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Linking Identity Salience and Work-family Balance

Azelin Aziz^a, Nor Azimah Chew Abdullah^b and Awanis Ku Ishak^c

School of Business Management, Universiti Utara Malaysia, Malaysia

E-mails: azelin@uum.edu.my; norazimah@uum.edu.my; awanis@uum.edu.my

Abstract: Work-family experiences vary across societies. The cross-cultural literature contains numerous studies examining the influence of work and family structure factors such as work demand and work hours in the work domain. Family demands and the presence of children are the typical determinants of the family domain. The present study aims to expand the Malaysian cross-cultural work-family literature by studying the influence of individual characteristics, i.e. an individual's role identity. More specifically, this study proposes an interrelationship between work identity and family identity with the experience of work-family balance.

Keywords: Work-family interface, Role-identity, Cross-cultural

INTRODUCTION

Work and family are the two central domains in most adults' lives. Research into the links between these two domains has grown tremendously because of changes in the demographic composition of the workforce. Researchers have acknowledged that one constraint within the work-family literature is that existing research has primarily been conducted in Western societies. This is most notable in the United States (Cohen & Kirchmeyer, 2005; Poelmans *et al.*, 2003), likely because the West experienced a diversified workforce earlier than other parts of the world.

However, better education, economic growth, and employment opportunities, among other factors, have led to an increasing number of women in the workforce in developing countries, like Malaysia. As seen in Table 1, the overall trend of women's participation in the labour force in Malaysia is increasing. Although men far outnumber women, the number of female employees has been increasing even though the participation rate (shown in parenthesis) fluctuates as a result of external influences such as the economic condition. This shows that Malaysian women are increasingly represented in the labour force and significantly contribute to national economic development. While gender roles remain traditional, these working women actually juggle their work and family roles.

Countries differ at both the macro- and micro-level. The macro-level difference includes factors such as economic, social, technological and legislative systems (Joplin, Shaffer, Francesco & Lau, 2003; Korabik, Lero & Ayman, 2003; Poelmans, 2003; Sheridan & Conway, 2001). Micro-level differences refer to differences in individual variables, such as the quantity of role demands shouldered by individuals, coping strategies, personality, values, or even demographic differences. These differences to some extent influence the work-family interface. For example, family-friendly policies and work options are more available in developed countries than developing countries. Similarly, differing employment legislation will bring about different work structures for work hours, minimum wage, as well as maternal and paternal leave conditions. In summary, dissimilar conditions between countries lead individuals to face differing challenges when occupying multiple roles in life, including work and family roles.

Table 1
Increased participation by women in the labour force (in hundreds of thousands)

	2000	2004	2008	2012	2015
Employed ('000)	9,321.7	9,986.6	10,659.6	12,723.2	14,067.7
(Increment (%))	(21.9)	(7.1)	(6.7)	(19.4)	(10.6)
Male	6,086.2	6,397.9	6,851.1	8,093.5	8,691.1
	(20.1)	(5.1)	(7.1)	(18.1)	(7.4)
Female	3,235.5	3,588.7	3,808.5	4,629.7	5,376.7
	(25.0)	(10.9)	(6.1)	(21.6)	(16.1)

Source: Department of Statistics, Malaysia

Within organisational studies, differences from the micro-level perspective have more often been considered in terms of macro-level factors (e.g. Aryee, Fields & Luk, 1999; Spector et al., 2004; Yang et al., 2000). For this reason, the present paper follows this perspective, which is looking at the effect of cultural value differences on work-family interface.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Work-family experience across culture

Within the Malaysian context, studies on work-family interface have mainly looked at the conflict perspective, known as work-family conflict (WFC). For example, the study of Kasa and Hassan (2017) and Abd Razak, Yunus and Nasuridin (2011) examined the predictors of WFC, while Hamid and Amin (2014) and Panatik *et al.* (2012) examined the consequences of WFC. The popularity of this conflict perspective stems from the scarcity hypothesis, which assumes that individuals have limited time and energy. Therefore, occupying multiple roles creates role conflict and role overload, in turn causing distress and exhaustion (Marks, 1977). Research from the positive perspective of work-family interface is believed required for a comprehensive picture of work-family linkages in Malaysia context. As such the present paper focuses on the balance perspective – i.e. work-family balance (WFB).

There are many definitions of work-family balance (WFB) in the literature. Most commonly, WFB is viewed as a lack of conflict or interference between work and family roles. Balance is perceived when the

conflict is low. Other scholars focused on the equality perspective, that is, equal resources given to all domains as signifying balanced (Marks & MacDermid, 1996; Kirchmeyer, 2000; Greenhaus *et al.*, 2003). Another group of scholars used psychological constructs such as role satisfaction and role functioning (Clark, 2001; Frone, 2003). From this perspective, balance is measured in terms of individuals' judgment as to whether one's expectations about work and family roles are met or not. Overall, these various definitions reflect balance as effectively organizing and juggling between the two domains - work and family. The present paper adapted Aziz (2011) conceptualization of balance that consists of work functioning and family functioning dimensions.

In a majority of cross-cultural research, cultural values are examined through cultural dimensions, as opposed to observing a specific cultural attribute such as honesty, self-direction or benevolence. Comparatively, Hofstede's cultural dimensions receive most reference in cross-cultural research. Hofstede (1980) proposes four main value dimensions in which cultures differ:

- (a) *Power distance*: the extent to which the less powerful members of organisations and institutions accept and expect that power is distributed unequally;
- (b) *Uncertainty avoidance*: the extent to which a culture programmes its members to feel either uncomfortable or comfortable in unstructured situations (i.e. situations that are novel, unknown, surprising, or different from usual);
- (c) *Individualism-collectivism*: the relationship between the individual and the collectivity that prevails in a given society; and
- (d) *Masculinity-femininity*: the distribution of roles between the genders.

A fifth dimension, long-term *versus* short-term orientation, was later added after conducting an additional international study based on Confucian dynamism. Long-term *versus* short-term orientation refers to the extent to which a culture programmes its members to accept delayed gratification of their material, social, and emotional needs.

The value of individualism-collectivism has mainly been considered when comparing culture across groups. Nevertheless, the masculinity-femininity dimension is also believed relevant in work-family research across cultures as it contributes to the differences in gender role ideology (Westman, 2002). Gender role refers to the beliefs and values about the appropriate division of labour between men and women at work and at home (McHugh & Frieze, 1997). It is often conceptualised on a continuum ranging from traditional to non-traditional or egalitarian. One difference between Western nations and non-Western nations is that the latter are characterised as having traditional gender roles. The traditional gender role holds the work role for women to be secondary to domestic and maternal roles. The role of mother is highly valued and the home is considered primarily the woman's responsibility. In contrast, cultures with egalitarian gender roles expect men and women to invest more equally in domestic and family economic roles (Emrich, Denmark & Den Hartog, 2004; Roehling *et al.*, 2005).

Role-identity

The roles played at home and in the workplace influence the formation of work and family identities in oneself (Bielby & Bielby, 1989). The extent to which individuals involve in their social roles is believed to influence individuals' perceptions of the relative importance of their role in one domain over another. It is

said that when individuals become engaged in their role activities, these activities become a source of meaning and contribute to their sense of self, and they develop identities linked to those roles. This means that those who devoted more of their personal resources such as time, energy and attention to the family role as opposed to their work role will establish a stronger family identity than work identity. Similarly, those who are more attached to the work role than the family role are believed to have a rather salient work identity. As such, Bielby and Bielby contended that in a traditional gender role society, women established a stronger family identity than men, as women tend to devote more time to household duties and child-caring than the men, while men possess a stronger work identity than women, as they tend to invest more attention and resources in their work role.

Following this notion of gender role identity formation in both men and women, this argument is believed to be applicable for explaining gender role identity formation in women alone. That is, gender role-identity is also believed to vary among women. With the influence of environmental factors such as education level, upbringing style, the society surrounding them and the like, women may develop their role identity to the varying degree – i.e. some women have stronger work identity or family identity. In the Malaysian context, greater educational and work opportunities for women, coupled with the exposure to Western culture through media and education among others, have made some of the women less traditional in terms of gender role. Instead, many are seeking opportunities in an employment sector. In short, role-identity or identity salience among women do vary.

According to social identity theory, people classify themselves in social roles which define their identities. People may have multiple identities as a result of the various social roles they occupy, but these identities may vary in salience (Stryker & Serpe, 1982; Thoits, 1983). For example, an individual may view being a good employee as the most important aspect, while others gain more happiness from the role of being a parent, valuing this more. An identity high in salience is said to provide individuals with meaning, self-worth and purpose. Thus, the respective role is more valued, attended, and cared about. Logically, a role high in salience would have greater implications for one's well-being than a role low in salience.

The present study

As stated earlier, there have been few studies on role salience in the Malaysian work-family. The majority of work centres around the demand and resource factors within the work and family domains in explaining work-family experience (e.g. Kasa & Hassan, 2017; Abd Razak, Yunus & Nasurdin, 2011; Hamid & Amin, 2014; Panatik *et al*, 2012). Studies on role salience in work-family linkages are more common in Western literature. For example, Noor (2004) examined the direct and the moderator effect of role salience in the stress-strain relationship among 147 employed English women, while Bagger, Li & Gutek (2008) observed the interactive effects of family identity salience, family-interference-with-work (FIW) and gender on two outcome variables: job satisfaction and job distress.

Previous studies have typically argued that Individuals who value work role more than family role will more likely to perceive the demand made by the family role impede their successful performance in the work role. Similarly, when family role is more important to an individual, work role will always be seen as hindering their performance in the work role. In other words, demands made by the role that is less important or salient to the person will be seen as threatening to the other role.

Relating to the present study, although the gender role is still somewhat traditional in Malaysia, Malaysian women are advancing in terms of education. A clear-cut example is that female students outnumber males in public institutions of higher learning. Better education and participation in employment sector are believed to have made these women somewhat less traditional in terms of gender roles, and they have begun to establish stronger attachment to work roles. The present study will sample women in a professional sector – i.e. higher institution educators. Therefore, the first aim of this paper is to determine whether these women possess stronger work identity or family identity. The second aim is to examine the dominant predictor of work-family balance experience (WFB); that is, to determine whether work-identity or family identity that matters in explaining WFB of these respondents. In short, the research questions to be addressed are as follows:

- 1) What are the levels of work-identity and family identity, as reported by the respondents?
- 2) Which identity is more dominant in explaining the work-family balance experience?

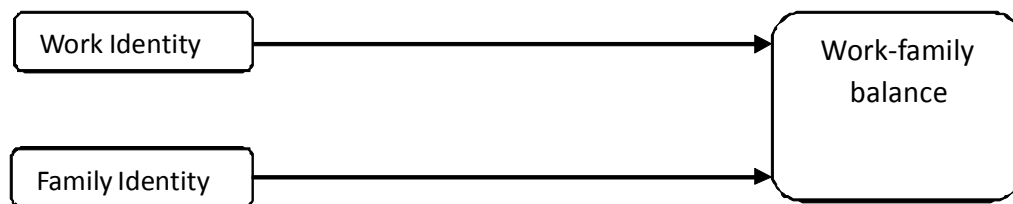


Figure 1: Proposed Research framework

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