

## Work-Family Conflict, Stress and Psychological Strain in Higher Education

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**Abstract.** Work and family life are two important dimensions of human life that are hard to be separated. The incompatibility between these two domains is proven to increase stress and psychological strain. Thus, this research aims to investigate the impact of work-family conflict on stress and psychological strain among university staffs. A survey method using questionnaire was carried out to obtain the data for this study. A total of 267 respondents participated in this study, giving the return rate of 20% from the entire of population. The data were analyzed using correlation and multiple regression. Result indicated that both work to family conflict and family to work conflict have a significant relationship with the stress dimensions and psychological strain. In specific, work-to-family conflicts have a high correlation with the criterion variables compared to family-to-work conflict. In addition, the regression results indicated that only work to family conflict influence stress levels and psychological strain. In conclusion, this research hopes to enhance the knowledge in the realm of work-family conflict on stress and psychological strain among academic staffs in Malaysian higher institution.

**Keywords:** Work-to-family conflict, Family-to-work conflict, Psychological strain, Behavioral stress, Somatic stress, Cognitive stress

### 1. Introduction

Literature reviews show that the relationship between work-family conflict (WFC), stress and strain has been extensively explored by many researchers, especially in Western society. However, studies of WFC in Asia are still rare [1]. Thus, this research aims to investigate the relationship between work-family conflict and stress and psychological strain among academic staffs in Malaysian setting. The predictor variables were work-family conflict, such as work-to-family conflict and family-to-work conflict. The criterion variables were stress (i.e. behavioral stress, cognitive stress, and somatic stress) and psychological strain.

Universities have been experiencing major changes leaving a significant impact on the role and working practices of the academics [2]. Academic jobs have become more challenging in terms of effort and time. With growing institutional demands, accountability and work intensification of 50 to 60 hours per week, workload has become the norm in many universities [3]. Research on work-family conflict has found that such conflict is higher among those who work longer hours or have carry greater work demands, and reported as having higher job involvement and greater autonomy [4]. Therefore, the academic staffs tend to experience conflict that related to the work-family issues. Work-family conflict occurs when the work domain and family domain are incompatible with one another in some manner. Poelmans [5] found that work-family conflict was related to stress and mental health such as psychological strain.

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## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1. Work–family conflict**

Work-family conflict is defined as the inter-role conflict that occurs when two domains become unbalance [6]. When conflict occurs it will give adverse effects to both organization and individuals. Previous research have found that a person experiencing work-family conflict will lead to the increase of health risk, decrease performance in both work and life, inhibiting stress and reducing satisfaction in life [7-9]. The inability to endure both commitments will also form the behavior of absenteeism, increasing the intent to turnover in organization as well as reducing the organizational commitment [10-11].

Previously, most of the research found that work-family conflict works in two directions which are work-to-family conflict and family-to-work conflict [12]. For work-to-family conflict, it is a situation that occurs when conflict sourcing from the realm of work is affecting the family life. For example, stress experienced by the workers interfere the family life. Meanwhile, family-to-work conflict is a situation where the family life interfere the working life. However, previous research indicated that individuals experience work-to-family conflict more than family-to-work conflict [13].

### **2.2. Stress**

According to Lazarus and Folkman [14], psychological stress is defined as “particular relationship between the person as taxing or exceeding his or her own resources and endanger his or her well-being”. Job demands and lack of job control are two important work stressors [15]. The conflict between work and home has also been discussed in the Cooper model as one of the source of stressor [16]. Previous study indicated that work stressor can affect well-being and performance in organization [17-18].

### **2.3. Psychological Strain**

Beehr [19] defined strain as states that are harmful and usually give an adverse affect on the individuals experiencing them. Lee and Ashforth [20] on the other hand defined strain as affective, an individual’s state of feeling that is characterised by depleted emotional resources and lack of energy. There are a lot of research that had examined feelings of strain arising from certain job features (usually referred to as ‘stressors’) [21]. According to Lazarus and Folkman [22], strain arises when individuals perceive themselves as unable to meet environmental demands. If strain occurs, people will try to deal with either the stressor itself or with the negative effects of this stressor (coping) [22]. French, Caplan, and Harrison (1982) suggested that strain can result from the mismatch between a person and the environment on dimensions important to the well-being of the person.

## **3. Methodology**

### **3.1. Sample and procedures**

The population of this study was the academic staffs from three research universities in Malaysia, which are Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Universiti Sains Malaysia and Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. In total 1300 questionnaires were circulated through online correspondence with the above mentioned universities. Overall, only 267 filled questionnaires were returned, providing the response rate of 20%. 51% of the respondents were female and 49% were male. Majority of the respondents are from the Malay ethnic (79%), followed by Chinese (10%), and Indian (3 %).

### **3.2. Measures**

Work-family conflict was measured using Work-to-Family conflict and Family-to-family conflict scale [23]. Stress was adapted from Copenhagen Psychosocial questionnaire [24], while psychological strain was measured using the General Health Questionnaire-12 (GHQ-12).

## **4. Result**

### **4.1. Mean and correlation analysis**

Table 1 shows the mean value and correlation among the variables. The mean value for work-to-family conflict ( $m=3.35$ ) is higher compared to family-to-work conflict ( $m=2.65$ ). The behavioral stress, cognitive

stress and somatic stress recorded the mean value ranging from 1.82 to 2.27. The mean value for psychological strain was  $m=3.26$ , indicating a moderate level.

The results demonstrated that both work-to-family and family-to-work conflict has a positive significant relationship with all the independent variables. In specific, work-family conflict shows a moderate significant positive relationship with behavioral stress ( $r=0.51, p<0.01$ ), somatic stress ( $r=0.40, p<0.01$ ) and cognitive stress ( $r=0.52, p<0.01$ ) compared to the family-work-conflict which only shows a positive low relationship with stress ((behavioral stress ( $r=0.24, p<0.01$ ), somatic stress ( $r=0.19, p<0.01$ ), cognitive stress ( $r=0.30, p<0.01$ )). However, only work-to-conflict found to be positively related to feeling of strain but only with low correlations ( $r=0.12, p<0.01$ ). Thus, we can conclude that the increment of work-to-family conflict and family-to-work conflict will increase the behavioral, somatic and cognitive stress as well as strain.

Table 1. Correlation of the variables

Variables	Mean	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Work-to-Family Conflict	3.35	(.96)					
2. Family-to-Work Conflict	2.65	0.53**	(.95)				
3. Psychological Strain	1.82	0.12*	0.03	(.51)			
4. Behavioral Stress	2.05	0.51**	0.24**	0.18**	(.90)		
5. Somatic Stress	2.27	0.40**	0.19**	0.19**	0.57**	(.90)	
6. Cognitive Stress	3.26	0.52**	0.30**	0.11	0.66**	0.61**	(.92)

Note: \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \* $p < 0.05$ ; Cronbach Alpha coefficients are in the bracket on the diagonal.

## 4.2. Regression analysis

Table 2 below shows the regression analysis among the variables. The result indicated that overall work-family conflict explained 26% of the behavioural stress, 16% of the somatic stress and 27% of the cognitive stress. However, the work-family conflict domains did not significantly predict psychological strain.

Table 2. Regression analysis

Predictor	Standardized coefficients beta ( $\beta$ )			
	Behavioral stress	Somatic stress	Cognitive stress	Psychological strain
Work to family conflict	0.54**	0.42**	0.50***	0.15*
Family to work conflict	0.05	-0.36	0.04	-0.05
$R^2$	0.26***	0.16***	0.27***	0.02
F	46.35	25.64	47.56	2.27

Note. \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \* $p < 0.05$

Specifically, only work to family conflict gives a significant impact to behavioural stress ( $\beta=0.54, p<0.01$ ), somatic stress ( $\beta=0.42, p < 0.01$ ) and cognitive stress ( $\beta=0.50, p<0.01$ ). Work-to-family conflict found to be related to psychological strain ( $\beta=0.15, p<0.05$ ).

In summary, this study found that only work-to-family conflict affects stress and psychological strain. Family to work conflict did not predict stress and psychological strain.

## 5. Discussion

This study found that work-to-family conflict was highly correlated with stress and psychological strain compared to family-to-work conflict. This result is in line with the previous literature [6-7, 9] that stated work-to-family conflict is correlated more on well-being compared to family-to-work conflict. This study also found that work-to-family conflict has its influence on stress and psychological strain. However, family-to-work conflict did not influence both the outcome variables. These results suggest that work environment of lecturers contributes to the level of work-to-family conflict. This study is supported a study by Gmelch, Lovrich and Wilke [26] that reported 60 percent of the total stress among lecturer came from work. High self-expectation, finding financial support for research, insufficient time, low pay and striving for publication are among the most troublesome reported stressors [26]. Blix [27] also argued that conducting research,

teaching, being professional, and service related activities are contributing to the amount of perceived stress among academician. The Person-Environment Fit (P-E Fit) model explained the results of this study, where stress occurs from a misfit between the lecturer and the work environment [28]. Previous study also indicated that the spillover of work is stressful to the family [29]. Work conflict is the most important predictor of work-family conflict [29], which in turn lead to high level of stress and psychological strain.

This is supported by previous literature which found working life can provide individual with various types of work-stressor [5]. Previous literature documented that relationship existed between working life and stress perceived [30-32]. Stressors such as high job demands, role overload, role ambiguity and others had been proven as the source of stressors that lead to the augmentation of work to family conflict. When individuals experience high levels of job demands, they tend to have less time with their family. Sometimes, the stressor from work will interfere with family life. Family was found to be affecting working life lesser because they provide social support to the individual. As stated by Camman *et al.* [25], social support such as family support plays a role in buffering and maintaining the health and well-being. Within all types of social support, the family support may be considered as the strongest social support that can support individual emotionally and behaviorally.

In terms of implication, this study presents preliminary research on work-family conflict, stress and psychological strain from academic staffs in Malaysia. The study explains the level of stress and psychological strain among academic staffs in Malaysia. This study found that academic staffs in Malaysia have a similar conception about stress and psychological strain as their Western counterparts. Despite these similar conceptions, the way they react to stress may differ. From managerial implication perspective, this study suggests that university should create a better work environment in order to reduce the conflict between work and family role. The management level also needs to take a step in controlling stress at workplace in order to prevent work-family conflict from occurring. This is important to improve health condition and reduce the depleted performance among academic staffs.

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