

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ASPECTS OF RELIGION AND WORK-FAMILY INTERFACE IN MALAYSIA: A LONGITUDINAL STUDY

Zaiton Hassan*

Universiti Malaysia Sarawak

Dayang Kartini Abang Ibrahim

Universiti Malaysia Sarawak

Nik Norsyamimi Md Nor

Universiti Malaysia Sarawak

Surena Sabil

Universiti Malaysia Sarawak

Nur Fatimah Abdullah Bandar

Universiti Malaysia Sarawak

ABSTRACT

Shifting from Western-dominated perspectives, this study aimed to investigate relationship between religion and work-family conflict and enrichment. SPSS analysis was conducted on data obtained through two self-report questionnaires completed three months apart by 296 executives and non-executives from six public and private sector organizations in Kuching, Sarawak. After controlling for conflict and enrichment at Time 1, aspects of religion (importance of religion and perception of religiousness) negatively related with work-family conflict and positively associated with work-family enrichment. The study underscores the roles religion, which have been neglected in Western studies, as important parts in shaping the work-family interface in Malaysia. Therefore, organizations should include religious activities to encourage work-life balance among employees.

Keywords: Work-Family Conflict; Work-Family Enrichment; Malaysia; Religion.

1. INTRODUCTION

Work-family interface (WFI) has been extensively examined from Western perspectives. Eighty percent of research on work-family conflict between 1980 and 2000 (Karimi, 2006) and 95 percent of work-family enrichment studies (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006) were carried out in Western developed countries. This suggests that work-family interface issues in non-Western contexts have largely been ignored, even though changes in economic development, employment patterns and the use of technology are intensifying in developing countries. Moreover, changes in the macro environment, but not in cultural values, tend to increase stress and work-family conflict (Joplin et

* Corresponding author: Zaiton Hassan, Faculty of Cognitive Sciences & Human Development, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, 94300 Kota Samarahan, Sarawak, Malaysia. Email: hzaiton@unimas.my

al., 2003). This raises the question about the length to which Western work-family issues can be comprehensive to non-Western contexts due to differences, *inter alia*, in cultural values (Poelmans, O'Driscoll, & Beham, 2005).

This study was conducted in Malaysia, an East Asian country, set out to further our insight of work-family issues in a non-Western culture. Using longitudinal data at three-month intervals, the study aimed to examine aspect of religion and work-family conflict (WFC) and work family enrichment (WFE). We believe the current study will add significantly to the work-family interface literature in two aspects.

First, we used longitudinal data following a call for more longitudinal designs to understand the process of the work-family interface (Poelmans et al., 2005). So far, only 14 studies examining both conflict and enrichment could be found, of which only one was performed longitudinally (Innstrand, Langballe, Espnes, Falkum, & Aasland, 2008). While merely 11 studies in longitudinal design on WFC could be found (Steinmetz, Frese, & Schmidt, 2008), none were from the Asian region. A three-month time interval in data collection was chosen for this study, as researchers have suggested that a period shorter than 4 years and 1 year may be more pertinent to capture the changes in work-family relationships (Frone et al., 1997; Huang, et al., 2004). Moreover, several previous studies have also used a three-month period in their longitudinal design (see Brough, O'Driscoll, & Kalliath, 2005; Korabik et al., 2003).

Second, following calls for more research on antecedents and consequences of enrichment (e.g., Gryzwacz, Carlson, Kacmar & Wayne, 2007), this study investigated antecedents of work-family enrichment. Previous studies have established strong evidence of antecedents of conflict (see Byron, 2005 for a review) while research on antecedents for enrichment are few but increasing (see, Brough, Hassan, O'Driscoll, 2014), and are mainly based on cross-sectional data. Thus, evidence for a causal relationship between antecedents and consequences (conflict and enrichment) has not been sufficiently investigated. The purpose of the present study was to discuss this concern by investigating the relationship between aspects of religion and work-family conflict and enrichment over a three-month period.

1.1. Religion and the work-family interface

Triandis (2006) categorized Muslim countries as 'traditional', in which 'God is important' in comparison to secular Western countries. While Malaysia is a Muslim grounded country and Malaysians are religious (Abdullah, 1996; Lim, 2001), undoubtedly aspects of religion which embody the importance of religion and perception of religiousness were included in this study. With teachings in religious faith that are more traditional, such as Islam, actively support a blurring between religion and the external political, social and legal environments (Cash, Gray, & Rood, 1993). Thus, it could be interpreted that integration between religion, work and family is encouraged in Muslim dominant societies such as Malaysia. The integration between work and non-work domains is embodied by the religion in agreement with collectivist society values (Yang, 2005).

In a study among Muslim men in Australia, Sav, Harris, Sebar, Stewart, and Abdalla (2009) found that religious obligations were perceived as resources. They further indicated that the religious element was important in the concept of 'work-life balance' among these men. Religious support has been overlooked in work-family enrichment (Seng, Bujang, & Ahmad, 2009, Seng, 2016).

Therefore, in this study, two characteristics of religion (i.e. the importance of religion in life and perception of religiousness) were considered as part of resources which consistent with Conservation of Resources Theory (Hobfoll, 1989).

Besides Sav et al., (2009), no prior studies could be located that directly studied the role of religion in the work-family interface directly. Religion was used to interpret the findings in Noor's (1999) study on well-being (happiness and distress) among 388 employed Malaysian women. Noor (1999) revealed religion affects well-being directly, when other resources are used up and when individuals look elsewhere for help. Belief in God could minimize the influence of stress on well-being and buffer negative experiences (Jones, Zhang, Jaceldo-Siegl & Meleis, 2002; Noor, 1999), which is likely to bring less conflict and more enrichment.

Using cross-sectional data among 506 employees in Malaysia, the importance of the religion and perception of religiousness were positively related to WFE and FWE (Hassan, Dollard & Winefield, 2009). As Hill (2005) proposed, work-family enrichment and work-family conflict may have the same antecedents, but in opposite direction, we proposed, using longitudinal design,

Hypothesis 1: Aspects of religion (importance of religion and perception of religiousness) will be negatively related to WFC longitudinally

Hypothesis 2: Aspects of religion (importance of religion and perception of religiousness) will be positively related to WFE longitudinally

2. METHOD

2.1. Participants and procedure

This study was conducted in Kuching, Sarawak in six public and private organizations. The private organizations represented forestry, manufacturing, telecommunication and the service industry. Human resource managers were the contact person to reach the respondents. Respondents were requested to complete a self-administered questionnaire within two weeks. At Time 1f 506 employees responded (50.6% response rate) and at Time 2, 296 responded (58.5% response rate).

In term of demographic, male respondents are the majority (56%). More non-executives (77%), had a permanent posts (82%), age groups were between 35 to 45 (36%), married with an average of 15 years (53%) with 1 to 9 children (80%), and had a working spouse (50%). Thirty nine percent of respondents had 11 years of education, with 15% having a Bachelors degree. The lengths of time working in the organizations were ranged from 1 to 39 years, with a mean of 12.63 years. Nearly half (45%) were Malay ethnic, 50% were Muslim, with 77% indicated religion as important in their life and 72% regard themselves as religious.

3. MEASURES

3.1. Work-family conflict

This was measured using a 9-item WFC scale which include time-based, strain-based and behavior-based (Carlson, Kacmar & Williams, 2000). Example items is 'My work keeps me from my family

activities more than I would like'. It is scored on a 5-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). The present study found acceptable internal reliability for WFC, .86 at Time 1 and .84 at Time 2 respectively.

3.2. *Work-family enrichment*

This was measured using the Work-Family Enrichment questionnaire (Carlson, Kacmar, Wayne, & Grzywacz, 2006) which consist development-based, affect-based and capital-based. The 9-item scale is scored on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). The internal reliability for the current study was .94 (Time 1) and .91 (Time 2) for work-family enrichment (WFE). An example item for WFE is 'My involvement in my work helps me to gain knowledge and this helps me to be a better family member'.

3.3. *Aspects of religion*

Aspects of religion were measured using two items and scored on a 5-point scale 1 (not very important; not religious) to 5 (very important; very religious). The questions are 'How important is religious belief in your life' and 'Do you consider yourself as a religious person'. ($\alpha = .80$).

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data was analyzed using SPSS version 20. Hypothesis 1 and 2 which proposed that aspect of religion negatively related to WFC ($r = -.25, p < .005$) and positively related to WFE ($r = .22, p < .005$) longitudinally were fully supported.

Two significant aspects of the study, which were the importance of religion and perception of religiousness, have positively related to WFE and negatively related to WFC. The finding reaffirms the prior cross-sectional finding of Hassan et al., (2009) among Malaysian employees and Sav (2009) among Muslim male in Australia. Employees who have faith in religion, makes it become an important part in their lives and perceived themselves as religious have less conflict and more enrichment from work to family.

Religion could be viewed as a personal resource as proposed by Conservation of Resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989). Using a religious lens, conflict in balancing work and non-work responsibilities are perceived as fated by God. Yet individuals believed that God would provide the insights and strength to help them deal with these conflicts thus explaining less WFC in this study. Inner strengths (Jones et al., 2002) from believing in rewards in an afterlife enabled individuals to persist which contribute to WFE. Furthermore, it was reported that individuals with high level of religiosity tend to report high level well-being (Hill & Pargement, 2003), which led to the experience of more enrichment and less conflict.

Interestingly, increasing numbers of organisations are accommodating religious practices at the workplace, such as time off and providing space for religious observances and displaying of religious materials (Cash, Gray & Rood, 1993). It is a common practice to have a Muslim prayer room and celebration of religious holy days in government and big private companies in Malaysia. Therefore, the integration of religious practices and the workplace may direct to more work-family enrichment and less work-family conflict.

5. IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Multi-National Companies (MNC) in particular needs to be aware of cultural factors that may produce work-family conflict or enrichment. In predominantly collectivist and 'religious' societies, aspect of religion should be incorporated into an organization's agenda. Organizations should allow, support and organize religious (or spiritual) practices at work. For example, besides offering the usual family-friendly policies, organizations could include space for prayer, sponsor religious talks regularly and organize religious celebrations (e.g. Eid, Christmas, Chinese New Year, and Diwali) as being practiced by many organizations in Malaysia. Organizations could also develop good relationships with religious institutions, so employees could refer to religious leaders (e.g. Imam, priest) to reduce their work family conflict or discuss ways to enhance their work family enrichment.

Although we measured work-family interface components twice, we only measured aspect of religion at Time 1. Future research should measure both aspect of religion and the work-family interface twice. Thus it will enable the researcher to take into account possible reverse causation and reciprocal relationships (Zapf, Dormann & Frese, 1996). For example, WFC predicted increased workload 6 and 12 weeks later (Demerouti et al., 2004) and 3 months later (Leiter & Durup, 1996). However, as research using longitudinal design in a non-Western context is still scarce, we believe this study still enhance our understanding on WFC and WFE, and how religion influence this work-family interface.

6. CONCLUSION

The current study enhances our understanding of how religion influence work-family interface longitudinally. In Malaysian context, the importance of religion in life and perception of religiousness relate to decrease work-family conflict and increase work-family enrichment. Thus, organization should incorporate religious elements in the programs and activities to encourage work-life balance among employees.

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