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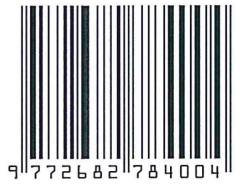

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Work And Family: Role-Identity Variations Among Malay Ethnic

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ABSTRACT

Work-family life provides different experiences for societies around the world. Scholars have attributed these variations to the cultural differences that exist between each group of these societies. For example, the societies in the west and east, or even ethnic groups have their own culture, causing the work-family experience to be different. However, cultural differences (e.g. role-identity) are believed to exist not only between societies but also within the society itself. This study aims to find empirical evidence that variations in role-identity are present among respondents in a shared cultural group - using the Malay ethnic as a proxy of the study. Specifically, this study examined the differences in role-identity among Malay ethnic respondents in different age categories. The results of this study confirm that variations in role-identity are indeed present within the cultural group.

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1. Introduction

Research on work and family interrelationship has attracted the attention of scholars primarily due to the global trend of the increased participation of women, dual-career earners and single-parent families, in the workforce (Aryee, Srinivas & Hwee, 2005; Hansen, 1991). Related studies have initially developed in western countries, as they have formerly experienced changes in workforce composition before other parts of the world. However, currently, these changes are also apparent in non-western countries as well. In Malaysia, as can be seen in the Department of Statistics (2015) report, over five million members of the Malaysian workforce are female. More than half of these women are married (63.1%), while over 7% are either widowed or divorced (see Table 1). It is evident that the majority of the members of the Malaysian workforce are juggling between work and family roles. As such, this poses the question of whether they are achieving a balance in their work-family lives – better known as work-family balance (WFB).

Past research has suggested that WFB experience is influenced by cultural attributes. In relation to cultural attributes, this paper focuses on role-identity (i.e. work identity and family identity) difference among employed women in Malaysia.

2. Review of Literature

In the related body of literature, the majority of work-family studies are populated in the West (Cohen & Kirchmeyer, 2005; Poelmans et al., 2003). However, these findings from the West cannot be simply generalised to other parts of the world. This is because there is a growing recognition that cultural and contextual factors can influence perceptions and experiences in work and family roles (Lewis & Ayudhya, 2006; Shafiro & Hammer, 2004; Westman, 2002). In other words, the findings are based on the context of the situation under investigation. This means that the surrounding factors of a particular society may influence the manner in which work and family lives are experience by individuals.

Table 1
Number and percentage distribution of employed labor force by marital status, 2015

	Total	Male	Female
Total ('000)	14,067.7	8,691.1	5,376.7
(%)	100.0	100.0	100.0
Never married	4,608.2	3,007.7	1,600.6
	32.8	34.6	29.8
Married	8,901.7	5,509.7	3,392.0
	63.3	63.4	63.1
Widowed	300.3	85.9	214.5
	2.1	1.0	4.0
Divorced/Separated	257.5	87.9	169.6
	1.8	1.0	3.2

Source: Department of Statistics, Malaysia

Due to this concern, cross-cultural work-family studies have started to emerge. A cross-cultural study refers to one that is conducted outside the western context, or one that compares people of different cultures (Aycan & Kanungo, 2001). There exists evidence that these cross-cultural studies generally did find differing work-family experiences across various groups, whether countries or ethnic groups, among others. The different gender-roles among these groups are often said to be the cause. Gender role refers to the segregation of roles between men and women in a society. In many non-western countries such as Malaysia, gender role ideology remains more traditional (Westman, 2005). In this society, the duties of running the household and children caring are primarily performed by women, while men are assumed to be the primary breadwinners.

In past studies, cultural differences between groups are often defined by country or ethnicity as the unit of analysis. For instance, a study conducted in Israel by Cohen and Kirchmeyer (2005) found work-family conflict differences between Jewish, Muslim and Christian groups. Similarly, a study on American workers revealed that work-family spillover varies across White, Black and Hispanic groups (Roehling, Jarvis & Swope, 2005). However, culture can also be viewed at the individual level (Leung & Bond, 1989). Hofstede's study of values (1980) across 53 nations was based on this approach. In comparing culture at the individual level, the individual acts as the unit of analysis. The cultural attributes are computed within the range of individual respondents, regardless of the cultural group the individual originates.

The approach of equating cultures at the group level may not be appropriate when the groups are heterogeneous (Cohen & Kirchmeyer, 2005). Hofstede (1980) stated that culture and its normative qualities are expressed through the values that individuals hold about life and the surrounding environment. These values are prioritized differently among individuals. As such, for confirming that culture plays a role in how people experience work and family lives, measuring culture at the individual-level is necessary.

The objective of this paper is to provide support for this argument, i.e., differences in cultural attribute exist across people of the same cultural group (i.e., ethnic group in the context of this study). For this purpose, role-identity (work-identity and family-identity) is utilized as the cultural attribute to be tested. Role-identity is among the dimensions that reflects gender-role ideology. Work-identity refers to one's stronger attachment to one's role in the work domain, while family-identity refers to one's stronger attachment to their role in the family domain. This role-identity is postulated to differ across individuals of different age generations. Different generations have been brought up in different eras and environments, and this consequently influences their values and behaviours, even though they are from the same cultural group.

3. Methodology

The data was collected through questionnaires, and then distributed to the respondents using a self-administered method. The nature of the survey was cross-sectional. The data was collected randomly, and the respondents were given ample time (i.e., two weeks) to answer the questionnaires without any pressure exerted.

Married women who are academic staff members from universities in the northern region of Malaysia acted as the population of this study. Universities in the northern region of Malaysia include Universiti Sains Malaysia, Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM), Universiti Utara Malaysia, and Universiti Malaysia Perlis.

The work-identity and family-identity was adopted from Kanungo (1982). All scale items were measured using 6-point Likert-type scales (1 = strongly disagree; 6 = strongly agree). This construct describes the relative importance of work versus family to oneself. A sample item for the work identity (WID) construct is: "Work is something people should get involved in most of the time". For this scale, Kanungo (1982) found a reliability coefficient of 0.75 in his study. Family identity (FID) was assessed with a parallel set of five items - with work substituted for family. An example of a family identity item is: "Family should only be a small part of a person's life". The data obtained from the survey was analysed using statistical analysis that was performed using SPSS version 19. Data was analysed using a t-test.

4. Findings

The participants of this survey consisted of 204 women academic who are all married. All of them have at least one dependent child in the household, and are of the Malay ethnic group. In terms of age, 71 respondents are of the age 35 and below; while 121 respondents are above 35 years old. The former group is considered the generation Y category, while the latter is generation X. Those who are members of the baby-boomer generation were not included, given their limited presence in the data. Tables 2 and 3 present the inferential results of this study.

Table 2 shows the difference in work-identity between participants of these two age categories. Levene's test was non-significant, thus equal variances can be assumed. The t-test was significant, i.e., the group of respondents who are above 35 years old (M = 3.305, SD = 0.90667) and the group of respondents who are 35 years old and below (M = 3.571, SD = 0.82966) were different in their work-identity ($p = 0.044$; $p < 0.05$). Thus, the alternate hypothesis is accepted. More specifically, the results indicated that the younger group (i.e., age 35 and below) has a somewhat higher work-identity compared to the group comprising those above 35 years of age.

Table 3 shows the difference in family-identity between participants of these two groups. Levene's test was non-significant, and thus equal variances can be assumed. The t-test was significant, i.e., the group of respondents who are above 35 years old (M = 4.716, SD = 0.96167) and the group of respondents who are 35 years old and below (M = 4.209, SD = 0.97054) were different in their family-identity ($p = 0.001$; $p < 0.05$). Thus, the alternate hypothesis is accepted. More specifically, the results showed that family-identity is stronger in the group comprising those above 35 years old.

Table 2
Independent samples test between age and work-identity (WID)

					Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means			
Variable		N	Mean	Std. Dev	F	Sig.		t	df	Mean Difference	Sig. (2-tailed)
WID	Above 35	121	3.305	.906	2.01	.15	Equal variances assumed	-2.02	190	-.266	.044
	35 and below	71	3.571	.829			Equal variances not assumed	-2.07	157.39	-.266	.040

*WID- work-identity

Table 3
Independent samples test between age and family-identity (FID)

					Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means			
Variable		N	Mean	Std. Dev	F	Sig.		t	df	Mean Difference	Sig. (2-tailed)
FID	Above 35	121	4.716	.961	.341	.56	Equal variances assumed	3.52	190	.507	.001
	35 and below	71	4.209	.970			Equal variances not assumed	3.51	145.68	.507	.001

*FID- family-identity

5. Conclusions

In summary, the findings of this study reveal that there is a significant difference in role-identity (work-identity and family-identity) among these participants, who are all of Malay ethnicity. This finding implies that people of the same cultural group can also vary in terms of their beliefs and values on the cultural attribute.

Past cross-cultural work-family studies have mostly equated culture to country or ethnic group. For example, a study by Roehling et al. (2005) found that work-family spill over varies across White, Black and Hispanic ethnics, and the study of Lu, Gilmour, Kao & Huang (2006) compared British and Taiwanese respondents. With reference to the present findings, it is evident that variations can also occur within the same cultural group. Therefore, to some extent, measuring culture at the individual level is deemed necessary, particularly when the group under study is composed of members with heterogeneous demographic background. Else, the study will result in a misrepresentation of the groups' culture.

The present findings indicate that the younger employees are somewhat high in work-identity, while the older workers are stronger in family-identity. The implication of this finding is that these different people will experience work and family lives somewhat differently. Those with stronger work-identity are believed to have a better attachment to work role - thus, less likelihood to view work as stressful compared to those with low work-identity. Similar argument goes to family-identity aspect.

Accordingly, for organization effectiveness, understanding the cultural aspect of employees is as important as understanding the technical part of managing the company. Employees of different values have different aspirations or desires. Any policies or strategies designed in the company may benefit a group of people and less effective to others. Therefore discretion by the management is necessary in managing these diverse employees, so that no one is disadvantaged, which then will ultimately lead to seizing the maximum potential from these people.

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