

LOCUS OF CONTROL, SUPPORTIVE WORKPLACE POLICIES AND WORK-FAMILY CONFLICT

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The study examined the possible pathways by which locus of control influenced the relationship between workplace policies and work-family conflict. Initially, supportive workplace policies were predicted to be negatively correlated with work-family conflict. In a sample of 142 Malaysian employees combining work and family, results of the regression analyses showed that after controlling for demographic variables and locus of control, workplace policies were not related to conflict. More importantly, however, the results showed that locus of control had both direct and moderator effects on the relationship between workplace policies and work-family conflict. No mediation effect was found. The implications of these findings were discussed with respect to the literature on personality and workplace policies within the work-family linkage.

Key words: locus of control, workplace policies, work-family conflict, moderator, mediator

The last few decades have seen dramatic changes in the demographic characteristics and lifestyles of the workforce. The single most important change is the increase of women into the workforce, especially that of married women with children. With this change, in many countries, dual-earner families are fast becoming the norm.

These families face certain challenges that the traditional single-earner families do not. The most obvious is the “time bind” between the demands of work and family (Hochschild, 1997) or work-family conflict. This is experienced when demands from one role domain interfere with participation or performance of the other role (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). For example, when one devotes extra time and energy into the work role (or the family role), the family role (work role) is assumed to suffer. Two types of work-family conflict have been identified; work-interfering-with-family (WIF) and family-interfering-with-work (FIW). WIF conflict occurs when work-related activities spill over or interfere with home responsibilities (e.g., bringing work home and trying to complete them at the expense of family time) and FIW conflict arises when family-role responsibilities spill over or impede work activities (e.g., having to cancel an important meeting because a child is suddenly taken ill). Although strongly correlated with one another, they are conceptually and empirically distinct constructs (Duxbury, Higgins, & Lee, 1994; Frone, Russell, & Cooper, 1992). While the best predictors of WIF conflict are work-related variables, the antecedents of FIW conflict are mainly family-related variables (Frone, Yardley, & Markel, 1997; Kinnunen & Mauno, 1998).

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Due to this conflict between work and family, many dual-earner couples are seeking jobs that offer some sort of work-family alternatives and programs. Although pressure has been exerted on employers to be strategically responsive to the needs of the new workforce, research into personnel issues still indicate a lack of concern for family-related matters. Only in the last few years have there been concerted efforts on the part of the employer to implement policies that are considered responsive to family needs. This is deemed necessary due to the realization that all facets of an individual's life are integrated, and that work and life domains should be studied together within a common framework for a better understanding of people's lives (e.g., Barnett & Hyde, 2001; Frone et al., 1992; Greenhaus & Parasuraman, 1999). Because contemporary adults occupy various social roles, following identity theory, stressors that encumber role-related performance may influence individuals' well-being which may create a spillover effect and impede normal functioning in other roles.

The present study aims to integrate two areas of study; individual differences and workplace policies in the work-family linkage. Although individual differences have been extensively examined in the general literature on work and life stresses, it has not been considered much with respect to workplace policies. Specifically, the study examines the possible pathways by which control beliefs can impact upon the relationship between workplace policies and work-family conflict.

Workplace Policies and Work-Family Conflict

Workplaces are considered to be responsive to employee needs or "family friendly" when they (i) help employees manage the time pressures of being working parents by having policies such as vacation time, sick leave, personal leave, or flexible work schedules, or (ii) help employees meet their continuing family responsibilities through such programs as maternity and paternity leave, leave that can be used to care for sick children or elders, and child care or elder care (Marshall & Barnett, 1994).

Research on the effect of these benefits and programs on employees suggests that family-friendly workplaces do have some effects. For example, workers have found flexible work schedules to be positive (Pleck, 1992). Employees with flextime also report less work-family conflict and more time for home chores and family (Winett, Neale, & Williams, 1982). Marshall and Barnett (1994) showed that greater job flexibility is associated with greater job satisfaction and reduced work interference with family life. Thomas and Ganster (1995) tested and developed a model linking family supportive workplace policies and work-family conflict and strain outcomes. They found that family supportive programs such as flexible schedules and supportive supervisors were directly and indirectly related to work-family conflict. High levels of work-family conflict were related to strains such as job dissatisfaction and health complaints.

The recent review by Glass and Finley (2002) also tended to suggest that family-responsive policies in the areas of flexible scheduling, employer assistance with childcare, and parental leave positively impact both organizational and worker outcomes. However, as noted by Grover and Crooker (1995), the specific policy effects shown may be an artifact of employment in a generally more supportive and innovative workplace rather

than the effect of the policy itself. Or it could be that other factors, such as personal characteristics are also at play. One personal characteristic that seems particularly likely to impact upon outcomes in the workplace is control beliefs.

Locus of Control and Work-Family Conflict

Little attention has been paid to the effects of personality factors on work-family conflict. Only lately have researchers considered the role of individual difference variables in the work-family link (e.g., Carlson, 1999; Noor, 2003; Stova, Chiu, & Greenhaus, 2002). The study by Carlson (1999) showed that Type A and negative affectivity (NA) explained for significant additional variance beyond those attributed by the role variables (role ambiguity and role conflict) in the work and family domains. In addition, Stova et al. (2002) examined the mechanisms by which NA influenced work-family conflict and found that NA played both mediator and moderator roles in the relationship between role stress (job stress and family stress) and work-family conflict. The study by Noor (2002) used another personality variable that of locus of control, in the relationship between work-family conflict and well-being to examine the different pathways control can impact upon well-being. However, in this case, work-family conflict was considered as the antecedent, rather than the outcome variable.

Locus of control, the generalized belief on the part of the individual concerning the extent to which outcomes are determined by internal factors (such as personal effort and ability) as opposed to external ones (such as fate, chance or powerful others), is chosen as the personality variable of interest in this study. Past studies in the areas of both work and general life stresses have indicated the beneficial effect of internal control beliefs on well-being (e.g., Frese, 1989; Lefcourt, Miller, Ware, & Sherk, 1981; Ross & Mirowsky, 1989; Van der Doef & Maes, 1999). Following from this reasoning, a sense of control should be associated with less work-family conflict. While control is a personality trait, it may also reflect the degree to which individuals actually does have control over the environment. An individual learns through social interaction and personal experiences whether his/her actions and efforts affect outcomes or not.

In addition, locus of control has been shown to moderate the relationship between stress and mental health outcomes (Parkes, 1994; Wheaton, 1983). The review by Cohen and Edwards (1989) concluded that locus of control is the personality characteristic that provides the most consistent and the strongest evidence of stress-moderation. In this case, external control was found to act as a vulnerability factor. Having supportive workplace policies offers workers the opportunities to exercise initiative and independent judgment, giving them a sense of autonomy and control within the workplace. A sense of control originating within the workplace may promote feelings of efficacy and effectiveness in coping with the environment leading to less work-family conflict being experienced.

The Present Study

Although women account for only a third of the Malaysian labor force, their labor force participation rate has increased from 37.2 percent in 1970 to 44.5 percent in 2000 (Economic Planning Unit, 2001). With better educational and employment opportunities

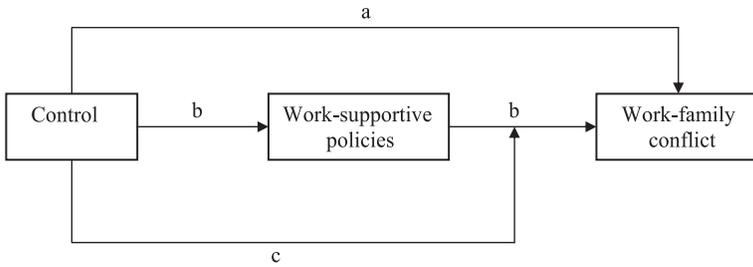


Fig. 1. Effects of control and workplace policies on work-family conflict.

(a) shows the direct effect of control on work-family conflict

(b) shows the effect of control on work-family conflict is mediated by work-supportive policies

(c) shows the moderator effect of control on the relationship between work-supportive policies and work-family conflict

and the realization that a one-wage earner is not enough to cater for the needs of the family, the trend for female employment is expected to continue.

In dual-earner families, although men are contributing more to the family, the home is still perceived to be the women's domain. Thus, relative to men, women experience more overload and work-family conflict because they spend more combined time on work and family activities (Frone et al., 1992; Hammer, Allen, & Grigsby, 1997).

Within the Malaysian work environment, although managers are aware of the dual roles assumed by employees (Abdul Halim, 2000), not much has changed in the workplace. Most organizations are still traditional in outlook in that they expect their employees to be available at all times to carry out the employer's bidding, although the composition of the work force has now changed. Both women and men are now employed with most having families to care for. Organizations in Malaysia do have their own workplace policies, which are established by the government and/or the Board of Directors of the company, and these operate as organizational laws and form part of the organizational culture. These 'family-friendly' policies, however, are mostly limited to paid leaves of absence, some medical coverage, and some child care facilities.

The purpose of the present study was to examine the possible pathways by which locus of control influenced the relationship between workplace policies and work-family conflict. On the basis of past findings, control beliefs have been shown to influence work-family conflict directly and indirectly. Therefore, the following hypotheses were examined. Fig. 1 graphically represents these hypotheses.

H1: Control would be directly related to work-family conflict.

H2: Control would moderate the relationship between workplace policies and work-family conflict such that those with high control beliefs would report lower levels of conflict as compared to those with low control beliefs.

H3: The effects of control beliefs on work-family conflict would be mediated via supportive workplace policies.

The present study also tested for the relationship between workplace policies and work-family conflict and this was hypothesized as follows:

H4: Supportive workplace policies would be inversely associated with work-family conflict; the higher the satisfaction with these policies, the lower the work-family conflict.

METHOD

Participants:

Participants were 142 employees at a higher educational institution in Malaysia. They included both male and female academics and administrative staffs (clerks and secretaries) with 37% academics and 63% administrative staffs. Their age ranged from 22 to 65 years with a mean of 35.95 years ($SD = 9.19$ years). There was about equal numbers of males and females (66 and 76, respectively). In terms of educational level, while the academics had at least a Master's degree, many of the administrative staff had only secondary schooling. Participants were all married, although 22.8% had no children. Number of children ranged from 1 to 7 (Mean = 2.3).

Measures:

Demographic/control variables. The participants' gender (coded 1 = males, and 2 = females), occupational group (coded as 1 = academics, and 2 = administrative staffs) and number of children below 5 years of age were entered prior to the study variables as controls. These variables were controlled for because previous studies have indicated that they may confound the relationship between the study variables and outcome. For example, past findings have shown women to experience and report more work-family conflict than men (e.g., Hammer et al., 1997; Lundberg, Mardberg, & Frankenhaeuser, 1994), and that occupational group as well as the number of children below 5 years have been associated with more overload and conflict (e.g., Lundberg et al., 1994).

Locus of control. Locus of control was assessed by the 12-item control measure of the Occupational Stress Indicator (OSI, Cooper, Sloan, & Williams, 1988). The items used a six-point Likert response scale ranging from 1 to 6 (1 = "strongly disagree" and 6 = "strongly agree") with high scores denoting greater perceived control over one's environment. Sample items for the scale include 'With enough effort it is possible for employees generally, to have some influence over top management and the way they behave' and 'It is not possible to draw up plans too far ahead because so many things can occur that make the plans unworkable'. The alpha coefficient of the scale for the present study was .67.

Policies. Two workplace policies were measured; a general workplace policy that was deemed employee-supportive and a specific policy relating to leave. The general workplace policy measure used in the study was derived from a combination of the existing government policies and those practiced by other international organizations (Gomez-Mejia, Balkin, & Cardy, 2001). This measure consisted of a 12-item checklist on pay (job-salary equity, bonus scheme, salary increment), job conditions (job description, employee empowerment, flexible working hours, promotion, employee welfare), services (child care centers, counseling services), and facilities (training, recreational facilities).

The specific leave policy, on the other hand, was made up of four items pertaining to four types of leave; maternity leave, paternity leave, employee sick leave and grievance/compassionate leave.

Participants were asked to indicate their satisfaction with each of the items on the two measures using a five-point Likert response scale ranging from 1 to 5 (1 = "not at all" and 5 = "very much indeed"). Cronbach alphas for the general workplace policy and the specific leave policy were .88 and .62, respectively.

Work-family conflict. Work-family conflict was assessed by the 22-item work-family conflict scale developed by Kelloway, Gottlieb, and Barham (1999). Although the scale distinguishes between WIF and FIW conflicts and between strain-based and time-based conflicts, in the present study distinction was only made between WIF and FIW conflicts because a factor analysis carried out to check for differences in the underlying factor structure failed to detect differences between time-based and strain-based conflicts. The items used a four-point Likert response scale (1 = "never", 4 = "almost always"), with higher scores indicating higher conflict. Sample items for the WIF conflict scale are 'Job demands keep me from spending the amount of time I would like with my family' and 'I do not listen to what people at home are saying because I am thinking about work'. For FIW conflict scale, sample items include 'When I am at work, I am distracted

by family demands' and 'Things going on in my family life make it hard for me to concentrate at work'. The alpha coefficients for the WIF and FIW conflict scales (each with 11 items) were .91 and .90, respectively.

Statistical Treatment

Multiple regression analysis was used to examine the role of control beliefs separately for the two outcome measures, WIF and FIW conflicts.

A significant additive term for control would indicate a direct effect. To test for control as a mediator, the paper by Baron and Kenny (1986) was referred to. Using regression analysis, three steps were recommended. First, control must be shown to be correlated with both measures of workplace policies and work-family conflict. Second, when the conflict measure was regressed onto workplace policies, workplace policies must significantly predict work-family conflict. In the final analysis, conflict was simultaneously regressed onto both control and workplace policies. If, in this final analysis, control was reduced to an insignificant level, then workplace policies would be seen to be the mediator.

To test for control as a moderator, the cross-product term between control and workplace policies were entered into the regression analysis after both control and workplace policies had been entered as main effects (Cohen, 1978). To facilitate interpretation of the interaction term, the continuous independent variables were standardized before analysis.

The regression analysis was carried out as follows for each of the conflict measure. At Step 1, the demographic/control variables of gender, occupational group and number of children below 5 years, were entered. At Step 2, control was entered alone and it tested the direct effect of control beliefs on work-family conflict. Both workplace policy measures were entered in Step 3, and the mediator effect of control would be supported if the initially significant control effect became insignificant when workplace policies were entered into the equation. The final Step 4 tested the interaction terms between control and workplace policies and it examined the moderator effect of control.

RESULTS

Means, Standard Deviations and Intercorrelations of Measures

The means, standard deviations and Pearson intercorrelations of measures used in the regression analysis are shown in Table 1. As can be seen from the table, control is correlated negatively with both work-family conflict but not with the policy measures. The two outcome measures were positively correlated with one another, each accounting for 39.69% of the variance in the other.

Hierarchical Regression Analysis Predicting WIF Conflict From Demographic Variables, Control Beliefs and Workplace Policies

Table 2 (left-hand side) presents the results of this analysis. At Step 1, only the demographic variable of occupational group was related to WIF conflict; academics reported lower WIF conflict. Step 2 showed that locus of control was a significant and negative predictor of WIF conflict, $\beta = -.23, p < .05$. No mediator effect was observed as evidence by the strong direct effect of control when it was entered with the workplace policy measures at Step 3. However, the interaction terms between control and both work policies, entered at Step 4 contributed significantly to the total explained variance, $\Delta R^2 = .117, p < .01$. Thus, control acted as a moderator in the relationship between workplace policies and WIF conflict. The final model was significant, $F(8,83) = 5.01, p < .0001$, and it explained for 37.4% of the variance in WIF conflict.

Graphical representations of the interaction terms. Following the method described

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations and Intercorrelations of Measures

Measures	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Occupational group	1.63	.49							
2. Gender	1.53	.50	.17*						
3. No. of children < 5 years	.95	.91	.08	.07					
4. Control	50.09	6.62	.11	.06	.16				
5. Leave policy	13.68	2.50	-.13	.09	-.01	.03			
6. Workplace policy	44.05	8.15	-.12	-.08	-.14	.12	.57**		
7. WIF	23.78	6.66	-.30**	-.19*	-.08	-.23**	-.21*	-.22*	
8. FIW	20.48	6.17	-.07	.04	-.01	-.31**	-.10	-.00	.63**

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Notes: Occupational group was coded 1 (academic) and 2 (clerical/secretarial); Gender was coded 1 (males) and 2 (females).

Table 2. Regression Estimates Predicting Work-Family Conflict

Variable	Dependent var. = WIF conflict				Dependent var. = FIW conflict			
	β step 1	β step 2	β step 3	β step 4	β step 1	β step 2	β step 3	β step 4
Demographic variables								
Occupational group	-.34**	-.29**	-.31**	-.24**	-.07	.00	-.00	.06
Gender	-.14	-.16	-.18	-.19	.08	.05	.05	.04
No. of children below 5 yr	-.04	-.08	-.10	-.07	-.03	-.09	-.09	-.05
Work Control (WC)		-.23*	-.27**	-.27**		-.36**	-.35**	-.34**
Policies								
Leave (PL)			-.05	-.11			-.04	-.07
Work condition (PW)			-.19	-.09			.04	.16
Interactions								
WC \times PL				.28*				-.16
WC \times PW				-.46***				.47**
ΔR^2	.152*	.051*	.054	.117**	.010	.119**	.001	.135**

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

by Cohen and Cohen (1983), the unstandardized regression coefficients were used to create the regression equation predicting WIF conflicts. For the leave policy \times work control interaction (PL \times WC), equations predicting WIF conflict from leave policy were derived for high and low levels of work control (1 standard deviation above the mean or +1 *SD*, and 1 standard deviation below the mean or -1 *SD*). Fig. 2 shows the form of this

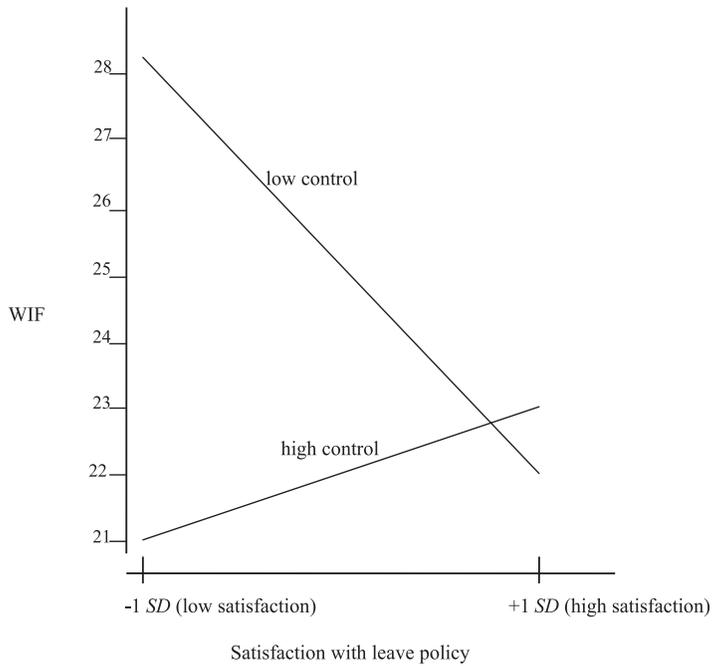


Fig. 2. The relation between leave policy and WIF conflict for high and low levels of work control.

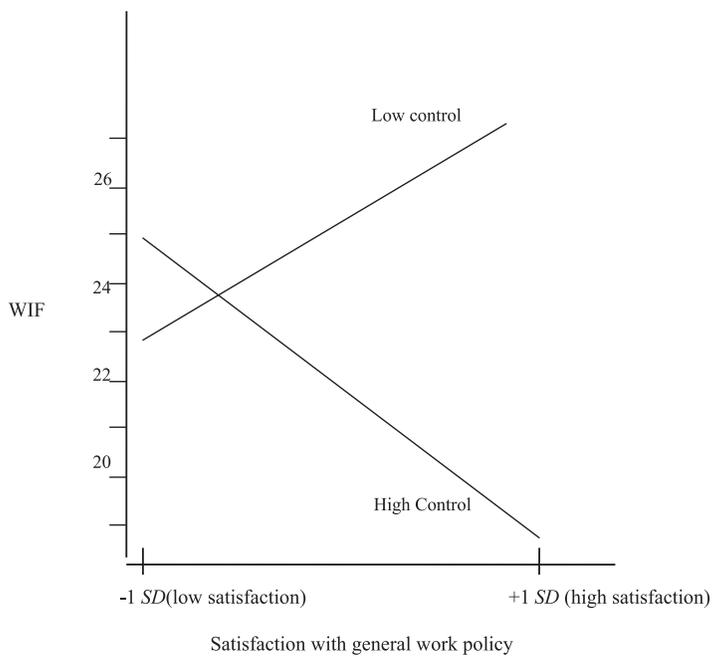


Fig. 3. The relation between work policy and WIF conflict for high and low levels of work control.

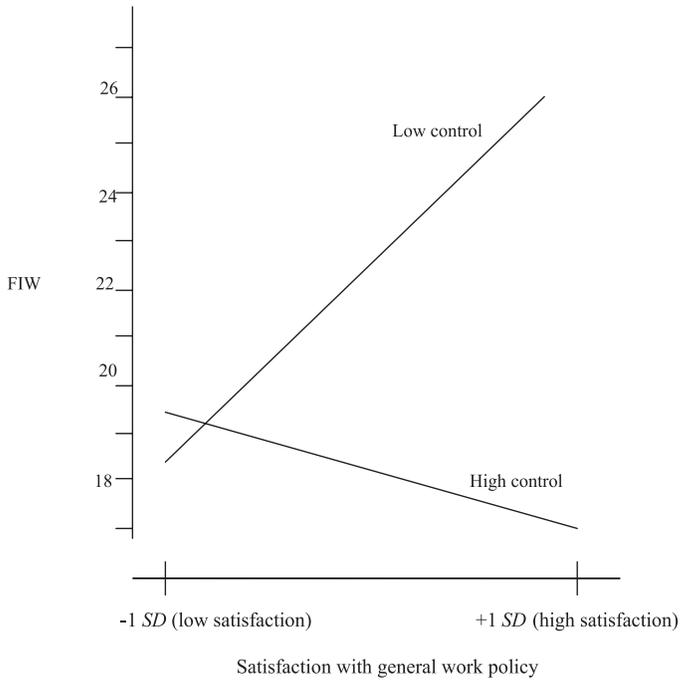


Fig. 4. The relation between work policy and FIW conflict for high and low levels of work control.

interaction. It can be seen that the relationship between satisfaction with the leave policy measure and WIF conflict was significant only for those with low control beliefs. Therefore high control mitigated the adverse effects of dissatisfaction with leave policy on WIF conflict.

Using similar analysis, Fig. 3 shows the form of the work policy \times work control interaction term (PW \times WC). The figure shows that individuals scoring high control/high satisfaction with workplace policy and low control/low satisfaction with workplace policy reported the lowest level of WIF conflict.

Hierarchical Regression Analysis Predicting FIW Conflict From Demographic Variables, Control Beliefs and Workplace Policies

Table 2 (right-hand side) shows the results of this regression analysis. None of the demographic variables were related to FIW conflict. Locus of control, entered at the next step, was negatively related to FIW conflict, $\beta = -.36$, $p < .01$; i.e., those with internal control beliefs reported lower FIW conflict scores. No mediator effect was found; control remained highly significant when the workplace policy measures were entered into the equation at Step 3. At the final step, the interaction between control and the general workplace policy was significant. The overall model was significant, $F(8,83) = 3.02$, $p < .006$, and it accounted for 26.6% of the variance in FIW conflict scores. Thus, only the direct and moderator effects of control were observed for both outcomes.

Fig. 4 gives the graphical representation of the work policy \times work control (PW \times WC) interaction term predicting FIW conflict. As can be seen, the relation between the general workplace policy and FIW conflict is significant only for those with low control beliefs.

DISCUSSION

Results showed that after controlling for demographic variables (occupational group, gender and children below 5 years of age) and locus of control, both measures of workplace policies were not related to work-family conflict. Past studies of this relationship have not considered the role of personality variables. As shown by studies of roles and well-being (e.g., Amatea & Fong, 1991; Noor, 1996) personality variables explained for substantially more variance in the well-being measures than the role variables themselves. In addition, after controlling for personality and demographic variables, the role variables accounted for little variance in the outcome measures. Thus, the observed significant association between the policy and conflict measures reported in past studies may be due to confounding by these personality characteristics. And, when these variables are controlled for, as shown in the present study, the relationship between the policy measures and work-family conflict becomes insignificant. Or, it could be that there are other variables not considered in the study that are better predictors of the relationship between workplace policy and work-family conflict. For example, one's marital situation and spouses' attitudes may have more influence on how one feels about managing role conflict and one's ability to even use available workplace policies to manage roles. Even when supports are available, some individuals may still experience conflict.

The results also showed that locus of control had both direct and moderator effects on work-family conflict. No mediator effect was found.

Locus of control was a strong direct predictor of both WIF and FIW conflicts. Previous studies have shown the beneficial effect of control beliefs on well-being (e.g., Ross & Mirowsky, 1989; Van der Doef & Maes, 1999). This study, in particular, showed that even with work-family conflict as the outcome measure, having an internal control belief is advantageous. Thus, everyone would benefit from enhanced levels of control. Although the study used workplace control as a measure a locus of control, it can be seen that such workplace control may spill over to promote feelings of efficacy and effectiveness in coping with the environment so that both levels of WIF and FIW conflicts are reduced.

As observed by past studies (e.g., Cohen & Edwards, 1989; Parkes, 1994; Wheaton, 1983), control moderated the relationships between the workplace policy measures and WIF and FIW conflicts, respectively. With respect to WIF conflict as the outcome, both policy measures interacted with locus of control. The interaction between control and leave policy showed a vulnerability model of interaction, where, the relationship is such that WIF conflict is highest when low control is combined with low satisfaction of the

existing leave policy. Conversely, the interaction can be viewed as one in which high control, the adaptive personality characteristic, acts to buffer the positive relation between stressor and WIF conflict. Thus, individuals low on control beliefs are more vulnerable to the effects of a stressful workplace leave policy than others (Parkes, 1990). The relationship between control and the general workplace policy, on the other hand, showed more of the person-environmental fit model of interaction where those with high control/high satisfaction with work policy and low control/low satisfaction with work policy, experience lower levels of WIF conflict. These two points representing a match between control (personality) and work policy measure (environment) are associated with lower conflict than points which represent a mismatch.

With respect to FIW conflict as the outcome measure, only the interaction between control and work policy is significant. The form of the interaction showed that only those with low control are affected; with the highest level of FIW conflict being reported by those with high satisfaction on the general workplace policy. This suggests that although these individuals are satisfied with the workplace policy, being externals they are unable to make use of the supportive situation to reduce the FIW conflict.

No mediator effect of control was observed. It may be that the workplace policy measures used may not be the most appropriate variables to assess for the indirect effect of control on conflict. More specific workplace policy measures pertaining to child care, flexible work schedules may be more suitable as opposed to the general work policy measured in the present study.

The present study used only one personality variable, that of locus of control. Other personality variables should also be considered. While Carlson (1999) examined both negative affectivity and Type A behaviour and found that the latter had a significant effect on only behaviour-based conflict (as opposed to time-based and strain-based conflicts), Stova et al. (2002) showed that negative affectivity had both mediator and moderator effects on work-family conflict. Thus, incorporating personality variables into the work-family linkage can provide a better understanding of the influence of these factors. In addition, it provides a more comprehensive model in examining personality and situational factors, together with their interactions, on the work-family linkage.

The study used two measures of workplace policy, a general workplace policy (consisting of pay, job conditions, services and facilities) and a specific policy relating to leave. This was done because in most work organizations in Malaysia, except for leave policy, others are either not well developed or non-existent. In fact, part-time work is almost absent although the government is trying to make it a strong case in order to attract more female workers into its workforce. Therefore, a general workplace policy is more meaningful than specific ones relating to flexible work schedules, child care on site, etc.

These findings, however, should be considered within certain constraints. First, the design of the study was cross-sectional and causal relationships cannot be ascertained. It was assumed that locus of control as a personality variable preceded the outcome measures, rather than the reverse based on previous findings (e.g., Frone et al., 1992). In addition, the sample was made up of employees from only one educational institution that was generally more educated than the general population of employees. The sample was

also made up of employees who volunteered to participate, making them somewhat different in some aspects from those who did not respond. However, bearing these limitations, the findings of the study indicated that after controlling for demographic variables (occupational group, gender and children below 5 years of age) and locus of control, workplace policies were not related to work-family conflict. Locus of control was found to have both direct and moderator effects on work-family conflict. However, no mediator effect was observed. Individual differences in terms of personality variables should be incorporated in future studies examining the work-family interface.

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