CAREER PRIORITY OF DUAL-CAREER COUPLES IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates career priority of professional and managerial dual-career couples in Malaysia using role salience theoretical framework. Semi-structured qualitative interviews were used to collect data from 40 participants in dual-career relationship. The findings indicate that the participants regard both their spouses and their own career as very important, although different reasons were given on the importance of both careers. The results also reveal how differences in terms of the career priorities within spouses affect their perceptions of the challenges they face and their career development. In addition, the experiences described by the participants reflect their work and family role salience. The results also reveal how interaction between partners can shape their role salience and career priority. This paper fills the gap by adding more research on dual-career couples' career development in a non-Western context. Furthermore, it extends the use of role salience perspective to develop an understanding of the professional and managerial dual-career couples' experiences.

Keywords: Career priority, Career development, Role Salience, Role conflict, Dual-Career Couples

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Many studies have been done to examine the career priority of men and women in dual-career marriages (e.g Buchel, 2000; Challiol & Mignonac, 2005; Grady & McCarthy, 2008; Pixley, 2008; Stamm & Buddeberg-Fischer, 2011). It has been acknowledged that women face more challenges in developing their career despite having high levels of education and experiences (O'Neil & Bilimoria, 2005; Omar, 2005). Nevertheless, studies focusing on the experiences of

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both professional and managerial men and women in dual-career relationship have been conducted mainly in the US and Western countries (e.g Elloy & Smith, 2003; Groeneveld, 2008; Pixley 2008; Stamm & Buddeberg-Fischer, 2011). Attempts to examine their experience across cultures, especially in developing countries, are generally lacking, despite of the significant increase of working women in these countries (Karimi, 2009; Quek& Knudson-Martin, 2008; Shujat et al., 2011).

In Malaysia, there have been very few empirical investigations comparing the experiences of professional and managerial dual-career men and women, let alone on their career priority. Studies that have been conducted focused mainly on the antecedents and consequences of work-family conflict (e.g Komarraju, 2006; Nasurdin & Khor, 2008; Tam, 2008). Furthermore, literatures in Malaysia seem to focus more on working women, compared with investigation that includes both men and women (e.g; Abdullah et al., 2008; Hashim, 2004; Ismail & Ibrahim, 2007; Noor, 1999; Noor & Mahudin, 2005). Hence, it was deemed appropriate to examine both men and women's perceptions of their career priority, which will reflect their salience towards work and family roles, and hence, their career development.

This research will adopt role salience perspective as the framework to discuss the topic under study. In this perspective, people are viewed as being engaged with various roles, and role salience denotes the relative importance or "the degree to which a given role stands out from others played" (Super, 1982). One important aspect of role salience is its influence on how people will accomplish their responsibilities in family and organizational roles. Cinamon and Rich (2002) have demonstrated the importance of examining the relative salience of both work and family roles to understand work-family conflicts and challenges. Role salience impacts peoples' behavior and decisions regarding their roles as employees and, therefore, has meaningful implications for employees and organizations (Greer and Egan, 2012). Salience concerning the different roles that individuals enact in society is particularly suited as a framework for examining the conflict between work and family roles (Greenhaus & Powell, 2003); hence, it would be suitable to examine how couples determine the importance of their work and family roles and therefore, their career priority.

2.0   LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies report that most dual-career role couples saw each career as equal in importance, however, many women admitted that their partner's career takes precedence over theirs (Hardill & Watson, 2004; Lang, 2000; Stamm & Buddeberg-Fischer, 2011) This has contributed to women having difficulty in reaching higher ranks of management level, despite having appropriate education, increasing years of service and the passage of time (Burke & Mattis, 2005; Davidson & Burke, 2011). However, it was also discovered that, even in the cases where

one partner's career is identified as primary, the partner indicated making such accommodations as being available for emergency childcare or turning down an opportunity to relocate (Lang, 2000; Rusconi & Solga, 2008). It is also important to note that although, traditionally, the husband's career was seen as primary, this could also be determined by factors such as which partner has a higher salary, or in the case of geographic relocation, whether one partner has a more specialized work role with less ability to gain employment in a new location. It was also highlighted that, in other cases, couples might decide to take turns making work role sacrifices for one another (Perrone et al., 2009). Meanwhile, some couples choose "commuter marriage" by living apart, while one of the partners completes as assignment away from home (Hardill, 2004; Van der Klis, & Mulder, 2008).

Thus, previous Western literatures have indicated that having a relationship where both spouses engage in full-time profession certainly has an impact on each other's career priority and progression. Couples have to make adjustment as to make way for each spouses' careers and hence, it is crucial to look at this matter in the Malaysian context.

3.0   METHODOLOGY

Semi-structured qualitative interviews were used to collect data from 20 dual-career couples. Up till now, there have been very few studies carried out to investigate about the experience of Malaysian dual-career couples (for instance, Ahmad, 2008; Komarraju, 2006; Nasurdin & Khor, 2008; Tam, 2008). These limited studies are found to adopt quantitative methodology. Therefore, qualitative methodology is regarded as suitable to support the current research because, the research questions developed are geared towards discovering what people think and feel, how they account for their work experiences and actions, and what challenges they face (Webber and Byrd, 2010). The utilization of a semi-structured interview format allows for understanding gained from past research to be used to benefit the current study. Hence, it offered the opportunity to investigate the validity of past research findings in a local context, and to explore other relevant issues as identified by the respondents (Pierce and Delahaye, 1996). The selection criteria for the sample of the research are: (1) each individual (male and female) had a position as a professional or at the management level; (2) must be a Malay; and (3) have at least one dependent child (below 18 years of age). The study also decided to focus on Malay couples since the Malay represent the largest ethnic group (more than half of the population) in this country. Furthermore, other ethnic groups may have different experiences due to differences in culture and religions, so it would be appropriate to only focus on the Malay ethnic in this study. In addition, the research only interviewed couples who had children under the age of 18, as they are expected to carry greater responsibilities and struggles in balancing work and family demands compared with childless couples or parents of adult children. Interviewees for this research were

selected by personal contacts and recommendations. A snowball sampling strategy was also employed to gather a group of individuals who fit the study parameters. Some of the interviewees helped to recruit participants by recommending friends that they thought would be interested in being involved in the study. The interviews were conducted face-to-face and couples were interviewed separately. The respondents in this study ranged from 30 to 52 years old. Analysis of interviews was carried out using template analysis, using codes to serve as a template for data analysis (King, 2004; Robson, 2002). The findings are presented in a thematic presentation of the findings, using different individual case-studies to illustrate each of the main themes. Protection of the participants in the reporting and representation of the analysis was ensured by replacing the participants' names with pseudonyms.

4.0   FINDINGS

It is evident from the research that the participants regard both their spouses and their own careers as very important. However, different reasons were given for this by the participants. One of the reasons given in relation to the couples prioritizing both of their careers is the need for financial security for the family. A male respondent expressed his thoughts in this way:

> I think both of our jobs are important. Well, for the time being…both of us need to work. If I work alone, I guess I have to sell one of our cars (laugh). (Zamri)

This is further supported by a male respondent who said:

> If we were to elaborate in terms of career priority…well, both of us need to prioritize our careers not to be neglecting each other's careers. Due to security reason since the cost of living is getting higher and the need to have income from both partners is important so I do not foresee any party should prioritize their career more than the other party so I think both are equally important. (Raymee)

Both statements above indicate how financial needs caused the couples to adopt a shared provider role. Interestingly, this economic necessity has led them to place equal importance on both careers, thus showing the high salience of both the husbands' and wives' work roles for the family.

However, finance is not the sole reason mentioned by the participants in the study. For example, a female interviewee shared why she views both careers as important:

> Both of them are important. Mine is important for me because I like my job and he also considers his career as important because he is the leader of the family…so both of our careers are important. (Rozita)

Rozita gave different reasons on why both of their careers are important. However, it is interesting to note that, although she appears to show high work salience by insisting that both careers are important, the traditional ideological influence is still embedded. She noted that her husband's career is important because he is the head of the family, compared with her own career, which is due to her interest.

Meanwhile, a female interviewee, who also has a mother who used to work, stressed that:

> I think it's a balance. Both of our careers are important. If I am given the option to quit working, I will not quit. I want to develop my own career…so if anything happens…I am ready. (Shuhaidah)

Shuhaidah's comment indicates that she has a high work salience and a less traditional attitude in relation to her role as a wife; she contended that she will never quit her job. It is important to highlight that Shuhaidah has a mother who used to work at the same time as having a family; therefore, having a working mother might serve as a role model for her to succeed in her own career.

4.1   Conflicting Views within Couples

Even though it is not typical, this study has discovered differences in terms of the career priorities within the couples. For example, one partner may say that both careers are important, but the other might not share the same thought. As acknowledged by a female interviewee:

> It's the same because both of us want to work. Like us, both of us agreed that we both want to work…so both careers are important. (Lina)

Shamsul, her husband, on the other hand, does not share this view. According to him, his career is more important than hers, except in certain situations.

> Well, in my perspective, my career is more important. But there are times when I sacrifice my work for her, for example when my child is sick and she has to attend an important meeting, so I will stay at home and take care of the kid. We will look at the situation because my job is more flexible than her. (Shamsul)

The differences in views might affect their perceptions of the challenges they face. Shamsul thinks that his career is more important and, therefore, perceives that he makes more of a sacrifice to attend to his family's demands when his wife cannot. A further example of conflicting views was given by another couple presenting a completely opposing view. While Azalina thinks her husband's career is more important, in line with his role as the man in the family, Faris considers their careers to be equally important.

> Normally it is the husband that will work for the family. So, I don't think a husband will not work although maybe his wife earns more than him. So, I think his career is more important. (Azalina)

> For me, both are important. Only that, right now my wife has the chance to further her study and I feel that she has more opportunities for her career now. Therefore, for the time being, I consider her career to be more important. So, basically I think it depends on the situation because I think one day, I will also have my opportunity too. (Faris)

The above statements point out how cultural and religious values influence the participants in how they think about the importance of their own and their partner's careers. Although Faris shows that he is less traditional in his view, Azalina, despite earning more than Faris, is still influenced strongly by the view that the male should have more career priorities. Therefore, as experienced by Lina and Shamsul earlier, the differences in couples' view may influence the challenges and experiences that are faced by each spouse.

4.2 Work Characteristics Influencing Career Priority

The work itself also presents an interesting point in terms of career priorities among the spouses. Some participants reported that the nature of the job makes their spouse's job appear more important. Therefore, although they regard both careers as equally important, the nature of their partner's job makes their career seem to take precedence. In one instance, a female respondent said:

> Both are equally important but the nature of my work and his work is different because he couldn't do much office work at home…unlike me, I can bring my work home. So, in the case of career priority it is much more the same …only that the nature of work that makes it look like his career is more important. (Hafizah)

This impact is not only felt by women, as some male participants also stated that their wives' jobs need to be given primacy due to their nature. One such example is expressed by a male interviewee:

> I prioritize both of our careers. But there are certain times when I would give more priority to her work because she works in the medical sector….so, sometimes she has to be on-call or work in the weekends. So, I have to sacrifice and spend time with the kids. (Nasrun)

The above comment shows that, although the male participants prioritize both jobs, he has to make some sacrifice due to the nature of his wife's job. This situation is also recognized by some

women participants who claim that they have the more demanding job and, therefore, their husbands have more time for the family. This is illustrated by a female interviewee in this way:

> Oh it's the same for me because we are both working in the admin field. He is in finance and I am in the pure administration. So it's the same. There are certain situations when he will prioritize my work...depends on the scope. Like me, I am in the admin and I travel a lot. Unlike him, he is in the finance department so his work is more static...he stays more in the office, so he has to often tolerate with my work demands because I think I am busier than him (laugh). If I have to go outstation, I will leave my children with him. So he compromises a lot, because he has to do everything when I'm not around...from A to Z...change the nappies, feed them, give them bath...he did it all. (Syireen)

Another female respondent echoed the claim, saying:

> Ok...this question is quite tricky because now it looks like my job is more demanding than his. He does have to go outstation and stuff but not that often. The frequency is not that much as compared to me. After I came back from my PhD, the work commitment is more. So, he has to sacrifice more. (Yasmin)

The above circumstances not only make the couples more egalitarian, with increased involvement of the husband in caring for the children, but also affect their role salience. Based on the two examples above, both Syireen's and Yasmin's husbands have to increase their family salience due to the absence of their wives at home, while Syireen and Yasmin move their role of a worker higher in their role salience hierarchy due to their work commitments. Hence, this indicates how the family circumstances have a significant impact on their work and family salience.

5.0 DISCUSSION

Previous studies have indicated that even though, traditionally, the husband's career was seen as primary, certain conditions can affect how career priority is perceived, such as the wife earning more or having a more specialized work role (Perrone et al., 2009). Looking into this matter, the study indeed found the impact of wife's work condition on the couples' work role salience. The interview data manage to illustrate how some husbands and wives exhibiting more roles sharing due to the nature of their wives' jobs, which caused them to be more involved in childcare. It was also found that some husbands have to increase their family role salience, while the wives move their work role to a higher position due to the work demands of their wives. Therefore, the above circumstances are not just affecting their role salience but also could give impact to their career advancement. This finding provides evidence for a contention by Budworth. et al. (2008) in their conceptual paper that states when an individual is part of a couple, the role of worker may take

on a different meaning or position than if the individual is not part of an independent relationship, Therefore, the salience of the role of individuals within the couple may be shaped by their interactions with each other and have a significant impact on their career development. Thus, it is important for the organizations to understand the needs of employees in dual-career marriage in order to retain and motivate employees to gain competitive advantage.

6.0   CONCLUSION

In line with modernization and economic needs, the participants display the view that the wives' careers are as important as the husbands. Furthermore, the interviews have managed to highlight the differences of views among some couples in their career priority which affect their perceptions of the challenges they face. Interestingly, it was revealed that certain conditions such as wife's work demands may also have an impact on each spouse' hierarchy of salience in work and family roles.

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