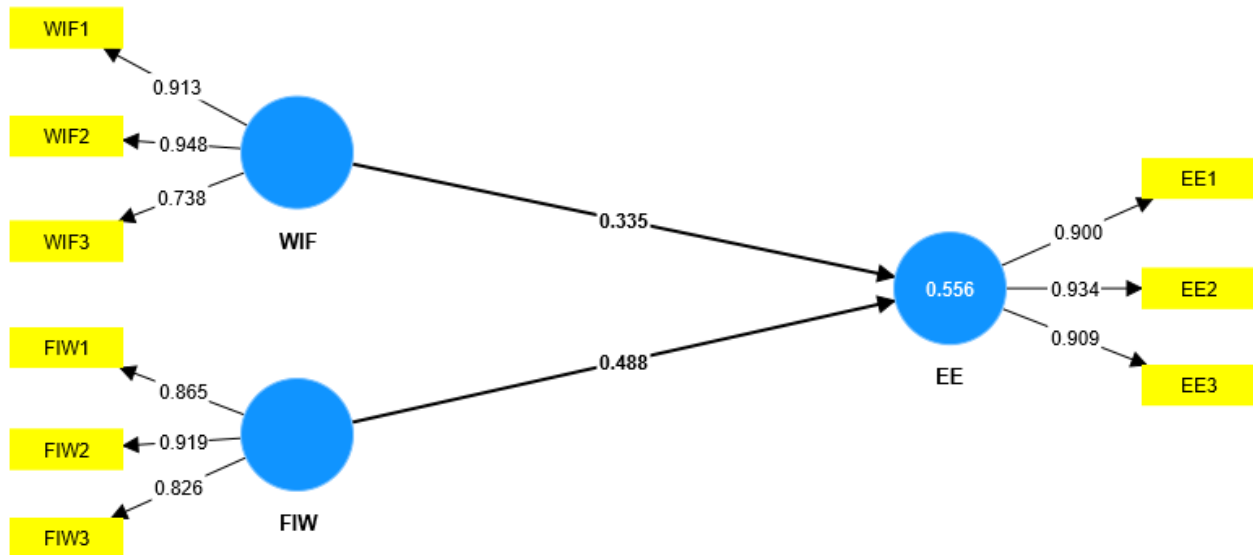
Table 2. Indicator loadings, internal consistency reliability and convergent validity

Constructs	Loadings	CA	CR	AVE
<b>Family interference with work</b>		0.843	0.904	0.758
FIW1	0.865			
FIW2	0.919			
FIW3	0.826			
<b>Work interference with family</b>		0.843	0.903	0.759
WIF1	0.913			
WIF2	0.948			
WIF3	0.738			
<b>Emotional exhaustion</b>		0.902	0.939	0.836
EE1	0.900			
EE2	0.934			
EE3	0.909			

Table 3. Discriminant Validity – HTMT

Construct	EE	FIW
FIW	0.776	
WIF	0.701	0.729

Figure 1. Reflective measurement model (indicator loadings)



### Structural model assessment

Collinearity must be examined before assessing structural relationships to avoid bias in the regression relationships (Hair, Risher, Sarstedt, & Ringle, 2019). Variance inflation factor (VIF) is used to evaluate collinearity problems. This test is similar to the common method bias test (Kock & Lynn, 2012). The VIF value between FIW and EE was 1.641. Similarly, the VIF value between WIF and EE was 1.641. All the constructs of the structural model are below the suggested threshold VIF value of 3 (Hair, Risher, Sarstedt, & Ringle, 2019). Therefore, no multicollinearity issues were detected and further assessments were done.

The results revealed an  $R^2$  value of 0.556 for EE, as shown in Figure 1. As a guideline,  $R^2$  values of 0.75, 0.50 and 0.25 can be considered substantial, moderate and weak (Hair, Risher, Sarstedt, & Ringle, 2019). Therefore, the  $R^2$  value supports the model's in-sample predictive power (moderate). Furthermore, the  $Q^2$  value is assessed to determine the PLS path model's predictive accuracy. As a guideline,  $Q^2$  should be higher than 0, 0.25 and 0.50 to depict the small, medium and large predictive relevance of the PLS-path model (Hair, Risher, Sarstedt, & Ringle, 2019). The  $Q^2$  is found to be 0.526, which shows that the PLS-path model in this analysis has a large predictive relevance.

A bootstrapping of 5000 samples was done in this analysis to assess path coefficient significance (p-value) along with  $t$ -statistics (T value > 1.96) and 95% confidence intervals of indicators. Path coefficients can be interpreted as standardized beta coefficients ( $\beta$ ).  $\beta$  values closer to 1 are stronger. Table 4 presents the path coefficients ( $\beta$ ), standard deviation (SD),  $t$ -statistics,  $p$  values and bias-corrected confidence interval of indicators (BI).

Table 4. Testing direct relationships

	$\beta$	SD	$t$ value (bootstrap)	$p$ values	BI (2.5%; 97.5%)	Decision
H1a: FIW-> EE	0.488	0.108	4.517	0.000	(0.270; 0.688)	Supported
H1b: WIF-> EE	0.335	0.109	3.090	0.002	(0.121; 0.546)	Supported

\* $p < 0.01$

The results in Table 4 revealed that FIW has a positive and significant impact on EE ( $\beta = 0.488$ ,  $t = 4.517$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ). Hence, H1a was supported. The results revealed that WIF has a positive and significant impact on EE ( $\beta = 0.335$ ,  $t = 3.090$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ). Therefore, H1b is also supported. It can be interpreted that during WFH, FIW ( $\beta = 0.488$ ) had a stronger effect on EE in comparison to WIF ( $\beta = 0.335$ ).

## Discussion

The key finding of this study is that both dimensions of work-family conflict (WIF and FIW) had a positive effect on emotional exhaustion amongst the public sector teleworkers during the enforced WFH in the COVID-19 lockdown. The findings highlight that teleworkers' FIW dimension had a stronger effect on their emotional exhaustion compared to WIF.

The theoretical underpinning and results of this study are similar to Nohe and Meier's (2015) meta-analyses of studies on work-family conflict and strain. Their meta-analyses illustrate that work-family conflict creates a strain on the resources; as individual's adjust to the resource loss, therefore, WIF and FIW predict strain. In this research, work-family conflict predicts emotional exhaustion via resource loss amongst teleworkers during enforced WFH. The finding of this study is similar to Bhumika's (2020) study done in northern India and Medina, Aguirre, Coello-Montecel, Pacheco and Paredes-Aguirre's (2021) study in Ecuador during WFH in the pandemic. The empirical findings of this study support both empirical studies as it showed that teleworkers experienced emotional exhaustion because of both dimensions of work-life conflict when teleworking from home in the pandemic. Both studies support the viewpoint that during the lockdown, teleworkers globally experienced exacerbated levels of WIF and FIW. Similarly, Palumbo's (2020) empirical research shows that the public sector's home-based teleworkers suffered from increased work-to-life and life-to-work conflicts, which diminished their work-life balance during the pandemic. The fact that WFH was enforced made it particularly difficult for first-time inexperienced teleworkers to deal with work-life situations. The findings of this study reflect that the inexperienced public sector teleworkers in Fiji's public workforce had difficulty in balancing family and work role demands. Similar to other small island developing states of Mauritius, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, WFH was more popular in the private sector rather than the public sector because of the traditional nature of government services (Durbarray, 2021). Researchers highlight that inexperienced Mauritian public teleworkers struggled to manage their time to keep a regular work schedule when working from home, leading to an interruption in their daily work-life balance (Durbarray, 2021). In another research, Mauritian employees faced office-home conflict as work and family expectations substantially increased during WFH (Kooraram & Durbarray, 2021). They spent less time towards family activities as they struggled to manage their time when teleworking (Kooraram & Durbarray, 2021). In Fiji's case, the inexperienced public teleworkers faced a similar situation of an imbalance in their work and life domain. They experienced work-family conflict, which eventually led them to

face emotional exhaustion from work during the involuntary WFH.

The findings of this study also suggest that mainly emotional exhaustion was experienced from FIW. Teleworkers faced higher levels of FIW during the enforced WFH period, making them feel exhausted with their work. The effectiveness of WFH is dependent on family factors and household characteristics such as the size of the living area, the number of family members sharing the same accommodation and the number and age of children in the household (Baker, Avery, & Crawford, 2007). Many teleworkers, had to juggle their work tasks with home-schooling their children. Children's learning and homework duties during lockdown at home may have been a significant challenge for Fijian teleworking parents as it became their personal obligation rather than teachers. These would have required more time, cognitive attention and energy towards supervising and keeping track of their children's home-based learning whilst teleworking. Evidence from the Caribbean Policy Research Institute in 2020 showed that Jamaican teleworking parents who had school-aged children were getting less than 50% of their work done while working from home (Nelson, Thompson, & Riley, 2021). Similarly, teleworking parents with toddlers would have faced resource constraints as they had to balance between child-care and work demands, leading to remote work. It can be determined from the profile of participants that 48 per cent of the respondents with dependent children may have faced the challenge of home-schooling and/or child-care. Teleworkers living in extended or nuclear families with dependent elderly family members needed to provide domestic care and support for them. This may have exhausted their resource towards work commitment and fatigue within the work domain. Particularly, the teleworkers living in extended families, they may have faced excessive family responsibilities and greater interruptions from the family domain depending on the size of the family composition. The findings of this study support the argument made by Himawan, Helmi and Fanggidae (2022). Fijian society's socio-cultural norm of extended families has challenged the effectiveness of WFH, as reflected in the findings of this study. It can be gauged from the profile of respondents that about 30 per cent of the respondents resided in extended families (7 respondents lived with elderly and 23 with both elderly and children). These teleworkers faced excessive family responsibilities of domestic dependent care for the elderly as well as child-care and/or home-schooling for the children. These teleworkers faced greater resource loss towards the family domain and subsequently higher emotional exhaustion compared to other teleworkers with less family responsibilities. Too many incompatible family roles demands depleted the much needed resource for remote work tasks, making teleworkers feel emotionally exhausted.

Another study, which was done in a pre-COVID-19 context, showed that in the work setting, family-to-work conflict had a positive and significant effect on the emotional exhaustion of employees, whereas work-to-family conflict did not have a significant effect (Liu, et al., 2015). Researchers suggest that depending on the context of work or home, work-to-family conflict or family-to-work can actually drain employees' resources to varying degrees. This research provides evidence that in the home context of WFH, WIF has a positive and significant effect on employees' emotional exhaustion. In the home context, the scenario becomes different compared to working in an office whereby in an office setting, employees are more focused on completing the work tasks. The close proximity of work and family in the home environment during enforced WFH led to more disruption from the work domain towards family activities compared to routine office days. Studies have detailed that WFH during the lockdown, WIF was mainly because of individuals' anticipation towards slow economic growth pressuring them to put extra effort into securing their job (Bhumika, 2020), and less commuting time, which meant additional time for work at home (Kumar, Kumar,

Aggarwal, & Yeap, 2021), over working without tea or lunch breaks (Bilotta, Cheng, Davenport, & King, 2021) and work emergencies were omnipresent in the family domain (Medina, Aguirre, Coello-Montecel, Pacheco, & Paredes-Aguirre, 2021).

Similarly, these challenges were faced by the public teleworkers in this study as well. Global and local news on COVID-19 induced layoffs and the possibility of economic downturn caused emotional distress and anxiety amongst teleworkers with their jobs. Another study showed that amongst Mauritian employees, the fear of losing their jobs pressured them to accept work overload, which had a significant effect on their work-family conflict and occupational burnout (Rughoobur-Seetah, 2021). In both the small island developing states, the tourism and hospitality sector heavily experienced COVID-19-induced layoffs. This may have sparked fear amongst public employees and from other sectors to secure their jobs during the pandemic. The constant work overload of teleworkers meant more role conflict of WIF with less time and attention for family activities and also depletion of the resources required for the job. Thus, this led teleworkers to experience emotional exhaustion and tiredness with work overtime. In contrast, Rughoobur-Seetah's (2021) theoretical argument is based on COR, which suggests that employees were conserving their jobs during the pandemic as an important resource, resulting in work overload, stress and burnout, which affected their family domain as justified through spill over and crossover model. However, in this research COR lens is used to theoretically argue about the resources of time, cognitive attention and physical energies required to complete work tasks. Once these resources are depleted, failure to replenish them will lead to emotional exhaustion. The high level of incompatible work demands hinders the teleworker's ability to satisfy the family demands and vice-versa, resulting in WIF and FIW as justified by role theory. Therefore, teleworkers experience resource loss towards the work and family domain and eventually feel emotionally exhausted. The positive and significant effect of WIF/FIW on EE reflects this theoretical argument in this study.

The constant availability of teleworkers by managers via email, mobile phones and social media in the family environment would have disrupted their family activities and personal time. This led them to take fewer breaks and potentially experience work intensification as well. Palumbo's (2020) research supports this viewpoint as public teleworkers from home were found to experience work-related fatigue due to the intensification of work efforts. This reduced their perceived work-life balance. In addition to this, inexperienced public teleworkers spend more time learning about Zoom, Google Drive, and other virtual apps to complete work tasks remotely from home. In Fiji, weak internet connectivity, the high cost of Wi-Fi services and the lack of technological infrastructure and equipment added to the virtual work stress for public teleworkers. Similarly, in Jamaica, internet connectivity issues were found to be a barrier for teleworkers that led to loss of productivity and frustration amongst employees (Nelson, Thompson, & Riley, 2021). Furthermore, Fijian teleworkers' family composition and dependent responsibilities delayed their work tasks and were to be completed later, thus interfering with their sleep schedules and family activities. The constant interference of these work-related factors made teleworkers feel stressed in the home environment and exhausted with remote work. The inability of the teleworkers to replenish the much-needed resources such as supervisor support for work-life situations and quality breaks in between work further deteriorated these resources, mounting into emotional exhaustion. This empirical study supports the suggestion made by Nelson, Thompson and Riley (2021) in the Jamaican context. These researchers posit that during the enforced WFH in COVID-19, work conditions deteriorated contributing to a greater risk of burnout due to prolonged stress. There have been increasing psychosocial pressures associated with working from home, such as increased use of technology,

the need to learn new skills quickly and balancing home and work life, amongst other challenges with a lack of social and psychological resources (Nelson, Thompson, & Riley, 2021).

### **Theoretical contribution**

This paper contributes to WFH literature based on public employees' perceptions of work-family conflict on emotional exhaustion during the enforced WFH in the COVID-19 lockdown. This paper's major theoretical contribution is the use of Role theory and COR theory, which provides a comprehensive and robust explanation of the negative effects of work-family conflict on employee emotional exhaustion due to the resource depletion process. The major advantage of COR theory is its ability to make a wide range of specific hypotheses based on resource views that are much broader than those offered by theories focused on a single resource (Hobfoll, Halbesleben, Neveu, & Westman, 2018). Using both theories in the context of enforced WFH expands the theoretical contribution and development. The suggestions of these theories are empirically proven in this study. Exacerbated levels of incompatible work and family role demands were experienced during the lockdown, which depleted teleworkers' time, cognitive attention and physical energy; this led to emotional exhaustion from work as teleworkers juggled to fulfil the demands of both roles.

### **Practical Implications**

There are several recommendations for the public workforce for the effective work-life balance of public employees post-COVID-19 in case of unknown disasters or pandemics like COVID-19. These suggestions aim to benefit the management and employees. Firstly, an overarching WFH policy or section needs to be included in the Employment Relations Promulgation (ERP) Fiji, which clearly outlines the objective of WFH arrangement and roles of workers (e.g., right to request, eligibility and requirements), employers (grounds for refusal), unions and other stakeholders such as mediation services and tribunal for resolving disputes. This will encourage the public sector workforce to adopt remote working regulation/policy on WFH and/or hybrid working arrangements (a mixture of working in the office and home) in the post-pandemic era. The management should agree on factors such as identifying jobs that can be done remotely, minimum time and days for employees required in the office and clearly articulate expected behaviour (for example, in charter or code of conduct, WFH guideline) for employees and managers to work remotely and in the office (OECDa, 2021). This will set the tone for changing the organizational culture of workplace flexibility for remote work.

Secondly, to motivate WFH employees and improve their WLB, human resource policymakers should consider the following: (a) allow employees to customize their work commitment and hours during WFH, (b) supervisors to trust and support WFH employees to help them reduce stress, (c) preference to be given to the employees to choose their place of work as some may be willing to WFH and others may prefer to be in office, (d) provide equal pay for remote work, (e) right to disconnect when WFH (Vyas, 2022). This gives employees the right not to respond to work-related matters and demands during nonworking hours, therefore reducing WIF.

Thirdly, managers should encourage healthy working practices such as working within regular hours and encouraging teleworkers from home to take regular breaks such as tea, lunch breaks and stretching exercises for relaxation. This will help them to keep work and nonwork activities separate and less conflicting (Vyas, 2022). In addition, these breaks will help teleworkers replenish resources such as physical energy and cognitive attention, which will help them feel more relaxed and less

exhausted with remote work.

Moreover, managers should demonstrate participative leadership as this reduces emotional exhaustion among teleworkers and reduces the interference of their work with their personal lives (Bhumika, 2020). Furthermore, organisations should invest in training managers on identifying employees' family-related issues and helping teleworkers from home solve these issues as they arise. Supervisor support is important for teleworkers from home as it acts as a resource for work-life balance (Talukder & Galang, 2021). For instance, constant communication via video-conferencing, phone calls and text messages with supervisors helps build rapport, which is found to reduce stress among employees (McGloin, Coletti, Hamlin, & Denes, 2022). Organisations should also invest in effective WFH technologies such as laptops, desktop PCs, and WiFi modems and provide training to WFH employees on using virtual applications to ease their remote work. This can possibly build the self-efficacy of remote workers to deal with challenging situations. Lastly, teleworkers must manage and self-regulate their individual resources effectively between work and family domains to prevent work fatigue and exhaustion when working from home post-COVID-19. Employee stress and burnout pose increasing threats towards their mental health and well-being (Vyas, 2022). Teleworkers need to be disciplined and well-organized. Teleworkers need to inform their family members about their work expectations and set clear boundaries between work and family during remote working hours to reduce disruptions from the family domain. Having a daily planner that outlines their working hours, break time and family activities may help reduce work-family interference for teleworkers. If similar circumstances to the COVID-19 health pandemic repeat itself in the near future, having such strategies implemented in advance will make the public workforce more adaptable, resilient, and capable of achieving a better work-life balance.

### **Limitations and future research directions**

The major limitation of this research is the small sample size, as it only included participants from two Ministries. This limits the generalisation and practical relevance of the findings to out-of-sample populations (other public sector organizations). Future research should include more public employees from other Ministries and public sector departments to understand their experiences with enforced WFH. This would allow for a larger sample size for accurate out-of-sample prediction for other public sector organisations. However, WFH may not apply to all Ministries, such as the Ministry of Health and Defence, as they provided frontline services. Important insights that emerged from the results call for the need to understand the public sector employees' work-life balance in a relevant cultural context. Fiji's culture emphasises living in extended families. Future researchers may explore the impact of family composition, extended family and culture on the emotional exhaustion of public sector employees. Future qualitative research can explore the experiences of public sector employees living in extended families and their coping mechanisms when balancing work and family life commitments. Future empirical analysis can include resources as mediators between work-family conflict and emotional exhaustion to gauge which resource loss was more salient during WFH. Gender-based perceptions on work-family conflict, work-life balance, emotional exhaustion, and other similar studies on employee well-being can shed light on the different or similar experiences of males and females during WFH. Through such studies, the changing gender norms and roles in the Fijian society or elsewhere can be addressed. Furthermore, in-depth qualitative research based on individual teleworkers' experiences is important to highlight the determinants of WIF and FIW towards their emotional exhaustion. This can provide clarity to researchers and policymakers for suggestions to improve the work-life balance of teleworkers.



Comparative studies between the public and the private sector can illustrate the experiences of teleworkers' work-family conflict and emotional exhaustion across sectors.

## Conclusion

This study showed that inexperienced public teleworkers experienced emotional exhaustion due to work-family conflict during the enforced WFH in the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. Teleworkers' FIW had a stronger effect on their emotional exhaustion. For the Fijian public teleworkers, the family responsibility of child-care, home-schooling and caring for the dependents in extended families during WFH in the lockdown burdened their ability to effectively WFH as they faced emotional exhaustion with remote work because of resource loss towards the family domain. The enforced WFH pressured the inexperienced teleworkers with work role demands of virtual work intensification amid rising fear of job loss and overworking without breaks, which impinge on their resource replenishment. Using virtual applications with limited experience and working without effective WFH technology made teleworkers feel exhausted with remote work in the home environment. During the lockdown, heightened levels of incompatible FIW and WIF were experienced by public teleworkers, making it difficult for them to cope with the depletion of time, cognitive attention and physical energy as they juggled between the demands of both roles.

## Acknowledgement

An ethical clearance was obtained from The University of the South Pacific's Research Ethics Committee, ensuring that this research complies with the University's human ethics values and principles.

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**Appendix 1**

Variables	Items	Source
<b>Work interference with family (WIF)</b>	<b>Time based WIF</b> (1) During COVID-19, I had to miss family activities due to the amount of time I spent on work activities.	(Carlson, Kacmar and William, 2000)
	<b>Strain based WIF</b> (2) During COVID-19, I was often so emotionally drained when I finished work that it prevented me from contributing to my family.	(Carlson, Kacmar and William, 2000)
	<b>Psychological WIF</b> (3) During COVID-19, when I was at home I tried to arrange, schedule or perform job-related duties outside of normal work hours.	(Carlson & Frone, 2003)
<b>Family interference with work (FIW)</b>	<b>Time based FIW</b> (1) During COVID-19, the time I spent on family responsibilities often interfered with my work responsibilities.	(Carlson, Kacmar and William, 2000)
	<b>Strain based FIW</b> (2) During COVID-19, tension and anxiety from my family often weakened my ability to do my job.	(Carlson, Kacmar and William, 2000)
	<b>Psychological FIW</b> (3) During COVID-19, I often thought about family-related problems while working from home.	(Carlson & Frone, 2003)
<b>Emotional exhaustion (EE)</b>	(1) During COVID-19, I felt emotionally drained and burned out from my work.	
	(2) During COVID-19, I felt fatigued to get up in the morning and had to face another day at the job.	(Moore, 2000)
	(3) During COVID-19, working all day was really a strain for me.	

**Appendix 2**

Construct	Items	Mean	Standard deviation
<b>WIF</b>	<b>WIF1.</b> During COVID-19, I had to miss family activities due to the amount of time I spent on work activities.	3.08	1.134
	<b>WIF2.</b> During COVID-19, I was often so emotionally drained when I finished work that it prevented me from contributing to my family.	2.90	1.059

	<b>WIF3.</b> During COVID-19, when I was at home I tried to arrange, schedule or perform job-related duties outside of normal work hours.	3.31	1.089
<b>FIW</b>	<b>FIW1.</b> During COVID-19, the time I spent on family responsibilities often interfered with my work responsibilities.	2.81	1.042
	<b>FIW2.</b> During COVID-19, tension and anxiety from my family often weakened my ability to do my job.	2.76	1.016
	<b>FIW3.</b> During COVID-19, I often thought about family-related problems while working from home.	2.91	1.045
<b>EE</b>	<b>EE1.</b> During COVID-19, I felt emotionally drained and burned out from my work.	2.63	1.022
	<b>EE2.</b> During COVID-19, I felt fatigued to get up in the morning and had to face another day at the job.	2.71	1.066
	<b>EE3.</b> During COVID-19, working all day was really a strain for me.	2.62	0.993