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Gender Differences in the Boundary Permeability between Work and Family Roles

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ABSTRAK

Kajian ini bertujuan untuk menentukan sama ada terdapat perbezaan gender dari segi ketelusan antara sempadan peranan kerja dan keluarga. Dengan mengguna borang soalselidik data dikumpul daripada 250 pekerja. Separuh daripada pekerja terdiri daripada jururawat di sebuah hospital di Selangor, Malaysia dan separuh lagi suami mereka. Kajian ini mendapati tiada bukti bagi perbezaan ketelusan sempadan antara peranan kerja dan keluarga yang menunjukkan bahawa dinamik bagi sempadan antara peranan kerja dan keluarga adalah sama di kalangan wanita dan lelaki. Walau bagaimana pun, responden wanita dan lelaki kedua-duanya melaporkan kerja mengganggu kehidupan keluarga lebih daripada kehidupan keluarga mengganggu kerja. Hasil kajian ini menunjukkan bahawa sempadan kerja dan keluarga adalah telus secara tidak simetri dengan sempadan keluarga lebih telus daripada sempadan kerja. Implikasi bagi penyelidikan akan datang dibincangkan.

ABSTRACT

The objective of this study is to determine if there are gender differences in the relative permeability between work and family boundaries. Using self-administered questionnaires data were gathered from 250 employees. Half of the employees consisted of nurses working in a hospital in Selangor, Malaysia and another half their husbands. The study found that there was no evidence of gender differences in the permeability of work and family boundaries indicating that the dynamics of boundary permeability between work and family roles are similar among females and males. However, the respondents, both females and males, reported that work interfered with family life more than family life interfered with work. These results suggested that work and family boundaries are asymmetrically permeable with family boundaries being more permeable than work boundaries. Implications for future research are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

More women, including married women, are entering the labour force in Malaysia. Their participation in the labour force has increased from 32.2% in 1970 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 1973) to 47.1% in 1995 (Malaysia, 1996). The labour participation rate of married women was 58.2% in 1991 compared with 51.2% in 1980 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 1995). Since women are increasingly occupying both work and family roles simultaneously, they are more likely to experience interrole conflict involving incompatible demands from the work and family domains (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985).

Pleck (1977) introduced the notion of asymmetrically permeable boundaries between the life domains of work and family. Boundaries between work and family are asymmetrically permeable to the extent that the interference of demands from one domain into the other occurs with unequal frequency. Work and family boundaries are asymmetrically permeable with family boundaries being more permeable than work if work demands and responsibilities are more likely to interfere with home life than vice

versa. Pleck (1977) also proposed that there would be gender differences in the pattern of asymmetry. Specifically, he hypothesised that family demands would intrude into the work role more than the reverse among women because they assume primary responsibility for managing home-related demands. Conversely, he posited that work demands would interfere into family role more than the reverse among men because they are more likely than women to take work home and are also more likely to use family time to recuperate from the stresses they face at the workplace.

Since Pleck (1977) introduced the notion of asymmetric permeability of work and family boundaries, only a few studies related to this issue have been conducted. Hall and Richter (1988) did a case study on managing home and work boundaries. Based on their research interviews, Hall and Richter reported that home boundaries were more consistently permeable than work boundaries among both men and women. Hence, their study did not support Pleck's hypothesis that there are gender differences in the pattern of symmetry. Wiley (1987) conducted a study of work-family conflict in which she assessed both the degree to which work interfered with family and the degree to which family interfered with work. Her results revealed that the mean level of work interference with family (M = 2.48) was higher than the mean level of family interference with work (M = 2.13), although Wiley did not test whether this difference was statistically significant. However, the pattern of overall means is consistent with Hall and Richter's conclusion that family boundaries are more permeable than work boundaries.

Frone *et al.* (1992b) conducted a study to test Pleck's hypothesis concerning gender differences in the relatively permeability of work and family boundaries. Data were obtained from a randomly drawn community sample of 631 employed adults (278 men and 353 women). Respondents reported that work interfered with family life more frequently than family life interfered with work. These results, which are congruent with previous studies by Hall and Richter (1988) and Wiley (1987), suggest that work and family boundaries are indeed asymmetrically permeable with family boundaries being more permeable than work boundaries. However there was no evidence of gender differences in the pattern of asymmetry, indicating that the dynamics of work and family boundaries may operate similarly among men and women. This finding was similar to that of Kinnunen and Mauno (1998) who examined the prevalence of work interference with family and family interference with work among 501 employed women and men in Finland. They found that work interference with family was more prevalent than family interference with work among both sexes, and that there was no gender difference in the boundary permeability.

Despite this accumulating evidence, the relative permeability between work and family boundaries has not been adequately explored, and that these studies have been conducted in Western societies. Thus far, literature and studies on work-family interference have mainly relied on assessing interference from work to family (Holahan and Gilbert, 1979; Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985; Good, 1990; Bacharach *et al.* 1991; Aryee, 1993; Aminah Ahmad, 1995a; 1996a; 1996b; 1996c; 1997) Stephens and Sommer, 1996). Although Frone *et al.* (1992a) in their study of antecedents and outcomes of work-family conflict, have examined both types of interference, namely, work interference with family and family interference with work, only modest attention has been paid to gender differences in the pattern of asymmetry in the permeability (Wiley, 1987; Hall and Richter, 1988; Frone *et al.* 1992b; Kinnunen and Mauno, 1998). The main objective of the present study is to test Pleck's (1977) hypothesis that there are gender differences in the relative boundary permeability between work and family roles, using data obtained from employed Malaysian women and their husbands. Specifically, this research tested the following hypotheses: 1) there is a significant difference between work interference with family and family interference with work among women; 2) there is a significant difference in work interference with family and family interference with work among men; 3) there is a significant difference between work interference with family between women and men; 4) there is a significant difference in family interference with work between women and men. The hypotheses were tested at the 0.05 level of significance.

METHOD

Sample and Procedure

The sample in this present study consists of

female nurses working in a government hospital in the state of Selangor, Malaysia, and their husbands. Female nurses meeting the following criteria were identified: (a) married, (b) working full-time, (c) living with spouse who is fully employed, and (d) has at least one child staying with them. These criteria were established to ensure that the women as well as their husbands in the sample had quite similar responsibilities in terms of family and work roles. Using random sampling, from a list of 735 eligible nurses, 300 nurses were selected who form half of the sample size. The other half of the sample consists of 300 husbands of these nurses.

Two sets of self-administered questionnaires (one for the nurse and another for her husband) were distributed to each nurse. The nurses were requested to have their husbands fill in the questionnaires. Out of the 300 pairs of subjects, 242 (81%) nurses and 125 (42%) husbands returned the questionnaires. For analysis, only data from 125 matched pairs were used.

The women in the sample averaged 35.2 years of age (SD = 7.14) while their husbands 37.7 years (SD = 6.74). There was an average of 2.5 (SD = 1.09) children in the family and an average of 2.4 (SD = 1.07) living at home. Fifty-nine percent of the women and 53% of the men earned an average gross income between RM1001 – RM1500 per month. Only 16% of the women and 26% of the men earned more than RM1500 per month. Respondents who had children below school going age constituted 68.8%. Only 26.0% reported that they had helpers, other than family members, at home. Respondents who sent their children to child-care centres or babysitters constituted 52.9%.

INSTRUMENTS

Boundary permeability between work and family roles was measured using two four-item scales. Four items developed by Kopelman *et al.* (1983) assessed work interference with family (WIF). Another four items, paralleling the WIF items were developed by Burley (1989) to assess family interference with work (FIW). The response options for both sets of questions or items were five-point scales ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The reliability coefficients (alphas) for the WIF scales were 0.73 for the wife and 0.71 for the husband. For the FIW scales the reliability coefficients were 0.77 for the wife and 0.65 for the husband.

RESULTS

The means and standard deviations of items measuring WIF and FIW are presented in Table 1. The most highly endorsed item measuring WIF was "After work, I come home too tired to do some of the things I'd like to do" for both wives and husbands, mean = 3.41 (SD = 1.14) and mean = 3.05 (SD = 1.18), respectively. The parallel item measuring FIW, "I am often too tired at work because of the things I have to do at home" was also the most highly endorsed item for wives, with a lower mean of 2.56 (SD = 1.07). For husbands, all the four item means were moderately low, ranging from 2.13 to 2.23.

Table 2 presents the distribution of wives according to the type of conflict (WIF and FIW) and the intensities of conflict. Fifty-three (42.4%) of the 125 nurses reported low intensity of WIF. Forty-nine (39.2%) reported medium intensity of conflict while 23 (18.4%) reported high intensity of conflict. For FIW, 92 (73.6%) reported low intensity of conflict, 25 (20.0%) medium, and only 8 (6.4%) high. The mean for WIF on a five-point scale was 2.8. (SD = 0.79), while that for the FIW scale was 2.3 (SD = 0.72) (Table 4).

Fifty-nine (47.2%) husbands reported low intensity of WIF, while 38 (30.4%) reported medium, and 28 (22.3%) high intensity of WIF (Table 3). For FIW, a high percentage of husbands (80.0%) reported low intensity, and only 4 (16.8%) reported medium and 4 (3.2%) high intensity of FIW. The means for WIF and FIW were 2.84 (SD = 0.93) and 2.18 (SD = 0.75), respectively (Table 4).

The WIF means for both wives and husbands were significantly greater than the FIW mean ($t = 6.99$, $p < .05$ and $t = 7.23$, $p < .05$, respectively) (Table 5). Consequently, the means for the total WIF (wives and husbands) and total FIW (wives and husbands) were significantly different ($t = 7.23$; $p < .05$). However the WIF and the FIW for the wives did not differ significantly from those of the husbands.

DISCUSSION

The main objective of this study is to test Pleck's (1977) hypothesis concerning gender differences in the relative permeability of work and family boundaries. Contrary to Pleck's (1977) hypothesis, however, there was no evidence of gender differences in the relative permeability of work and family boundaries. The present

TABLE 1
Means and standard deviations of items measuring WIF and FIW for husbands and wives

Item	Husbands (n = 125)		Wives (n = 125)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Work Interference with Family (WIF)				
After work, I come home too tired to do some of the things I'd like to do	3.05	1.18	3.41	1.14
On the job I have so much work to do that it takes away time for my family interest	2.62	1.16	2.45	0.99
My family dislikes how often I am preoccupied with my work while I am at home	2.87	1.20	2.64	1.01
My work takes up time that I'd like to spend with my family	2.82	1.19	2.90	1.13
Total WIF	2.84	0.93	2.85	0.79
Family Interference with Work (FIW)				
I am often too tired at work because of the things I have to do at home	2.19	1.02	2.56	1.07
My personal demands are so great that it takes away time from my work	2.23	1.25	2.20	0.82
My supervisor and peers dislike how often I am preoccupied with my personal life while at work	2.15	1.04	2.43	0.98
My personal life takes up time that I would Like to spend at work	2.13	0.97	2.02	0.88
Total FIW	2.18	0.75	2.30	0.72

TABLE 2
Distribution of wives by type and intensity of conflict
(n = 125)

Type/Intensity of conflict	Frequency	Percentage
Work Interference with Family		
Low (1.0-2.5)	53	42.4
Medium (2.6-3.5)	49	39.2
High (3.6-5.0)	23	18.4
Family Interference with Work		
Low (1.0-2.5)	92	73.6
Medium (2.6-3.5)	25	20.0
High (3.6-5.0)	8	6.4

TABLE 3
Distribution of husbands by type and intensity of conflict
(n = 125)

Type/Intensity of conflict	Frequency	Percentage
Work Interference with Family		
Low (1.0-2.5)	59	47.2
Medium (2.6-3.5)	38	30.4
High (3.6-5.0)	28	22.4
Family Interference with Work		
Low (1.0-2.5)	100	80.0
Medium (2.6-3.5)	21	16.8
High (3.6-5.0)	4	3.2

TABLE 4
Means and standard deviations of type of conflict by gender

Gender	Type of Conflict			
	WIF		FIW	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Females/Wives (n = 125)	2.85	0.79	2.30	0.72
Males/Husbands (n = 125)	2.84	0.93	2.18	0.75

TABLE 5
Values for the difference in boundary permeability
by type of conflict and gender

Type of conflict/gender	df	t	p
WIF (wives) and FIW (wives)	124	6.99	0.00
WIF (husbands) and FIW (husbands)	124	7.23	0.00
WIF (wives) and WIF (husbands)	124	0.09	0.93
FIW (wives) and FIW (husbands)	124	1.37	0.17

results support a survey study by Frone *et al.* (1992b), a case study conducted by Hall and Richter (1988), and extend a survey study of work-family conflict conducted by Wiley (1987). The results pertaining to WIF are also in line with those found by Aminah Ahmad (1995b) whose study focussed only on work interference with family.

The study findings also revealed that the nurses and their husbands experienced WIF more than FIW, suggesting that family boundaries are more permeable to work demands than are work boundaries to family demands. It can be argued that since male and female workers who are in full-time employment spend fewer hours in family work (housework, household maintenance, and child care) than they do in paid work, it is not surprising that both male and female workers would report more WIF than FIW. However, the results of studies conducted by Gutek *et al.* (1991) and Duxbury *et al.* (1994) have shown that women reported significantly more WIF than men, even though their number of hours of paid employment was virtually identical.

It has been argued that the results of the studies by Gutek *et al.* (1991) and Duxbury *et al.* (1994) can be explained from the gender role perspective, whereby traditional gender roles prescribed different emphases for men and women (work is for men; family is for women). However, the findings of this present study that women and men did not differ in the extent of FIW they experienced could not be explained from this perspective. Hence, the gender role perspective may to a certain extent explain boundary permeability in earlier studies, and Pleck's (1977) hypothesis may have been valid in previous situations. It appears that in the present situations, the dynamics of boundary permeability between work and family roles may operate similarly among women and men.

With regards to future research, there is a need to study the prevalence of WIF and FIW among women and men at different life-cycle stages. Examining women and men in the different life-cycle stages, particularly in the periods when their children are young, may generate dissimilar results with regard to gender differences in boundary permeability. The findings that men and women experience the same pattern of FIW and WIF may not hold true.

Future research should also examine interventions to reduce exposure to the two different types of work-family conflict. For example, organisations should offer programmes to help their employees cope with interference from work to family and family to work (i. e. flexitime, reliable childcare arrangements, time management courses, seminars on coping strategies). Family development practitioners should work together with human resource managers in charge of organisational programmes in designing programmes to help women and men, particularly nurses and spouses, cope with the demands of work and family roles.

This study is generalisable to nurses working in government hospitals in Selangor, Malaysia. Validation of the results across various occupations is suggested for further research.

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