

The Role of Religiosity as a Coping Strategy in Coping with Work-Family Conflict: The Case of Malaysian Women in Academia

Meguellati Achour and Ali Bin Boerhannoeddin

Abstract—The purpose of the present study is to examine religiosity as a strategy to achieve employees' well-being among Muslim women academic staff of Malaysian learning institutions. The determinants of well-being included under this research are job satisfaction, family satisfaction and life satisfaction. The researchers used 130 Muslim women of academic staff as respondents, working in Research Universities in the Klang Valley included University of Malaya, National University and Putra University, Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Their ages ranged from 30 to 60 years. The results show that religiosity is positively related with well-being and work-family demands, although negatively not significant, related with work-family conflict. The findings also revealed that work-family conflict is significantly related to work-family demands and negatively related to well-being.

Index Terms—Work-family conflict, well-being, religiosity, coping strategies, work-family demands

I. INTRODUCTION

In the last decade, the emergence of the concept of empowerment has encouraged human resource leaders to grapple with the problem of tapping worker creativity and productivity for competitive success. It has been extensively instrumental in mobilizing and maintaining workers performance and commitment (Wilkinson *et al.*, 1979; Lashley, 1997). Besides, human resource experts also focus on conferring organizational justice to employees who are to be treated with justice and given considerate treatment. This in return will be reciprocated with better performance of employees due to higher satisfaction towards organizational justice provided by employers.

In the past few decades, managers were preoccupied with restructuring their organizations to improve employees' performance and enhance their productivity, meeting competitive challenges in the global marketplace. The problem of workers is that they do not work according to their employers' expectations. Human resource managers propose solutions to the many problems faced by workers including job dissatisfaction, low job performance, less employee commitment, and create a balance between work demands and family life. Recently, women's labor force

participation in Malaysia has rapidly increased to reach (about 11.4 million) [Eighth Malaysia Plan, 2000].

Concern for the quality of working life has pre-occupied social scientists for the past 50 years. Thus, work-life balance is a pertinent issue in present time. The work-life balance debate however, seems to focus on a number of assumptions and perceptions that work is experienced negatively, with long hours of work as a problem affecting employees' well-being and commitment to family institutions.

Research on work-family conflict and its negative impacts on employees have been explored extensively in Western industrialized countries (Allen, Herst, Bruck & Sutton, 2000). Despite strong indications that work and family issues are increasingly important phenomena in Asian countries however, studies of work-family conflict in Asia are rare (Luk, 2001; Yang, Choi & Zou, 2000; Spector, Sanchez, Oi Ling Siu, Salgado & Jianhong, 2004). Those few researchers who have considered this problem believe that Asian people view work and family differently because of cultural differences. Some research about Western and Asian countries suggest that more research is needed to investigate work-family conflict and impact on different groups and settings because issues of work and family are strongly related to cultural beliefs, values and norms (Lobel, 1991).

Women's roles in society have begun to change especially with the emergence of the women's movement. Despite those changes, barriers that prevent women from working still exist. Not only do men see parenting as fundamentally female, they also see the pursuing of career as a fundamentally male prerogative (Lawlor, 1994; Schwartz, 1989).

Working women, while facing stressors similar to those of working men have often additional ones not experienced by working men. While the stress usually faced by those who work comes from administrative strategies and policies, organizational design and structure, working conditions and organizational processes, women face additional and different exclusive stressors (Robbins, 1998; Luthans, 1992). These stressors include stereotyping, work/home conflict, social isolation and discrimination (Long, 1995; Evetts, 1994; Marshall, 1995). In most western countries, teaching is considered a female profession, particularly in elementary level (Ruijs, 1993). However, university teaching and administration are domains mostly reserved for males (Ruijs, 1993; p535). In developed countries, studies related to women holding managerial and non managerial positions are abundant (Marshall, 1995; Tanton, 1994; Moen, 1992; Evetts, 1994).

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II. WORK-FAMILY CONFLICT AND POLICIES IN ACADEMIA

Higher-learning institutions have experienced major significant changes regarding the role and working practices of academics (Barry *et al.*, 2001). In the context of the “increasingly economist and managerial nation, which environment university life,” (Currie *et al.*, 2000, p. 269), academic jobs have become more challenging in terms of effort and time. With growing institutional demands, accountability and work intensification of 50 to 60 hours per week, workload has become the norm in many universities (Jacobs & Winslow, 2004).

Research on work-family conflict has found out that such conflict is higher among those who work longer hours or have greater work demands and report higher job involvement and greater autonomy (Eby *et al.*, 2005), thus rendering the academic context particularly sensitive to work-family issues. The fact that total commitment might be self-imposed by social and career expectations does not change the main argument of this paper: as the culture of long hour becomes ‘the norm’ in university settings, academics are likely to feel the tensions between work and family life and the work-family culture that prevails in academia is unlikely to make things easier for faculty members, particularly women who try to balance job requirements with the demands of family life.

Universities have traditionally organized academic careers based on male life patterns, making it more difficult for women to advance their careers while building a family (Armenti, 2004; Moen & Sweet, 2004). However, the intensified organizational demands and current expectations from academics supposed to devote unlimited time to their work have raised new gender issues worth addressing.

The gendered division of household labor and the gendered expectations of family obligations and responsible parenting that remain in Western societies (Acker & Armenti, 2004; Jacobs & Winslow, 2004) also play a significant part in the tensions between work and family, particularly for mothers of young children.

III. WORK-FAMILY CONFLICT AND THE MALAYSIAN CONTEXT

In the case of Malaysia, some empirical studies investigating the phenomenon of work-family conflict have been reported (Ahmad, 1996; Noor, 2002; Komarraju, 2006). Nevertheless, these studies focus on the consequences of work-family conflict instead of their antecedents. A study on the associations among work-family conflict, job satisfaction, family satisfaction and life satisfaction among married professional Malaysian women found that work-family conflict is vital to the firms where these women work and to the women themselves.

A study of employed Malaysian women with families revealed that an internal locus of control were less likely to experience work-to-family conflict (Noor, 2002). Noor (2003) proposed and tested an exploratory model using demographic variables, personality and roles as predictors of well-being with work-family conflict acting as a mediator or an intervening variable between these sets of predictors and

well-being. Other researchers have viewed work-family conflict as a mediator of relationships between pressures of work and family roles and individual well-being (e.g., Frone *et al.*, 1992; Frone, Yardley, & Markel, 1997). Noor’s (2003) study is important because it incorporates personality variables as predictors of women’s well-being. Although previous researchers (e.g., Amatea & Fong, 1991) have shown that the personal resources women bring with them into their roles are important, Noor’s (2003) study is one of those who have directly tested personality variables within their frameworks. Noor’s (2003) results show that although work-related variables explain the most variance in the prediction of work-interfering-with-family (WIF) conflict and job satisfaction, personality variables account for the most variance in the prediction of family-interfering-with-work (FIW) conflict.

A study on female Malaysian operators, clerks, secretaries, nurses and physicians found that physicians experienced the greatest intensity of work-to-family conflict. However, operators experienced the greatest intensity of family-to-work conflict (Aminah Ahmad, 2005). Aminah *et al.*, (2009) conduct a study on work-family conflict among single mother employees and its antecedents including dispositional (locus of control and perfectionism), job (role overload, role conflict and job flexibility) and organizational (supervisor support) factors. This study was applied to 159 Malaysian single mother employees using self-administered questionnaires. The findings of the study indicated that 66% of the single mother employees experienced moderate to high levels of work-family conflict.

Managers and business leaders however, recognize the need for strengthening family life because the ability to balance work and family roles greatly affects the productivity of employees and is considered to be a challenge for both women and men in the 21st century workforce (Eby *et al.*, 2005). During the past two decades, there has been an increasing interest in the conflicting demands of work and family roles, and the effect of that conflict on both organizations and employees (Allen *et al.* 2000; Greenhaus & Powell, 2006).

Nowadays, in many developed and developing countries, working men and women experience problems of balancing work and family domains (Joplin, Shaffer, Francesco & Lau, 2003). However, the impact of multiple roles at work and in family lives may be culture-bound in different countries. As the modern world begins the third millennium, the significance of work and family is clearly visible in the daily challenges faced by employed parents who are combining work and family roles (Fallon, 1997; Zedeck & Mosier, 1990).

Previous studies have shown that workload, long working hours, irregular work schedule, number and age of children and time spent with family activities were major sources of conflict between work demands and family responsibilities (Burke & Greenglass, 2001; Simon *et al.*, 2004; Netemeyer *et al.*, 1996; Frone *et al.*, 1997., Gutek., 1991). Work-family conflict can lead to different negative consequences on their psychological, emotional and physical health such as low self-esteem, job dissatisfaction and poor work performance (Cooper *et al.*, 1989; Susan *et al.*, 1997; Firth, 1987). Sources

of work-family conflict among Muslim female academicians can generally be grouped into six categories: work overload, long working hours, irregular work schedule, number of children, their age and time spent on family activities. It is noteworthy that the conflicts may vary between institutions. Therefore, the purpose of this study is find ways to reduce the unwanted consequences of the conflicts on Muslim working female's wellbeing in the future.

According to this review, most employees attempt to use different strategies to cope with conflicting family roles and work demands, and there are many researchers interested in the study of methods dealing with work-family issues in a variety of environments and their relationship to some variables. Lazarus and Folkman (1988) found social support, transition from subject, self-control and plans of problem-solving as a coping strategy to deal with pressing conditions.

Coping strategies are the ways an individual, group or organization use to minimize the effects of stress (Belal *et al.*, 2009). Coping strategy is defined as "any activity, in thought or deed, which has as its goal the removal or modification of a threat to identity" (Breakwell, 1986, p. 78).

Two common types of coping strategies can be distinguished: problem-focused coping strategies and emotion-focused coping strategies (Folkman, Schaefer & Lazarus, 1979; Leventhal & Nerenz, 1982). Problem-focused coping strategies are used to directly tackle the problem and emotion-focused coping strategies are used to handle feelings of distress, rather than the actual problem itself.

Religious coping strategies consisting of elements of emotion-focused coping strategies and problem-focused coping strategies also include social support as a strategy to cope with the pressures by including advice, assistance, subsidies, emotional support and justifying the perceptions of the individual and his actions. The same thing is experienced with religious coping strategies, which include more practice of prayers and religious worship that focus on emotion. A religious coping strategy is more important and effective with stressful events that an individual cannot control.

Scutte and Hosch (1996) maintain that religiosity is a difficult construct to measure, as there are several definitions of religiosity. The definition of religiosity in the Muslim society comprises a much broader concept as stated by the Prophet (May peace be upon him), "Iman (faith) has over seventy branches, and modesty is a branch of Iman". (Sahih Muslim, 1: 55).

The purpose of this study is to examine the role of religiosity as a coping strategy and its influence on achieving employee' well-being among Muslim women academic staff of Malaysian higher learning institutions

IV. METHOD

A. Participants and Procedure

Data were collected from 130 Muslim female academicians working in Research Universities in the Klang Valley included University of Malaya, National University, and Putra University, Malaysia. Their ages ranged from 30 to 60 years. Rapport was established through explaining the

importance and relevance of the study. Participants were assured that their responses would be kept confidential and utilized only for the purpose of research. They were asked to complete the questionnaires by following the instructions provided at the top of the first page.

B. Measures

Work-Family Demands: Family demand was measured by a 3-item scale developed by Yang (1993), the Cronbach alpha reported 0.77; and work demands were measured by a 5-item scale by Spector (1975). The Cronbach alpha reported 0.81.

Work-family conflict: Work-family conflict was measured using two subscales (5 items for WFC and 5 items for FWC) and included ten items developed by Netemeyer, Boles and McMurrian (1996). The Cronbach alpha reported 0.77.

TABLE 1.1: SHOWING RELIABILITY OF THE MEASURES USED IN THE PRESENT STUDY

Variables	Number of Items	Alpha (α)
Work-family conflict	10	0.906
work-family demands	8	0.756
R. Coping Strategies	12	0.846
Well-being	13	0.501

TABLE 1.2: SHOWING CORRELATION AMONG VARIABLES USED IN THE PRESENT STUDY

		WFC	WELL BEING	COPING STR	WFD
W C	Pearson Correlation	1	-0.026	-0.076	0.568**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.773	0.390	0.000
	N	130	130	130	130
WELL BEING	Pearson Correlation	-0.026	1	0.082	-0.326*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.773		0.351	0.040
	N	130	130	130	130
COPINGSTR	Pearson Correlation	-0.076	0.082	1	-0.069
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.390	0.351		0.373
	N	130	130	130	130
WFD	Pearson Correlation	0.568**	-0.326*	-0.069	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.040	0.373	
	N	130	130	130	130

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Well-being: In this research major components of well-being are considered: job satisfaction, family satisfaction and life satisfaction. Family Satisfaction was measured using 3 items developed by Hackman and Oldham (1975), the Cronbach alpha reported 0.68; Job satisfaction was measured using 5 items developed by Hachman and Oldham (1975); the Cronbach alpha reported 0.83; and life satisfaction was measured using 5 items developed by Diener

et al., (1985), the Cronbach alpha reported 0.87.

Religiosity: Participants completed the questionnaires, a 12-item self-report measure of “Strength of Religious Faith”. Sample items include “religion is important to me because it helps me cope with life events” (Item-1) and “the primary purpose of prayer is to reduce stress” (Item-12). The scale uses a 5-point Likert response format, ranging from (1) “Strongly Disagree” to (5) “Strongly Agree.” Scores can range between 10 and 40, with higher aggregate scores reflecting stronger levels of “Strength of Religious Faith.”

C. Reliability Results

The reliability test was conducted. Coefficient Cronbach’s Alpha is a measure of reliability or internal consistency. A value of Cronbach’s Alpha of 0.50 or above is consistent with the recommended minimum values stated by Nunnally (1967). Cronbach’s alpha indicating reliability for each variable is seen in Table 1.1: work-family conflict: 0.906, work-family demands: 0.756, coping strategies: 0.846, and well-being: 0.501. Therefore, as related by Nunnally (1978), the research results can be accepted.

D. Results and Discussion

Table 1.2 exhibits the correlation coefficients among all variables. All independent variables are not significantly correlated to well-being. The correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). The standard used for the level of significance is set a priori.

Religious coping strategies are found to be negatively related with work-family conflict and work-family demands; these variables are negatively related with well-being. Table 1.2 also shows that religious coping strategies are found to be positively related with well-being. Therefore, religious coping strategies play a role in the well-being but are not significant in Malaysia. The finding also reveal that work-family conflict significantly related with work-family demands ($r=0.568$, $p=0.000<0.01$); and negatively related with well-being ($r= -0.326$, $p=0.040<0.05$).

Three work demands measures (workload, long working hours and irregular work schedule) are significant predictors of work family conflict related to lower job, life and family satisfaction. For example, high work-family conflict positively related with high long working hours (Bruck *et al.*, 2002; Burke *et al.*, 1980; Eagle *et al.*, 1997, Major *et al.*, 2002; Walance, 1999; Yang *et al.*, 1980). High work-family conflict is positively related with work schedules inflexibility (Aye, 1992), and work overload and irregular work schedules have a strong positive relationship with work-family conflict (Burke & Greenglass, 2001; Simon *et al.*, 2004).

Family demands measures number and age of children and time spent on family activities; some studies have shown the number of children living at home is positively related to work-family conflict (Netemeyer *et al.*, 1996); also time spent on family activities has been found to be positively related to family-work conflict (Frone *et al.*, 1997., Gutek., 1991). Some studies have shown negative relationship between family satisfaction and work-family conflict (Kopelman *et al.*, 1983; Rice *et al.*, 1992; Burke & Greenglass, 2001). Finally, Arora *et al.*, (1990) found a

negative relationship between work-family conflict and job and life satisfaction.

The present study indicates that religiosity coping strategies have an effect on well-being. All kinds of work-family demands are negatively and significantly correlated with well-being. Moreover, work demands such as long working hours, work overload, and irregular work schedule and family such as number of children, age of children and time spent on family activities are the main sources and causes of work-family conflict. The findings also reveal that religious coping strategies negatively relate with work-family demands and work-family conflict, and positively relate with well-being, yet not very significantly. Religious coping strategies play a role in coping with work-family conflict but this is not important in Malaysia.

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