

Career Priority of Malaysian Dual-Career Couples in Professional and Managerial Careers

Keutamaan Kerjaya Bagi Pasangan Dwikerjaya dalam Kerjaya Profesional dan Pengurusan di Malaysia

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Abstract

This article investigates the 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 23 dual-career couples. The findings indicate that the participants regard both their spouses and their own careers as very important, although different reasons were given on why both of their careers are important. The results also reveal how differences in terms of the career priorities within the couples affect their perceptions of the challenges they face and their career development. In addition, the experiences described by the participants reflect the salience of family and work roles. The results also reveal how interaction between partners can shape their work and family role salience. This article fills the gap by adding more research on dual-career couples in a non-Western context. Furthermore, it extends the use of role salience perspective to develop an understanding of their experiences.

Keywords career priority, career development, role salience, dual-career couples

Abstrak

Artikel ini mengkaji keutamaan kerjaya pasangan dwi-kerjaya profesional dan pengurusan di Malaysia dengan menggunakan kerangka penonjolan peranan. Temu bual kualitatif separa berstruktur dari 23 pasangan dwi-kerjaya telah dijalankan bagi mendapatkan data. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa para peserta menganggap pasangan dan kerjaya mereka sebagai sangat penting, walaupun sebab-sebab yang berbeza telah diberikan mengapa kedua-duanya adalah penting. Keputusan juga menunjukkan bagaimana perbezaan dari segi keutamaan kerjaya dalam pasangan memberi kesan kepada persepsi mereka terhadap cabaran yang mereka hadapi dan pembangunan kerjaya mereka. Di samping itu, pengalaman yang digambarkan oleh para peserta mencerminkan peranan penting keluarga dan kerja. Keputusan juga mendedahkan bagaimana interaksi antara rakan-rakan dapat membentuk peranan kerja dan keluarga mereka. Artikel ini mengisi jurang dengan menambah lebih banyak penyelidikan mengenai pasangan dwi-kerjaya dalam konteks bukan Barat. Tambahan pula, ia merangkumi penggunaan perspektif kerangka penonjolan peranan untuk membangunkan pemahaman tentang pengalaman mereka.

Kata kunci keutamaan kerjaya, pembangunan kerjaya, kerangka penonjolan peranan, pasangan dwi-kerjaya

Introduction

Many studies have been done to examine the career advancement of men and women in dual-career marriages (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 professional and managerial men and women who are in dual-career relationship have been conducted mainly in the US and Western countries (Elloy & Smith, 2003; Rusconi, 2002; Shafiro & Hammer, 2004). Attempts to examine their experience across cultures, especially in developing countries, are generally lacking, despite the fact that the increase of career women in these countries (Karimi, 2009; Quek & Knudson-Martin, 2008).

In Malaysia, there have been very few empirical investigations comparing the experiences of professional and managerial men and women, let alone on their career priority. Studies that have been conducted focused only on the antecedents and consequences of work-family conflict (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 (Abdullah, K., Noor, N. and Wok, S., 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.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts role salience as its theoretical framework. 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). The importance of role salience as a framework for examining the conflict and relationship between work and family roles has been highlighted by previous researchers (Cinamon & Rich, 2002a; 2002b; Greenhaus & Powell, 2003). Although these researchers have suggested that role salience is a relevant variable for work-family research, studies have pointed out that this perspective has been largely neglected. Hence, this study incorporates role salience in its theoretical framework to show the utility of using this perspective in understanding the career priority between couples.

In general, both men and women have been found to rank their roles as spouse and parent at similar levels of importance, or salience; both of these roles are ranked as more important than their roles as employees, and family activity is chosen over work activity (Greenhaus and Powell, 2003). However, a dual-career couple is, by nature, required to maintain some dual salience of the work and family roles (Budworth, M. H., Enns, J. R and Rowbotham, K. 2008). Complicating this picture is the reality among dual-career couples; those who rated both work and family roles as highly salient had higher work-family conflict than those who placed family above career (Cinamon & Rich, 2002a), and corrective efforts to resolve threats to family roles often result in a disruptive impact on their work roles. Hence, a common problem for dual-career couples is achieving a satisfactory balance in their commitment to family and work roles.

Budworth et al. (2008) proposed that it is necessary to consider how the roles of the individuals within the couple may be shaped by their interactions with each other. They argued that, when the individual is part of a couple, the role of worker may take on a different meaning or position than if the individual was not part of an independent relationship. For example, if one member of a couple is ill and unable to work, the other person may have to move the role of worker higher in his or her role hierarchy. However, since this proposition has not been examined empirically, it would be interesting to see in the research how the interactions between spouses will influence the importance of a particular role at a time. Thus, this study extends the use of role salience perspectives in examining the context of couples by exhibiting its utility in understanding the Malaysian couples' career priority.

Literature Review

Studies report that most dual-career couples saw each career as equal in importance, although women were twice as likely as men to limit their work commitments (Hardill & Watson, 2004; Lang, 2000). However, it was also discovered that, even in the cases where one 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). 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 career 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 career sacrifices for one another (Perrone, K. M., Wright, S. L. and Jackson, Z. V., 2009). Meanwhile, some couples choose “commuter marriage” by living apart, while one of the partners completes an assignment away from home (Neault & Pickerell, 2005).

Thus, having a relationship where both spouses engage in full-time profession certainly has an impact on each other’s career. Acknowledgement of wives’ career priority initiates a number of changes that appear to impact gender hierarchies in the family sphere (Quek & Knudson-Martin, 2008), such as decision making, housework and childcare. Therefore, the following section will discuss in more detail these matters.

Methodology

Semi-structured qualitative interviews were used to collect data from 23 dual-career couples. Up till now, there have been very few studies carried out to investigate about the experience of Malaysian dual-career couples (Komarraju, 2006; Nasurdin & Khor, 2008; Tam, 2008). The limited studies conducted on are found to adopt quantitative methodology (Komarraju, 2006; Tam, 2008; Nasurdin & Khor, 2008). 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. 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. 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). This study decided to focus on managerial and professional couples to analyse the impact of being dual-career couples on their attitudes to gender role and role salience. 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. Analysis of interviews was carried out using template analysis. 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.

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:

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)

The statement above indicates 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.

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:

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 values influence the participants in how they view 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 ideology that the male should be the main provider and 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.

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. 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 sacrifices due to the nature of his wife's job. This situation is also recognized by some women participants who claim that they have 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)

The above circumstances not only make the couple to have more role-sharing, 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 the salience of work and family roles in a couple's life.

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 career (Perrone et al., 2009). Looking into this matter, the study indeed found the impact of wife's work condition on the couples' career priority. The interview data manage to illustrate how some husbands are seemingly more egalitarian 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 the development of their career.

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 highlighted the differences of views among some couples in certain matters and also how individual personal preferences can affect the division of responsibilities among them. Interestingly, it was revealed that certain conditions such as wife's work demands may affect the couples gender role attitudes and has also been illustrated as to have an impact on each spouse' hierarchy of salience in work and family roles.

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