A Qualitative Exploration of Role Salience among Malaysian Professional and Managerial Dual-Career Couples

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Abstract: This paper explores work and family roles salience in the context of dual-career couples in Malaysia. Semi-structured qualitative interviews has been conducted on 18 couples in professional and managerial position. The data were transcribed and analyzed using template analysis. The findings revealed that several factors namely culture, religious values, gender, work characteristics and personal preferences influence the couples’ role salience. Women tend to face more struggles to maintain the salience of both roles despite the fact that couples regard both roles to be central to their lives. Factors such as culture and religious values influence the couples’ role salience making them holding to traditional gender attitude and reduce the impact of family to work. Some couples are more affected with spouse work condition or personal preferences leading them to practice less traditional roles in their family arrangements. Conflicting views within couples also exist, which influence their challenges and satisfaction. This study adds to the work and family research using couple-level analysis in a non-Western context. The qualitative data gained has also enabled the study to extend the understanding on how the dynamic of the interaction between culture, religion, gender, work characteristics and personal preferences come into play to shape couples’ role salience and consequently their work-family experiences and perceptions.

Keyword: Role Salience, Work-Family Conflict, Dual-Career Couples

1. Introduction

The increase of professional and managerial women throughout the world has resulted in the prevalent of dual-career couples, where the husband and the wife share a family life together while at the same time pursuing professional careers. The dual-career couples refers to the type of workforce that involves men and women with high career involvement and, at the same time, trying to balance them with marriage and parenthood (Gordon & Wheelan-Berry, 2005). Juggling an increasingly demanding career and a busy home life inevitably led to work-family conflicts due to multiple roles demands (Baltes, Clark & Chakrabarti, 2010). The difficulties to fulfill demands from both domains also affect the capabilities for couples to be outstanding in both work and family roles. Thus, being in dual-career relationship will have an impact on their role salience and many studies have focused their attention on this matter (Abeysekera & Gahan, 2019; Lieke & Lautsch, 2016; Knežević, Gregov & Šimunić, 2016).

Although it is known that the intersection of work and family produce significant impact on couples’ lives, the effort to understand the interaction effects of work and family conflict between men and women using couple-level analysis are still scarce (Abeysekera & Gahan, 2019; Demerouti, 2012). The majority of works that include couples have been conducted in the Western perspectives (Kierner & Suutari, 2018; Petriglieri & Obodaru, 2019; Vieira, Matias, Lopez, & Matos, 2016) and studies in non-Western context are still under-researched despite the fact that the dynamics of work and family in these countries have also changed (Rahman, Mustaffa, Rhouse & Ab Wahid, 2016; Umukoro & Oboh, 2017). In Malaysia, the number of women entering paid work has risen significantly due to the greater educational opportunities that contribute to women’s career aspirations, as well as the increasing economic needs that proliferate the desire for a double income in many families (Abdullah, Noor & Wok, 2008). However, the literatures on work-family conflict in this country seem to focus more on working women, compared with investigation that includes both partners in dual-career marriages (Jamil, Piang, & Mahadir, 2018; Lian, 2017; Rahman et al., 2016). Hence, it was deemed appropriate to explore role salience in the context of couples to provide a more balanced perspectives of their experiences.

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 (e.g Cinamon et al., 2008; Greer & Egan, 2012; Van der Velde, Jansen, Bal & Van Erp, 2017). Role salience impacts peoples’ behaviour and decisions regarding their roles as employees and, therefore, has meaningful implications not only for employees but also for
organizations (Greer and Egan, 2012). Nevertheless, despite the abundant of research using role salience as the base, most of studies examined how role salience moderates and effects the experience of work–family conflict by focusing on only one member of a couple (e.g. Bagger, Li, & Gutek, 2008; Bagger & Li, 2012; Erdogan, Ozcelik & Bagger, 2019). In contrast, relatively less research has focused on role salience in the context of couples (Van der Velde, 2017). Hence, this study explores how being in dual-career marriage impacts the couples’ role salience and the factors that influence their role salience.

The Malaysian Context

In Malaysia, culture and religious values greatly influence the effect of combining simultaneously both work and family roles. For the Malay, the biggest ethnic group in Malaysia, adat and Islam are the two fundamental elements that formed the basis of the Malay value systems and ideologies (Kling, 1995). The Malay culture insists that a woman has to take care of her husband’s overall well-being and she who is obedient to her husband would receive great respect from the society (Noor & Mahudin, 2005). Hence, according to the traditional norms, women in Malaysia are expected to play the role of a wife, a mother and caretaker of family as well as managing the household affairs. Even though industrialization has increased the number of married employed women in this country, this has not relieved them of the burden of domestic labour and childcare since they are expected to carry the main responsibility for these tasks (Hashim & Omar, 2004). Until now, the belief that a woman’s primary role is in the home is still strong. Even professional women tend to carry out most of the domestic work and adopts various coping strategies to cope with it (Osman, Naidu, Piang & Mahflood, 2019). Employment is regarded as an extra role and not the primary role of women, and thus, contributes to lots of challenges for employed women in the workplace (Abdullah, Noor & Wok, 2008). The glass-ceiling syndrome has been identified to exist in different sectors in this country which found to inhibits the promotion of female managers, and becomes a barrier to the career development opportunities of women (Dimovski, Skerlavaj & Man, 2010; Rossenkhan, Chand & Ahmed, 2016). Nonetheless, despite social expectations and barriers in the workplace that impede married women’s career development, many are relieved from unfavorable experiences by certain elements within their culture, such as the claim that religion plays an important role in their lives and as a result, helps to reduce their stress and improve well-being (Achour, Nor & MohdYusoff, 2016; Noor & Mahudin, 2005).

As industrialization and modernization in the country progressed, cultural expectations towards gender attitude however, are subject to change in terms of experience and context. Many women are calling for more recognition for the housewife role and negotiate more participation from husbands and government has taken numerous measures and provide various family friendly policies to address the challenges (Rahman, 2018). But still, challenges from other forces mainly cultural values in the society and traditional norms incorporated in organizational arrangements, still become factors that place many dual-career women in a state of dilemma.

2. Literature Review

The concept of role salience was established by Super (1982) to represent the notion that all life roles are not necessarily of equal importance to a person. This notion of role salience or also known as role centrality (Martire et al., 2000), explains partially why individuals choose to behave the way they do within a social role, and why individuals experience an enriching effect of one role on the quality of life in another role (e.g., Greenhaus & Powell, 2006). Role salience is effective in generating understanding towards peoples’ perceptions on the importance of work and family roles in their lives and how they act to cope with the challenges in fulfilling their responsibilities. In general, both men and women have been found to rank their roles as spouse and parent at similar levels of importance, or salience 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 (Bosch, Geldenhuys & Bezuidenhout, 2018). Cimamon & Rich (2002a) and Erdogan, Ozcelik & Bagger (2019) reported that those who rated both work and family roles as highly salient had higher work-family conflict than those who placed family above career and corrective efforts to resolve threats to family roles often result in a disruptive impact on their work roles (Bird & Shnurmann-Crook, 2005). Thus, a common problem for dual-career couples is achieving a satisfactory balance in their commitment to family and work roles.

A number of macro and micro factors have been associated as predictors of role salience. These include demographic, individual differences, cultural differences and gender differences (Greer & Egan, 2012). Salami (2000) for example, found that socio-economic status was related to work-role salience and a study by Hartung et al. (2002) indicates that characteristics of a person’s family of origin affect role salience hierarchy. They suggest that people who perceive their family of origin as more functionally adaptable and cohesive, participates more in home and family roles in life. The extent to which people determines their salient roles may also be
influenced in part by gender (e.g. Budworth et al., 2008; Erdogan et al., 2019; Liu & Ngo, 2017). Cinamon & Rich (2002a), for example, found three profiles of workers who differ in attributions of importance to work and family roles. They are classified as persons who assign high importance to both the work role and the family role (“Dual” profile); participants who ascribed high importance to the work role and low importance to the family role (“Work” profile); and participants who attributed high importance to the family role and low importance to the work role (“Family” profile). They also found that men were distributed equally throughout the profiles, whereas women were underrepresented in the Work category and more women than men fit the Family profile, and more men than women fit the Work profile (Cinamon & Rich, 2002b). Biggs & Brough (2005), on the other hand, found that gender significantly moderated the relationship between role salience and conflict; with females experiencing more conflict as their level of family role salience increased. Erdogan et al. (2019). Found that people who organized their roles in a salience hierarchy and assigned greater salience to either the work or family role were found to experience less work–family conflict as compared to those assigning high levels of salience to both work and family or those assigning low levels of salience to both roles. They also found that organizing work and family roles in a salience hierarchy with a predominant non-traditional gender role is associated with less work–family conflict, especially for women.

Budworth et al. (2008) pointed out 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. Similarly, Abysekera & Gahan (2019) found that the salience that individuals in dual-earner couples attached to their respective work and family roles determined their partner’s experience of work-to-family and family-to-work conflict through crossover effects. They also found that the influence of couple-level crossover effects of work (family) role salience on an individual’s experience of W-F (F-W) conflict was greater for women than men. Although these studies have shown the impact of crossover among couples on their salience role, most of the research does not incorporate other macro-factors such as cultural and religious values that may also influence the couple’s perception of their salience role. Individuals’ work and family role saliences have been found to differ across different cultural milieus, especially in relation to gender role expectations (Abysekera & Gahan, 2019; Zhang, 2013). Therefore, it would be interesting to see how the interactions between spouses will influence their work and family role salience, particularly in an non-western context of research where literatures on dual-career couples are still limited.

3. Methodology

Research in work and family interface has been dominated by studies adopting cross-sectional, quantitative methodology (Beigi & Shir Mohammad, 2017). Qualitative methodology is regarded as appropriate in the context of work and family research to explore and discover what people think and feel, how they account for their experiences and actions, and what challenges they face. The value of in-depth interviewing for work and family studies derive from the ability to gain rich qualitative data about particular processes or subjects from the selected individuals (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). Moreover, since many daily work and family social processes are ordinary, routine and taken for granted, this method allows the researcher to discover hidden information (Webber & Byrd, 2010). Taking this into account, this study employs a qualitative methodology using semi-structured interviews. Additionally, previous literatures in this country also seem to focus on working women only and few studies includes both men and women in dual-career marriages (Rahman et al., 2018; Jamil et al., 2018). Given the lack of available literature on this particular population and the need to explore various views and experiences of dual-career couples, in-depth interviews with 18 couples have been carried out using a semi-structured questioning format. The selection criteria for the sample of the research were that each individual (male and female) had a position as a professional or at the management level and have at least one dependent child (below 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. The sampling method was purposive, as the sample was selected not to approximate representativeness but because the respondents are atypical in some way that specially equips them to be useful as study informants (Neuman, 2014). Interviewees for this research were selected by personal contacts and recommendations. The interviews were conducted face-to-face and couples were interviewed separately in order to ensure that their answers are not influenced by their spouses. Analysis of interviews was carried out using template analysis. Template analysis has been shown to be effective in studies that have involved the analysis of textual interview data to extrapolate and organise them including where the objectives have been to compare the perspectives of different groups of individuals (Brooks, McCluskey, Turley & King, 2015). This type of analysis was considered appropriate for this study where commonalities and different perspectives within and across the
couples were the focus. In presenting the findings, an approach that shows a thematic presentation of the findings, using different individual case-studies to illustrate each of the main themes was chosen. Pseudonym was used to protect the interviewees’ confidentiality. Direct quotes from the participants are used to facilitate the understanding of specific points of interpretation.

4. Findings

It was evident from the interview data that several factors emerged as significant in influencing the salience of work and family roles for the couples. Macro factors such as culture and religious belief as well as micro factors namely gender, work characteristics and personal preferences are revealed to be significant in affecting their role salience.

Culture and Religious Values Influencing Role Salience

Culture and religious values were found to be prominent in the lives of dual-career couples affecting them in many aspects including childcare. Coping with childcare was pointed out as one of the main challenges for dual-career couples. The participants in the study have reported how having children has impacted their lives in terms of timing. The following remark illustrates this point:

There is a bit. Last time if we have any urgent work to do, we could still stay back and do our job…but now, we really have to plan carefully. When I worked with a private company before this, if the boss says that I need to finish my work that means I really need to finish my work….I have to put aside my children. (Nazmi)

The comment by Nazmi highlights how the participants must shorten their working hours in order to meet their childcare responsibilities. This contrasts with before they were married, when they could spend more time in the office.

However, some interviewees in this study talked about how they perceive children as not giving any impact to their work. For example, a male interviewee said:

No…the child'sgifts from God, so I do not feelthey gave the burdenorimpact on my work…why should I feel that… (Nasrun)

Nasrun’s comment shows the strong influence of religion in protecting him from feeling the impact of children on his work. The Malays, are very much influenced by the Islamic values that regard children as a blessing because they view children as assets and gifts from God (Hashim & Omar, 2004). This view is also shared by some other participants who believe that it is work that impacts solely on their family life. As mentioned by a female respondent:

I do feel exhausted but I don’t think it spills over to my work. Just like the burden of housework, I think it is the opposite…it is the work that affects my family. Of course it is definitely tiring…like we have to get up at night to care for the children but I don’t think it affects my work. (Azalina)

Thus, although dual-career couples are usually associated with the need to have dual salience in both roles, the statement above shows that there are some respondents who have much higher salience in their family roles compared with their work roles. Azalina, stated that although she feels tired, she does not think that childcare affects her work at all. Instead, she thinks it is the work that affects her family life. Therefore, her high family salience is in line with her traditional views of the Malay culture regarding the roles of women, has alleviated the impact of family on work. Another female respondent, Zurita, shared her view in this way:

For me, since I work far from home, I do feel some effect on my children. For example, I do wish that before I go to work I have the time to prepare them for school and nursery, but since I have to rush to work every morning I don’t have the time to do that. So, after I make sure they have their shower, I have to leave them to my husband to prepare them to school and nursery. (Zurita)

Based on Zurita's statement, it can be concluded that she thinks her work is an obstacle to performing her duties as a mother and portraying a high salience in her family role. Therefore, even though her husband is involved actively in childcare, her statement reflects that she is not satisfied the impact of work affecting her family roles which affects her ability to perform her family roles.

Gender influencing Role Salience: Women Struggles to Maintain Dual Salience
Clearly, women in this study expressed how they face more struggle in fulfilling work and family demands compared to their spouses. They are perceived as the one who needs to exhibit higher salience in their family roles particularly in terms of domestic labour and child care. Shahril, for example, talked about how his wife showed greater roles in domestic work since he is working far from home.

Ermm, my wife carries more of the responsibility. She did it all by herself…I actually I salute her. She took care of children all by herself for seven years since I am always away, so she did most of the childcare. (Shahril)

While Shamira, also talked about her experience:

Based on experience before this, I am the one who handle most of the emergency cases since my husband work far from home. So even though how much busy I am, I still have to handle and of course since it is emergency I couldn’t argue about it with my husband. (Shamira)

In this respect, it is important to highlight that women participants are found to be working nearer to their children than the men.

Additionally, the statements from a couple Hafsham and Hanita, clearly indicate that the wife, Hanita, carries the burden of household chores more than Hafsham. As stated by Hanita:

When we work, we will be tired and it will affect the performance at home. You know…we have to do the laundry, teach the children…it's like we couldn’t perform. Teaching the kids for example, sometimes we can only do it up to one page…it's like we don’t have enough energy to do more than that. (Hanita)

In contrast, Hafsham claimed that he does not contribute much to the household tasks. He mentions:

Not really, because I don’t really use a lot of time to do housework but I can see the exhaustion in my wife, so now I'm thinking of having a backup for doing housework by finding someone who maybe can work based on hour. (Hafsham)

Therefore, the statement that he is not involved much in housework contributes to the fact that he is less impacted by the demands of housework in comparison with Hanita. This is further echoed by a male respondent who said:

I don’t think there is because like what I said just now, my housework is not that much…so there is not really any effect. (Rezuan)

Based on Hafsham's and Rezuan's statement, it can be inferred that the men themselves agree, that their wives are more affected than them by housework, since the women undertake more responsibility in this area. In fact, it was also stressed that Hafsham would prefer to hire someone else to help with the housework rather than increase his own participation. Hence, these comments reflect that traditional gender attitude and the view that women should show higher salience in family roles are still held strongly by these husbands, despite the wives having steady positions and income.

When certain circumstances arise such as when children fall ill, some couples reported that it is the mother who usually participates more in caring for them; thus, showing a higher salience in this family role compared with the father. This viewpoint is illustrated by the following comments by Lina and Shahril:

Yes, there are some effects because sometimes we have to take care of our children who are sick so we cannot go to work…because usually when the children are sick I am the one who will take care of them. But there used to be a time when my child had chicken pox, so we alternated to take care of our son…but I took care of them more, so it affects in that aspect. (Lina)

I don’t know…but I think maybe there is some effect on my wife. Sometimes there is, when the children are sick….admitted to the hospital, warded…and we have to send them at night. So usually, when our children are admitted to the hospital, my wife will take care of them and apply for leave. (Shahril)

The statements by this couple show that women are more affected in their work than their husbands, due to the time that they need to spend caring for their ill children. This also reflects that the couples hold to the fact that the woman are the main person responsible for childcare and the one who should be more salient in this
family role. None of the women interviewed mention about not having much problem maintaining dual salience since they are responsible much for the domestic work and childcare. The wives, therefore, face more struggles in striking a balance between jobs and domestic work.

**Work Characteristics Influencing Role Salience**

For some couples, work characteristics affects their role salience to a great degree. For example, some couples explain how their family role is more salient to their spouse due to the availability for childcare regardless of gender. One interviewee explained it this way:

If she has to work on Saturday, she will bring two of our children with her and I will take care of the other two. For example if she extra-curricular activities or in house training she will bring the kids with her. But if she got lots of teaching to do at school and needs to be focus, I will take care of my four children at home. (Zamri)

On the hand, Fatihah who work as a senior officer explain:

If there is an emergency, the maid will call me and I will inform my husband and tell my boss that I need to go back home. So whenever I received an emergency, I will not act alone. Instead I will contact my husband and we will decide on the level of the emergency….if I think I should go back, I’ll go back. If he needs to go back as well, then he’ll go back too. So we will look at the situation at the office, if at that time I couldn’t go back, then my husband will. (Fatihah)

While another participant commented that both she and her husband act together when there is an emergency: That depends...if the babysitter calls my husband and he couldn’t go at that time, I will go there by myself. If not, we will go together. (Mimi)

Thus, in contrast to some couples who conform to traditional division, these couples appear to place similar emphasis of salience on their work and family roles, and are more egalitarian in their attitude as their preference is to act together during an emergency, or rely on which of them is available at that particular time.

The work itself also presents an interesting point in terms of work-family role salience among the spouses. Some participants reported that the nature of the job makes their spouse’s job stand out more than them. Therefore, although they regard both work roles as equally important, the characteristics of their partner’s job makes their work role 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)

Although Nasrun prioritize both jobs, he has to make some sacrifice due to the nature of his wife’s job making him more noticeable in his family roles. 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:

Ever since I was appointed as the head of the department my job has been busy... so busy that sometimes even on the weekends I have meetings and workshops to attend. So my husbands have to stay at home and look after the children every time I’m not around…he cooks and does all the housework (Marina)

The above circumstance 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 example above, Marina’s husbands have to increase their family salience due to the absence of his wife at home, while Marina move her role of a worker higher in their role salience hierarchy due to their work commitments. Hence, this indicates how work characteristics have a significant impact on the salience of work and family roles in a couple’s life. For some couples, the double burden for women seem less prominent as men are also heavily involved in family roles.

**Personal Preference Influencing Role Salience**
Interestingly, some interviewees reported how their spouses or their own personal preference might influence the couples’ work and family salient. A female participant expressed how her husband is involved in all decisions, including those that are considered women’s things.

We will even discuss before making decision about the curtain for the house (laugh). I will say let’s do this…and he will say let’s do this. So… usually we will take the fair solution. I don’t know whether I am fortunate or not, but he even wants to take part in making decision in women’s thing. Even about shopping, he is the one who will go to the market and he will pick the vegetables. So, in a way, most of the decisions are made together. (Wardina)

I am the kind of person that cannot stand looking my house messy and dirty. So, before I go to bed at night I will make sure the house is clean and tidy. So, sometimes I even get up at night at 10 until 2 am to do the housework. Maybe people will think I am fussy… but for me cleanliness is important. (Shuhaidah)

The comments above show how these participants’ personal preferences influence the importance that they put on their family role, particularly those concerning household responsibilities. The impact of these not only applies to women, but can also be seen among male participants. One such instance is illustrated by the following remark:

Well, basically I am a person who likes to tidy up the house. So I think we divide it quite equally. Every morning I will iron all my kids uniform for school and also for my wife because she’s busy preparing the breakfast for children. Same goes for the cooking, if she comes back late from work, I will cook. Sometimes I feel lazy to take care of the baby so I will cook. I rather cook (laugh) because the baby will still cry if she’s with me so it is better if I do cooking and leave the baby with the mother… and I think the food taste just as nice as their mother’s dishes (laugh). (Zamri)

Zamri’s statement reflects that people like him will exhibit a more egalitarian attitude in terms of housework and high salience in family roles, due to his own character which likes to clean and tidy. Therefore, personal preference in this regard influences the extent to which couples share their roles in the division of domestic responsibilities, and the salience that they place on this.

Couples Presenting Opposing Views

Interestingly, this study has also discovered differences in terms of the couples’ perception towards their roles salience. For example, one partner may say that both work roles are highly salient, 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 work role is more important than hers, except in certain situations.

Well, in my perspective, my work role 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 work role 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, Azalina and Faris, who presented a completely contrasting 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 work role 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 career now. Therefore, for the time being, I consider her career to be more prominent. 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 work roles. Although Faris shows that he is less traditional in his view, Azalina, despite earning more than Faris, is influenced strongly by the Malay culture that insists that the male should be the main provider. This has also led her to believe that Faris should have a higher work salience as compared to her. 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.

5. Discussion

Previous literatures have indicated that dual-career men are typically more engaged in caring for their children compared with men in single-earner families (Fahlen, 2016; Kinsilä & Oinas, 2016). The couples in this study also reflected the same situation when some couples explained that the husbands have to be involved more in domestic work and child care due to the wives’ career demands. Nevertheless, women still appear to be more likely to experience dynamic conflict between their roles similar to prior literatures which pointed out how women are expected to give more commitment and participate more in home-related activities than men especially for countries with less institutional support for work-family reconciliation and more traditional gender norms (Abeysekera & Gahan, 2019; Fahlen, 2016). In this study, couples also highlighted the same experience when women interviewees revealed that some of them clearly have to place much higher salience on their family roles pertaining to child care and household duties. These women have to increase their home commitment and face more challenges in their work-family roles than their husband, particularly for those women whose husbands work far from home or work (or used to work) in another city or country. It was also revealed that couples who work far from each other tend to live closer to the wife’s workplace, thus, making the wives more occupied by the homemaker role.

Hence, the present study shows that the women participants have to give more commitment to home activities and illustrate the need to display a higher salience in family roles, compared with their spouses who have to show more commitment to work. The claim by some male respondents that they are too tired to work and have to face long working hours, leaving the housework mostly to the wives, indicates that they are comfortable with the attitude that relates the work roles as being important for them and housework for women. This signifies how they make sense of the different emphasis of salience for men and women in work and family roles. Wives are also framed as being more involved in caring for their sick children and more impacted when they have young children, similar to the prior research that working mothers receive more impact, especially for those with younger children (Ammons, Dahlin, Edgell & Santo, 2017; Wharton & Blair-Loy, 2006). These mothers explained that they are more affected in their time and commitment and, thus, juggling work and home demands seems to be difficult, especially for those who strive to maintain high salience in both work and family roles. Nevertheless, despite the challenges that seem to be affecting more women than men, some women perceived that children were not impacting their work life, as opposed to work which impacts their family, particularly for female participants who exemplify higher salience in their family roles than in work roles due to the influence of culture and religious values. The perceptions of these women are supports the argument by Bagger et al. (2008) and Erdogan et al., (2019) that people with high family salience might have a reduction in the negative impact of family on work experience, since the high family salient family buffers the negative effects of spill-over into the work domain. The current study also revealed that spouses may have different understandings of their involvement in childcare and career importance. In this regard, the differences in gender role attitude and a different emphasis of salience in certain roles may result in conflicting views of each spouse, and subsequently affect their challenges and satisfaction in this area.

The influence of religious values can also be found in aspects of childcare. For example, some interviewees highlighted the significant role of religious belief in addressing the impact of family commitment towards work; such as how children are regarded as ablessingfrom God and thus, caring for children is not regarded as exhausting on their worklife. It has been acknowledged that being Muslim, the Malay tend to have a larger number of children as compared to other ethnic groups in the country as a consequence of the influence of Islamic values (Hashim & Omar, 2004). Therefore, having children is regarded as something that is very valuable and somehow it protected some of the respondents from feeling any impact on their work.

It was also evident in the current research that couples’ work characteristics may impact upon couples’ role salience. Some male participants explained that they have to be more involved in domestic responsibilities than their spouses in certain circumstances, such as when the wives have to work outstation or are offered the opportunities to study abroad. Thus, these men feel they have to increase their family role salience due to the work demands of their wives. Therefore, the above circumstances are not just making the couples shift to a less traditional attitude with increased involvement of the husband in caring for the children, but also affecting
the centrality of their roles. Hence, although women traditionally will have a higher salience in family roles than men, certain situations particularly work demands of wives can alter the hierarchy of salience between husbands and wives. Thus, interviewees in this study construct the hierarchy of salience in work and family roles in the context of each spouse’s work situation. This finding extends the understanding that 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 (Budworth, 2008; Van der Velde et al., 2017). Therefore, the salience of the role of individuals within the couple may be shaped by their interactions with each other and each spouse have significant impact on each other’s career outcomes. It is also crucial to point out that the participants’ own personal preference, such as preferring someone else to make decisions or men enjoy doing women’s tasks, has a significant impact on the couples’ family arrangement. Hence, spouses may exhibit high salience in certain roles, or couples can become more or less traditional in their family arrangement due to their own personal preference.

In short, the experiences of Malaysian dual-career couples in regards to their role salience may be summarized in the following framework (refer Figure 1). Some macro and micro factors have emerged to be important in influencing the perceptions and experiences of Malaysian dual-career couples. Macro factors such as cultural and religious underpinnings can be observed in many aspects of work and family. Additionally, it was revealed that the couples highlighted some micro-factors such as to gender, work characteristics and personal preferences, as influencing their experiences. The Malay couples constructed these factors as having significant impact on their role salience, and therefore on their work and family experiences and perceptions.

**Role Salience**

Macro Factors
- Culture
- Religion

Micro Factors
- Gender
- Work Characteristics
- Personal Preferences

**Figure 1.** A Summarizing Framework on Malaysian Dual-Career Couples’ Role Salience

6. Conclusion

This study extends the literatures on dual-career couples in the non-Western context and deepen the utility of role salience as a framework to understand the context of dual-career couples. In line with societal change, dual-career men are reported to be more involved in domestic chores and couples have reported to display more roles sharing in their family responsibilities. Nevertheless, women still face more struggles and expected to show higher family salience as they are majorly responsible for household management. Different perceptions regarding their importance of their roles are also found to be exist within couples which subsequently impacts their challenges and satisfaction in their work-family domain. Some differences in their experiences which are mainly the result of the differences gender role attitude influenced by culture and religious belief especially when husbands are considered as the one who should portray higher work salience and alleviate the impact of family to work. Data gained from both spouses has enabled the study to explicate their experiences and create a clear picture on how the dynamic of the interaction between their couples’ role salience affect their work-family challenges and satisfaction. Furthermore, through the interviews conducted, this study manages to reveal how the work characteristics and personal preference of each spouse may affect their hierarchy of salience in work and family and, simultaneously the importance of their career. Thus, it is important to understand how various forces such as culture, religion, gender, work characteristics and personal preferences may simultaneously interact to influence couples’ role salience and their work-family experiences.
References

