THE MODERATING EFFECT OF SPOUSE SUPPORT ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WORK VARIABLES AND WOMEN'S WORK-FAMILY CONFLICT

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The present study examines certain work variables (long work hours, autonomy, tedium and overload) in relation to women's work-family conflict, and the extent to which spouse support acts as a moderating variable in this relationship. In a sample of 310 Malaysian women combining work and family, results of the regression analyses showed that long working hours and overload were positively related to work-family conflict after taking into account of race and occupational group. In addition, there was some support for the moderating effect of spouse support on the relationship between work variables and conflict. Significant interactions were observed between work hours and spouse support, and between autonomy and spouse support. Implications of these findings to married employed women are discussed.

Key words: moderator, spouse support, work variables, women's work-family conflict

The present study examines certain work variables (long work hours, autonomy, tedium and overload) in relation to women's work-family conflict, and the extent to which spouse support acts as a moderating variable in this relationship. Given that many women are combining work and family roles, some amount of conflict is inevitable in attempting to balance the competing demands of work and family. This, coupled with the costs associated with such conflict, makes this kind of research important. As a background to the present study, relevant findings pertaining to the two areas of conflict and support are outlined below.

Work-family conflict

Traditionally, work and family have been considered separately. While the work role has been the domain of organizational researchers with males being the focus, only family-related issues were emphasized in females. However, from the 80's onwards, organizational psychologists recognized that these two domains are interdependent, with experiences in one influencing the other. Therefore, there has been a shift in focus from a purely work or family environment to include both work and family experiences and their interface (e.g., Burke, 1988; Frone, Russell, & Cooper, 1992; Greenhaus & Parasuraman, 1986).

As demands from these two areas are often incompatible with one another,

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conflict occurs. This work-family conflict, as popularly known, is experienced when demands from one role domain interfere with participation or performance of the other role (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). Thus, when one devotes extra time and energy into the work role (or the family role), the family role (or the work role) is assumed to suffer.

It has been shown that the predictors of work-family conflict stem directly from experiences within the work and family roles and these may include work and family demographics (such as work hours, work schedule, number of children, presence of preschool children, spouse's work hours, etc.) and work and family experiences (such as job insecurity, job flexibility, support at work and at home, marital relationship, etc.) (e.g., Duxbury, Higgins, & Lee, 1994; Kinnunen & Mauno, 1998).

Research has found work-family conflict to be correlated with various negative health outcomes like burnout (Bacharach, Bamberger, & Conley, 1991), unpleasant moods (Williams & Alliger, 1994), job and life dissatisfaction (Perrewe, Hochwarter, & Kiewitz, 1999), decreased family and occupational well-being (Kinnunen & Mauno, 1998) as well as increased psychological costs and physical complaints (Frone, Russell, & Cooper, 1992). As such, there is a need to reduce the amount of conflict and one way this can be done is through social support.

The effect of social support

Social support refers to the individual's access to emotional, informational, companionship and material assistance (e.g., House, 1981). It has been found that the degree of social support an individual has in a situation can influence his/her perception of the stress process. For example, if an individual perceives conflict on the job but receives proper assistance from his coworkers, he/she may not experience the resulting strain. Similarly, an individual with high family demands may not necessarily experience strain with good support from the spouse.

Many studies have considered the effect of social support on the stressor-strain relationship (e.g., Burke, 1988; Etzion, 1984; Adams, King, & King, 1996). Although social support may affect this relationship in a number of ways, (as an independent, a moderator, a mediator and an antecedent variable, see Carlson, 1999), the moderating effect of social support has received the most attention. The appeal for the moderating effect is practical; while it may be impossible to eliminate all possible stressors, the negative effect of high stressors can be compensated for by increasing or introducing social support.

Men and women, however, perceive support differently. For example, the study by Etzion (1984) of the effects of work stress on burnout showed that while men's work stress was moderated by support relationships in their work environment (e.g., supervisors and coworkers), women used non-work sources (e.g., family and friends). A similar result was also reported by Billings and Moos (1982) who found that the relationship between work stress and several strain symptoms was buffered by work sources of support for men and by family sources for women. Etzion and Pines' (1981) finding that women more than men tend to talk with others as a mode of coping

with stress, might explain the ability of women to use non-work sources of support not available in the stressful situation to buffer their work stress. Men talk less about their stresses, therefore they can best benefit from work-support sources that have immediate understanding of their stressful situation.

The present study

In the present study, the moderating effect of spouse support in the relationship between work variables and conflict is examined in a sample of women. Just as men and women differ in terms of their perception of support, they are also different with regards to perception of work-family conflict. The *rational view* of work-family conflict suggests that the amount of conflict one perceives is directly proportional to the amount of time or involvement one expends in the work and family domains (Staines, Pleck, Shepard, & O'Connor, 1978). Although this may generally hold for men, women do not necessarily report more conflict than men despite spending more combined time in work and family activities (e.g., Greenhaus, Parasuraman, Granrose, Rabinowitz, & Beutell, 1989; Pleck, 1985). According to Gutek, Searle, and Klepa (1991), gender role expectations of men and women may explain for this difference. Whereas women will report more work-family conflict with more time at work, men will report more conflict with more time spent at home. Due to these differences between men and women in terms of their perceptions of support and conflict, the present study focuses only on women.

Spouse support, as a source of social support, has been shown to be especially important to employed married women (Mederer, 1993; Noor, 1997; Perry-Jenkins & Folk, 1994). For example, several studies have found that a husband's support of his wife's employment is critical to the reduction of her conflict (e.g., Berkowitz & Perkins, 1984; Beutell & Greenhaus, 1982). Support from husband was shown to buffer the negative effects of interrole conflict on marital satisfaction for employed women (Suchet & Barling, 1986). In addition, the potential for conflict is greater when husbands are not supportive in terms of household work (Mederer, 1993). These findings reflect the intimate nature of the marital relationship, in which the experiences of one spouse can spill over to affect the other. For employed married women, support from the spouse is seen to be an endorsement on the part of the husband that they are doing the right thing.

The present sample was made up of Malaysian women occupying work and family roles simultaneously. As in other developing and developed countries, the number of women going out to work has increased significantly since its independence in 1957, from 30.8% to 44.5% in 2000 (*Eighth Malaysia Plan, 2001–2005*). These estimates are on the conservative side considering that there are many more women in the rural areas who are involved in subsistence agriculture or cottage industries without a continuous income and are not included under the term of 'employed' in normal government census.

The rapid industrialization and urbanization experienced in the last thirty years, albeit the economic slowdown of the last three years, have resulted in changes in

women's traditional role of homemaker. Many are now in paid employment, working in tandem with their husbands. They need to work because the earnings from their husbands alone are not sufficient to meet the demands of the family's. However, cultural and religious values that expect women to be responsible for the home and family are still intact and strong. Therefore, for women combining work and family, work-family conflict is indeed inevitable. On the one hand, traditional values place extreme importance to the women's family role and many are likely to feel guilty if these home-related responsibilities are not attended to properly. On the other hand, they are also expected to be committed to work.

As these women are employed, the support of their husbands is extremely important. It is hypothesized that spouse support will moderate the relationship between certain work variables (work hours, autonomy, tedium and overload) and work-family conflict. More specifically, the relationship between these work variables and work-family conflict would be weaker under conditions of high spouse support than under conditions of low spouse support.

In the present study, only work variables are considered. By spending more time or being more involved at work, women would have less time or less involvement at home. This would lead them to experience increase work-family conflict because gender/cultural expectations still assume that they are responsible for the home and children. In such a situation, spouse support, as seen earlier, can act as a moderator, so that women would not necessarily report more conflict with adverse work situations.

METHOD

Participants and procedure:

Participants were 310 full-time employed married women with children. Participants were recruited from several universities ($n=170$), organizations ($n=58$), schools ($n=56$) and businesses ($n=26$). The response rates from each of these work places were 52%, 39%, 48% and 42% respectively, not unusual for a voluntary survey of this sort (e.g. Wiersma & Van der Berg, 1991). The participants were loosely categorized into two broad occupational groups; academic/professional and secretarial/clerical.

The age range of the women was 19–59 years with a mean of 34.95 years ($SD=7.45$ years). The participants were made up of Malays ($n=230$) and Chinese ($n=80$). The two groups were similar in terms of their socio-economic status as measured by educational levels (mean of Malays=13.2 years, mean of Chinese=12.6 years), occupational groups (coded 1 for secretarial/clerical jobs and 0 for professional occupations; mean for Malays=.53, mean for Chinese=.51) and women's income (mean of Malays=\$28,667 per annum, mean of Chinese=27,654 per annum). All the women had children, with 76.2% having at least one child living at home. The number of children within a family ranged from 1–6.

Measures:

Participants could answer the questionnaire either in English or in Bahasa Malaysia (Malay language). As such, these measures were adapted to Malay using the back-translation method. Two steps were involved. First, the original items of all the measures were translated into Malay. Second, the Malay version of the measures was translated back into English.

The translation and back translation were carried out by a psychologist and a linguist, both fluent in English and Bahasa Malaysia. The same two persons carried out both the translation and back translation. After the original measures were translated into Bahasa Malaysia, they were administered to a group of fifteen employed women to check for clarity, understanding, and suitability of the items within the

Malaysian context. On the basis of the feedback provided by these women, modifications were made to the original items. In the second stage, the measures were translated back into English. At this stage, any items that appeared discrepant to the original items were translated again and appropriate revisions made. The revisions made were minor, and none of the original items were dropped. The majority of the participants chose to answer in Malay.

Although the lower reliabilities of the measures reported below may lower their potential validity, this is not deemed to be a major problem because the reliabilities obtained were still relatively high and comparable to those reported by other studies (see below).

Work-role variables. Work-role variables included both the actual number of hours worked per week and the quality of work experience. This latter measure was taken from Baruch and Barnett's (1986) work-role attributes, which included both positive and negative aspects of work experience. Using a 4-point scale, participants were asked to indicate the extent to which each item was applicable to them.

The present study carried out a factor analysis on these items to check for the underlying factor structure. This was deemed necessary because the items that made up the measures were rather varied and might not necessarily be made up of one factor. Furthermore, the present sample was culturally different from that of Baruch and Barnett. The analysis identified three factors; these were labeled "autonomy" (five items), "tedium" (four items) and "overload" (three items). Sample items for autonomy, tedium and overload include "Control over work", "Lack of challenge" and "Having too much to do", respectively. Coefficient alpha values were .64 for autonomy, .63 for tedium and .77 for overload.

Spouse support. Spouse support was measured by eight items from a factor analysis of the modified scale of Baruch and Barnett's (1986) spousal experience. Sample items include "Good communication" and "Husband backing you up". Using a 4-point scale (1-4), participants were asked to indicate the extent to which each item was applicable to them. The coefficient alpha value for this 8-item scale with the present sample was .87.

Work-family conflict. The Interaction Strain Scale of Parry and Warr (1980) was used to measure work-family conflict. The scale measures the strain experienced by employed mothers in coping with both domestic and paid work. Sample items include "The hours I work make it very difficult to look after the children" and "When I am at work, I often worry about things to do with my home or children". The scale consists of 12 items, with five items reverse-scored. A 3-point (1-3) response dimension was used, and scores were summed across items, with a high score indicating high interaction strain. Internal consistency for the present sample was .69, slightly lower than the .75 reported by Parry and Warr.

Demographic variables. Information regarding certain demographic variables was also collected because they may act as potential confounding factors. Occupation, for example, is a characteristic that may influence the stressors to which people are exposed to; those with high occupational status often experience different stressful circumstances from those with lesser jobs. In the present study, women were categorized into one of two occupational groups, secretarial/clerical and those in professional jobs. Similarly, there may also be differences in the two races observed. Thus, in the present study, inclusion of occupational group and race in the predictive model served to control for these possible confounding effects.

Statistical treatment:

Moderated multiple regression was used to test the extent to which the independent variables and their predicted interactions accounted for variance in the outcome measure. Cross-product terms were used to represent the interactions and these were entered into the regression model after their main-effect terms.

RESULTS

Means, standard deviations and intercorrelations of measures

The means, standard deviations and intercorrelations of measures used in the analysis are presented in Table 1. As shown in the table, the zero-order correlations between the variables ranged from low to moderate. The three main exceptions were the significant correlations between occupational group and work hours ($r = -.34$), between autonomy and tedium ($r = -.29$), and between work hours and work-family

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations and Intercorrelations of Measures

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Race	1.26	.44							
2. Occupational gp.	.53	.50	-.03						
3. Work hours	45.49	8.10	-.10	-.34**					
4. Autonomy	16.27	2.39	-.26**	-.00	.03				
5. Tedium	11.27	2.64	-.05	.16**	-.06	-.29**			
6. Overload	8.13	2.01	.02	.09	-.12*	-.13*	.22**		
7. Spouse support	27.85	4.17	-.01	.01	-.06	.19**	-.14*	-.05	
8. W-F conflict	20.03	4.86	-.22**	.24**	.29**	-.03	.14*	.17**	-.21**

$N=310$; * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Notes: Race was coded 1 (Malays) and 2 (Chinese).

Occupational group was coded 1 (secretaries and clerical workers) and 0 (professional women).

conflict ($r = .29$). Except for autonomy, all the predictor variables were significantly correlated with work-family conflict.

Regression analysis of work-family conflict in relation to work-role variables and spouse support after controlling for race and occupational group

In the multiple regression analysis predicting work-family conflict (Table 2), the independent variables were entered in a pre-determined order, control variables being entered prior to the main and interactive effects. At the first step, race and

Table 2. Hierarchical Regression Analyses Predicting Work-Family Conflict

Variable	R^2 increment	F	p	B
+Race		15.67	.0001	-2.411***
Occupational group	.103***	17.37	.0001	1.864***
+Work hours		12.52	.0001	.105***
Autonomy		1.12	<i>ns</i>	-.139
Tedium		1.39	<i>ns</i>	.191
Overload	.077**	5.52	.019	.796***
+Spouse support (SS)	.036***	13.41	.0001	-1.828
+Work hours $\times$ SS		4.04	.045	-.057*
Autonomy $\times$ SS		5.37	.021	-.591*
Tedium $\times$ SS		< 1	<i>ns</i>	-.085
Overload $\times$ SS	.028*	< 1	<i>ns</i>	.204
Cumulative R^2	.244			

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

+ Indicates a new step in the regression analysis. The B values are the unstandardized regression coefficients from the final stage of the regression analysis.

occupational groups were both significant predictors of conflict. Among the work variables entered at Step 2, both work hours and overload were significantly and positively related to conflict; long working hours and overload were associated with higher conflict scores. Spouse support, entered at the next step, was significantly and negatively related to conflict. At the final step, the interaction terms between work hours and spouse support and between autonomy and spouse support, were both significant. The final model was significant, $F(11, 298) = 8.49$, $p < .0001$; and it accounted for 24.4% of the variance in work-family conflict.

Graphical representations of the interaction terms

Following Cohen and Cohen (1983), the unstandardised regression coefficients (i.e., the B values shown in the final column of the hierarchical regression analysis in Table 2) were used to create the equation predicting conflict scores. This equation was evaluated to determine the forms of the interactions between work hours and support and between autonomy and support. Figs. 1 and 2 show these interactions.

Fig. 1 shows the work hours by support interaction in the prediction of work-family conflict. As can be seen, high spouse support moderated the negative effects of long work hours on conflict.

Fig. 2 shows the form of the autonomy by spouse support interaction. For those with low spouse support, high job autonomy has a negative effect on work-family

Fig. 1. The relationship between number of work hours and work-family conflict for high and low levels of spouse support.

Fig. 2. The relationship between job autonomy and work-family conflict for high and low levels of spouse support.

conflict. On the other hand, those with high spouse support and high autonomy showed the lowest level of work-family conflict.

DISCUSSION

The results showed that among the work variables used, only work hours and overload were related to work-family conflict after taking into account of race and occupational group. In addition, there was some support for the moderating effect of spouse support on the relationship between certain work variables and conflict. Significant interactions were observed between work hours and spouse support, and between autonomy and spouse support.

Among the work variables used, work hours is the most important predictor of work-family conflict. This is not surprising considering that the amount of time one spends at the workplace will directly affect one's family life (Gutek, Searle, & Klepa, 1991; Kanter, 1977). Besides this more objective measure of workplace involvement, overload too influenced women's experience of work-family conflict. Women who work long hours and experience feelings of overload reported higher work-family conflict because such a combination results in competition between work and family demands. Surprisingly, job autonomy, the positive aspect of work, did not carry over to reduce women's conflict.

The moderating effects of spouse support were observed for work hours and autonomy. As suggested by Cohen and Wills (1985), for moderation to occur, there

must be a match between support and stressor. As the measure of support used in the study was emotional in nature, it seems to match the demands created by long working hours; those with high spouse support experienced less work-family conflict, even with long work hours as compared to those with low spouse support.

The moderation effect of spouse support on the relationship between autonomy and work-family conflict is more complex. For those with low spouse support, high job autonomy has a negative effect on their conflict levels. However, the combination of high spouse support and high autonomy is positive, with the lowest level of conflict reported. Thus, the role of support is different for those with high and low levels of autonomy. Women may enjoy high job autonomy, but if support from their spouses is low, this may spill over to affect their conflict levels. And it is precisely this type of interaction that may account for the fact that job autonomy is not significant in the prediction of work-family conflict when the low- and high-support groups are combined (see Table 2).

Spouse support did not moderate the effects of the other two work stressors on conflict because the items used to assess these stressors focused on problems that were largely under the control of the workplace and beyond what the spouse can offer.

Although past studies on the moderating effect of social support have not been consistent, the findings of the present study suggest that spouse support may act as a moderator when there is a match between the stressor and support measure used. For employed married women with families, spouse support is seen to be a very relevant source of support that can alleviate some of the conflict that they are facing within the workplace. In line with the findings of Etzion and Pines' (1981), because women tend to be more open and to talk to others about their experiences, this may act as a mode of coping with stress. In the Malaysian context, however, married women are limited in terms of the people to whom they can talk to regarding their problems. As the husband is seen to be the closest person and one who has an immediate understanding of her situation, it is not surprising that the support he provides can, to some extent, moderate the wife's workplace stressors. Within the Malaysian context too, men do not usually participate in childcare and household tasks. Thus, women who are employed are seen to be responsible not only for the family and home, but also to the demands of the jobs. Work-family conflict indeed is inevitable, especially if women do not have some other forms of home assistance. In such a situation, spouse support is indeed beneficial to the reduction of their conflict.

The implications of these findings for the reduction of work-family conflict need to be considered. The conditions under which flexible work schedules would reduce work-family conflict deserve some mention. Because inflexible work schedules have been shown to increase work-family conflict (Pleck, Staines, & Lang, 1980), workplaces can help women with school-age children by introducing flexi-time working arrangement and allowing some discretion over when they arrive and leave work. Although long working hours is a problem, Herman and Gyllstrom (1977) suggested that having control over the work schedules might be more important for the reduction of work-family conflict than hours worked *per se*. Because women

usually occupy lower rung jobs in organizations, they seldom have control over their schedules.

As these women are working long hours, the husbands should participate equally with childcare and other household duties. Although most husbands in Malaysia do not mind their wives working because of the greater family income, most men do not put in much work at home. The home is still perceived to be the women's primary domain. Because women have to work 'inside' and 'outside' the home, the support provided by their spouses is extremely important. As shown by the study, spouse support is related negatively to women's work-family conflict. In addition, spouse support can also moderate the relationship between certain work variables and conflict.

The study has two main limitations. First, the design of the study was cross-sectional and causal relationships cannot be ascertained. On the basis of previous research it was assumed that role experiences preceded well-being (e.g., Frone, Russell, & Cooper, 1992).

Second, the measures used were derived from self-reports, thus exposing the findings to interpretation of method variance (variance attributable to the measurement method rather than to the variables of interest). While one way round this problem would be to include other objective or independent measures, this may sometimes not be possible. For example, objective measures of constructs such as overload, or spouse support are not easily observable. One can measure work absenteeism, or marital separations, but these are consequences of the constructs, not the constructs themselves. Measuring these outcomes would not be appropriate because no two individuals respond to stress in the same manner even though the level of stress may be the same. Furthermore, in the present study, interactive effects were evaluated. In contrast to main effects, interactive relationships cannot easily be attributable to method variance. In spite of these limitations, however, the study showed that spouse support acted as moderators of relations between certain work variables and work-family conflict.

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