

## **Work Challenges and Coping Strategies of Professional and Managerial Dual-Career Couples in Malaysia**

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### **Abstract**

This paper investigates the challenges of work and coping strategies of professional and managerial dual-career couples in Malaysia using gender role ideology and role salience theoretical framework. Semi-structured qualitative interviews were used to collect data from 23 dual-career couples. The findings identified a number of work challenges faced by the couples such as heavy workloads, long working hours, working away from home, coping with supervisors and the working environment. Evidently, some helpful support and strategies have also been found to help these couples to cope with the challenges such as having a domestic helper, receiving support from family, colleagues and supervisors, and having a flexible working arrangement. Moreover, some useful strategies are also found to be useful to the couples, such as psychological approaches, separating work from family and having good organization and prioritizing skills. The experiences described by the participants reflect their gender role attitude and salience of family and work roles. This paper fills the gap in Malaysian literatures which focus more on women instead of investigation that includes both husband and wife. This study also adds more research on dual-career couples in a non-Western context which are generally lacking. Furthermore, it extends the joint use of gender role ideology and role salience perspectives in examining the context of couples by exhibiting its utility in understanding the Malaysian couples' experiences.

**Keywords:** Work Challenges, Coping Strategies, Gender Role Ideology, Role Saliency, Dual-Career Couples

## **1.0 Introduction**

The steady growth of women's participation in the workforce has marked the rise of dual-career couples in which both spouses share a family life whilst having careers. Dual-career couples are likely to face pressures due to the need of fulfilling their work and family responsibilities. As career and family tensions are thrust into high relief, they have important implications for organizations too, since conflicts are transferred inevitably from home to work and vice versa (Kelly et al., 2011; Linehan and Walsh, 2001).

The majority of works on dual-career couples have been conducted in the US and Western countries (e.g Bures et al., 2011; Kansala et al., 2014; Livingston et al., 2013; Sprunt et al., 2014). Attempts to examine the dynamics of this family model across cultures, especially in developing countries, are generally lacking, despite the fact that the dynamics of work-family have also changed in these countries (Karimi, 2009; Quek & Knudson Martin, 2008; Valk & Srinivisan, 2011). Taking these factors into account, the present research sets out to investigate the challenges of dual-career couples in Malaysia. In this country, however, there have been very few empirical investigations related to dual-career couples. Studies that have been conducted focused only on the antecedents and consequences of work-family conflict (e.g Komarraju, 2006; Nasurdin & Khor, 2008; Tam, 2008). Furthermore, literatures in Malaysia seem to focus more on working women, compared with investigation that includes both men and women in dual-career marriages (e.g; Abdullah et al., 2008; Abidin et al., 2009; Hashim, 2004; Ismail & Ibrahim, 2007; Noor & Mahudin, 2005). Hence, it was deemed appropriate to examine the challenges of work in the context of couples in Malaysia.

The study adopts gender role ideology and role saliency as its theoretical foundation. Gender roles are those behaviours and attitudes prescribed and assigned to males and females by the broader culture solely on the basis of gender (Bartley et al., 2005). Women and men vary in their individual views concerning appropriate behaviours for the sexes in the paid work and family domain (Corrigall & Konrad, 2007). Conceptually, gender role orientation is seen as ranging on a continuum from traditional to non-traditional. Traditional roles are those that see the roles of men and women as distinct and separate, whereas non-traditional gender role orientation is characterized by role sharing between men and women (Ahmad, 1999). Additionally, this research expands the theoretical framework by adding another perspective; namely, role saliency. In this perspective, people are viewed as being engaged with various roles, and role saliency denotes the relative importance or "the degree to which a given role stands out from others played" (Super, 1982). One pivotal aspect of role saliency is its influence on how people will fulfill their responsibilities in family and organizational roles. Cinamon and Rich (2002) have demonstrated the importance of examining the relative saliency of both work and family roles to understand work-family conflicts and challenges. Role saliency impacts peoples' behaviour and decisions regarding their roles as employees and, therefore, has meaningful implications for employees and organizations (Greer and Egan, 2012). Saliency concerning the different roles that individuals enact in society is particularly suited as a framework for examining the conflict between work and family roles (Greenhaus & Powell, 2003). Hence, the present study extends the use of the two perspectives in examining the context of couples by exhibiting its joint use in understanding the Malaysian couples' experiences.

Thus, using the theoretical frameworks of gender role ideology and role salience, the research aims to provide a comparison between the perceptions and experiences of Malaysian dual-career couples and dual-career couples in the West in relation to the work challenges and support to combining careers and family life. Research examining the experiences of dual-career couples across cultures will not only enrich literature in this area but will also provide practitioners with knowledge about universal and culturally-specific work-family experiences. Furthermore, by linking two different theoretical perspectives, this study aims to show their utility in examining the context of couples and providing a comprehensive framework that is effective in scrutinizing the complexities of their entwined lives. Interviewing both couples and incorporating couple-level analysis, also presents a valuable method to describe the dynamics and the interplay of gender role attitude and role salience in their life.

## **2.0 Literature Review**

### **2.1 Work Challenges**

Although the burden of family responsibilities falls largely on women, both partners in dual-career relationships are affected to some extent by overload and conflict from multiple roles (Byron, 2005; Eby et al. 2005; Elloy & Smith, 2004). This situation is often worsened by the expectation that committed employees should visibly put in long hours at the workplace (Santos & Cardoso, 2008; Swanberg, 2004; Wharton & Blair-Loy, 2006). The long-hours' work culture that prevails in many organizations renders the conciliation between work and family, and parenting in particular, a very difficult endeavour (Acker & Armenti, 2004; Doherty & Manfredi, 2006; Jacobs & Winslow, 2004). There is an evidence that long (full-time) work hours are likely to increase work-family conflict and is associated with relationship difficulties with partners and children (Allan et al., 2007; Byron, 2005; Barnett, 2006; Wharton & Blair-Loy, 2006). Working long hours, which is one of the expected behaviours in contemporary organisations (Swanberg, 2004), is consistently associated largely with reduced work and life satisfaction (Pocock et al., 2007).

Work overload is also associated frequently with increased pressure on dual-career couples. In fact, it has emerged as the strongest predictor of work-life conflict (Byron, 2005; Skinner & Pocock, 2008). Work overload is likely to have a dual effect on work-life conflict; high workloads are likely to increase work hours and contribute to feelings of strain and exhaustion (Frone et al., 1997). In addition, there is good evidence that highly demanding jobs that lack control over work scheduling have detrimental outcomes for the well-being of individuals and their families (van der Doef & Maes, 1999). Furthermore, high workloads have also been identified as an important block to the uptake of work-family policies. For example, pursuing certain policies, such as taking time off, would only increase the stress levels due to the build-up of work (Waters & Bardoel, 2006). Thus, developing and implementing strategies to address work overload is challenging since work intensification is becoming a common phenomenon across countries (Green, 2004; Skinner & Pocock, 2008).

The rigid work arrangements by most organisations are also incompatible with family life and this may contribute to the difficulties and stress of the dual-career lifestyle (Anderson et al., 2002; Pocock et al., 2007). Lack of availability of flexible working hours was a key issue cited by female workers in their decision to leave their jobs (Smith & Secombe, 1998). Inflexibility in work schedules also had deleterious consequences for child well-being and family life in general (Bianchi & Milkie, 2010). Such concerns led initially to the emergence of a family-friendly agenda, in which policies focused on supporting employees in combining work and family pressures, developing an emphasis on achieving work-life balance or work-life

integration, often via flexible working mechanisms (Atkinson & Hall, 2009). Having to face numerous work problems and challenges, has led dual-career couples to utilize various kinds of coping strategies and supports. In the subsequent section, these strategies and supports will be discussed further.

## **2.2 Coping Strategies**

A particularly interesting matter in the dual-career couples' research has been an inquiry into the strategies used by the couples in their attempts to manage work and family. Dual-career partners reported using a variety of individual emotion and problem-focused strategies (Bird & Schnurmann-Crook, 2005; Higgins et al., 2010). Emotion-focused coping is aimed at regulating reactively one's emotions in the face of a stressful situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Middleton, 2004). This coping strategy might include thinking positively (Bird & Schnurmann-Crook, 2005) and managing psychological strains by working harder and sacrificing personal well-being for that of the family (Becker & Moen, 1999; Middleton, 2004). Problem-focused coping, in contrast, is aimed at taking action to affect the nature of the person-environment transaction (Higgins et al., 2010). It includes analysing work problems or dividing work problems into smaller and more manageable segments (Bird & Schnurmann-Crook, 2005). In the context of family coping, problem-focused strategy might include restructuring family roles to accommodate family members' demands, restructuring work roles to accommodate family demands or hiring outside help (Middleton, 2004; Bird & Schnurmann-Crook, 2005).

In the context of dual-career couples, Becker & Moen (1999) found that women tend to engage in problem-focused strategies through scaling back strategies, such as placing limits on work responsibilities; defining their work as a job rather than a career; and trading off as the primary breadwinner, particularly during childrearing years. Many women workers in the US, Australia and the Netherlands, for example, scale back from full-time to part time work, reduce their work hours to fit family schedules, such as school hours, or leave the workforce altogether when their children are young (Barnett & Gareis, 2002; Pocock, 2001; Bosch et al., 2010). In doing so, women join the "mommy track", effectively sidelining their chances for career advancement for the sake of their families (Bowes, 2005).

Dual-career couples were also reported to depend on social support (Allen, 2001; Marcinkus et al. 2007). Research suggests that social support in the workplace, such as the support of supervisors and co-workers, has a positive impact on work outcomes (Allen, 2001; Marcinkus et al. 2007), while social support outside work, such as that provided by spouses, friends and helpers, have a positive impact on work-family balance (Carlson & Perrew, 1999; Marcinkus et al., 2007; Ezzedeen & Ritchey, 2009). Hence, social support has positive consequences for reducing stress and mitigating work and family challenges (Deelstra et al. 2003; Marcinkus et al. 2007; Grady & McCarthy, 2008). Overall, dual-career couples make use of various types of strategies as well as relying on different kinds of support in order to cope with their problems and challenges. As mentioned before, couples in different countries might have different experiences due to cultural values and thus, it is important within the present study to identify the work challenges and coping strategies used by the Malaysian couples.

## **3.0 Methodology**

The limited studies conducted on dual-career couples in Malaysia are found to adopt quantitative methodology and focus on testing pre-formulated hypotheses. (for instance, Ahmad, 2008; Komarraju, 2006; Nasir & Amin, 2010; Nasurdin & Khor, 2008; Tam, 2008).

Furthermore, previous literatures in this country also seem to focus on working women compared with investigation that includes both men and women in dual-career marriages (e.g. Abdullah et al., 2008; Abidin et al., 2009; Hashim, 2004; Ismail & Ibrahim, 2007; Noor & Mahudin, 2005). Therefore, semi-structured interviews were chosen for this study as they provide the opportunity to explore the people's lives and the contexts in which they make decisions and yield "thick description" of social life (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). Studies that have gained data directly via interviews with dual-career couples have proven to produce rich and illustrative accounts of their experiences (e.g. Ba', 2008; Radcliffe, 2013; Such, 2002). The research does not aim to provide a generalised picture of the Malaysian couples, but rather to gain understandings and garner new insights into dual-career couples to be assessed in a new light.

The selection criteria for the sample of the research were: (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). Participants were chosen against these criteria due to several reasons. Firstly, the research centres on couples who engage with professional and managerial positions. Owing to the fact that dual-career couples are defined as couples who are involved in occupations with a developmental sequence, which require a high level of commitment and are highly personally salient to the occupants, the sample was more likely to be professionals and managers because they are more likely to be dual-career couples. 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, as explained in the literature review, 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. Thus, these couples would represent a meaningful context of work-family tension.

Analysis of interviews was carried out using template analysis, a qualitative technique for the thematic organisation and analysis of textual data as described by Crabtree and Miller (1999). This approach involves using codes to serve as a template for data analysis (Robson, 2002). In presenting the findings, the study chose an approach that shows a thematic presentation of the findings, using different individual case-studies to illustrate each of the main themes. Direct quotes from the participants are used to aid the understanding of specific points of interpretation (King, 2004). Protection of the participants in the reporting and representation of the analysis was ensured by replacing the participants' names with pseudonyms.

#### **4.0 Findings**

The participants in the study expressed how they enjoy their work and are happy to have jobs that match their interests. However, despite this, they remain burdened by heavy workloads. The situation is tenuous when their partners are also oppressed by compact work activities. This matter is reflected in one couple's comments:

Working at my place now, I get lots of experiences because now I am into policy making...but I do feel that work is too compact. Sometimes I fill out the leave form but my application is denied. Even when I am on leave sometimes they would ask me to go to the office for some important work. Sometimes I feel like going for overseas holidays so that they will not disturb me... (Shuhaidah)

Her husband also commented on his busy work life:

I have to travel a lot for my work, even now I have to go Lumut, Terengganu...Singapore. I don't have much time with the family because once a week I must travel somewhere. Sometimes my wife is annoyed too ...what can I do... (Shahril)

Obviously, the heavy workload and the bustle of dual-career couples have impacted on their family spheres. Comments from this couple show clearly how their busy work life has interfered with their family time, giving them less time to commit to their family. In a way, this might distract them from being more committed to their family demands and so on, portraying a high salience in their family roles.

The interference is also reported to affect the lives of the respondents at home. Some have explained how the pressures of completing assignments have caused them to bring work home after office hours. The following quote illustrates this point:

...I have to manage 3 departments. We have lots of meeting and sometimes outside of the office...and back at the office I have more work to do...so if I couldn't finish my job in that time I have to bring my work back to home. But if I bring my work home, I have to settle my housework first...tidy up, make sure the children have their dinner, check on their school bags...and only after that I can do my work....so the situation is really tense. Sometimes I even have to wake up very early in the morning so that I can finish my office work. (Lina)

Lina's experience shows how the pressure to complete her work has caused her to take work home. This also demonstrates an example of how a dual-career woman striving to maintain a high salience on both her family and work roles will face a greater struggle in order to balance both her family and work demands.

Excessive workloads have led to these participants experiencing some negative consequences; for example, the feeling of stress over the heavy workload. This heavy workloads might produce detrimental consequences. One such instance is expressed by a male respondent who said:

I like working in my line but the workload now is too much. I think the work distribution is defective. And there is no such thing as stress management actions by the employers...nothing. I think I'm almost heading to burnout! (Ikram)

Hence, it is quite disappointing for someone like Ikram because, although he currently enjoys working in his field, the workload makes him feel stressed and exhausted which, sadly, could result in a decreased interest in his job and might affect his ability to display a high work salience.

Work-related stress can have many undesirable effects on career couples. For some participants, the stress they experience due to work might impact on them emotionally, and they tend to be distracted while they are at home. As indicated by a male participant:

Yes, I can feel it. Sometimes when I got back from work, tired, and I look at all the children's toys cluttered at the living room...I feel terrible. Sometimes when my boss got mad at me...I also felt like blowing up when I got home. So that's why I think the environment at home is important in reducing the stress. (Shuhaidah)

In addition, to the emotional impact, work has also been found to impact on their physical ability. Some participants mentioned that they feel worn out due to the heavy workload. As highlighted by these respondents:

...last time teachers only teach right, but now teachers have to do everything. From decorating the class, writing the students record, admin things. So, there are lots of

work...the workload is heavy ...there is bunch of admin stuff to be handled. Sometimes I feel so exhausted (sigh)... (Nurida)

Indeed, living in families where both couples have full-time careers requires a lot of compromise and tolerance. Many challenges must also be confronted due to the work commitments of both parties. Some male interviewees have voiced that they must travel lengthy distances to their workplace. The following comments reflect this viewpoint:

The working arrangement is okay....the only shortcoming is that it is far from my house...so the travelling time is sickening....In terms of the toll, petrol and other stuff that I have to pay for travelling...the earning is just a little bit more than her... (Azimi)

It is interesting to highlight that, when couples work far from each other they tend to live closer to the wife's workplace than the husband's. This might reflect the masculinity of the male partner that makes it more suitable to travel far, and shows simultaneously that the wife will be more occupied by domestic responsibilities.

Some participants also mentioned that they have to tolerate the demands of their supervisors. One claim that has been made by the participants is that their supervisors are not sufficiently supportive of employees who have families. For example, a female interviewee said:

There is too much pressure working with him... we are afraid that we will be scolded. He is very autocratic...we feel pressured working with him....he will even use words such as stupid when he is cross with us. My work is also too compact. One of my friends has already got hypertension. I am scared that I will fall sick too. ..(Shuhaidah)

Obviously, supervisors are an important element affecting a worker's experience. Therefore, it is sad to see how some supervisors not only apply pressure and lack support for employees with families, but also have a detrimental effect on the health of their employees; thus, they are an unsupportive element in promoting better work salience for dual-career couples.

Besides supervisors, the working environment itself contributes to a challenging work life. Some respondents claim that they have to face a work environment that is full of stress. As mentioned by a male interviewee:

Now, when I'm working in the project development...it is a new thing for me, so it makes me tense (laugh). Even my boss and colleagues add to my pressure (laugh)...this is because there is nobody working in this project who really has experience working in project development...everyone is new to this and we all have to learn new things...so that makes us tense... (Rezuan)

Anxiety caused by working conditions is a matter that is unavoidable by employees and not all are fortunate enough to have a pleasurable working environment. Therefore, specific coping strategies and support are crucial to address the challenges of work, as well as balancing family and work demands.

Having a domestic helper, or maid, in Malaysia is a common scenario among dual-career couples. The ease of hiring maids from neighboring countries has prompted many couples to employ them in order to facilitate their household chores. These foreign maids come from several Asian countries, such as Indonesia, Philippines, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam. However, most are from Indonesia because of the similarity between Malaysia and Indonesia in relation to language and religion [70]. Apart from having a positive impact on the family, some respondents also pointed out the positive impact on their careers. As remarked by a female interviewee:

Well, I just started using maid about 6 months. My working hours are not fixed. I could finish my work at 8 pm...or 10 pm...or even at 3 in the morning. So, last time when I didn't have a maid...I was more stressful. I couldn't bring my work home because obviously I couldn't do my work with the kids around. So now, with the maid around, my situation has improved. (Shuhaidah)

The statement by Shuhaidah proves that having a maid is useful in her situation since she does not have fixed working hours. With the help of her maid caring for her children at home, she can focus more on her work and put in more commitment without having to worry about her children. Hence, it can be observed that having a maid also contributes to the increased professional performance of the dual-career parents and helps to maintain a high salience in both work and family roles.

The participants also mentioned that they use several different strategies and support to cope with their challenges. Some participants commented how their spouse and family provide support in overcoming work pressures. One example of this is explained by a male respondent:

I think the impact is quite big. Sometimes when we have problems with people or clients at the office, we will feel tense. So, at that time, I will remind myself that the reason I work is because I want to support my family, so thinking about my family gives me strength to face the tension that I have to go through. (Raymee)

While another female participants shared her thoughts:

I do tell my husband about things happening at my office...because he also works, and he does the same thing to. If I see that he looks like he needs support for his work matters, I will not incite him...because he will get more tension. (Fatihah)

Hence, the findings indicate that family support can materialize in many ways. Other than being a source of motivation, there are also some respondents who often share with their spouses things that happened in the office as a way of releasing stress and obtaining useful advice.

Other than family support, some participants have stated how problem-focused coping in the form of good organization skills, such as time management and prioritizing, are important to survive the demands of work, and help them maintain a high work salience. As mentioned by a male participant:

I do have long working hours...so I have to be good at managing... manage time, manage email...I have to be good at prioritizing. If not, there will be no time to do all the work. (Rizal)

Meanwhile, some participants tend to utilize emotion-focused coping by adopting a psychological approach to handling work issues. As mentioned by a female respondent:

I enjoy my work now. I think if we don't enjoy our work, we'll feel tense...feeling tension is not good for the health (laugh). If we don't enjoy it, we must do something about it...I think we are the one who have to make the work interesting... (Fatihah)

Besides coping with work demands, the interviewees in this study utilized a number of emotion-focused coping strategies to compensate on their busy work-life, and achieve an equal salience in work and family roles. Some participants claimed that, in order to reduce the impact, they tend to separate work and family. The following quotes reflect this point:

From the beginning I started to work, I have trained myself that, when I am at home, I am absolutely for the family....so it's like that from the start, I don't bring my problem

to home....I try to control, but I don't know if people see that I still look stressed (laugh)... (Nasrun)

The findings also found that the salience of a role may change depending on the situation and effect the way they handle their work demands. An example of this can be inferred from the experience of a female respondent:

When I started working, I think my priority was more to my career. But when I had children, I tried to balance everything and prioritize the thing that should be prioritized. Because we know that the children are our treasure...so we certainly give more priority to them. Before this, I was really into my work. I even go to work at night until 1 in the morning...but now I have family, so I never do that anymore... (Syireen)

Syireen, is an example of a person who had very high salience in her work role before she got married. However, after getting married and having children, it was crucial for her to maintain a good balance while still prioritizing her children. Therefore, her role salience has changed after marriage and, thus, the family role is more central to her. This influences the priority that she must emphasize in order to cope with her responsibilities.

Nevertheless, the situation is different for another female participant. Yasmin is an example of a dual-career woman who tries to maintain a high salience in both work and family by prioritizing according to the situation. In her words:

...sometimes we have to give more attention to the family, and we have to put the work a side because there is nothing we can do about it, the family comes first. But there are times when I have to put the job first rather than my family. ..for example when I did my PhD last time, I have to leave my child in Malaysia. See...that means the work comes first right? Like now when my boss assign me to go somewhere and I will say 'Oh can't go there, no one is going to look after my daughter, I have to look after her, I can't go'..... So that's it, it depends on the situation... (Yasmin)

It is interesting to see how Yasmin's statement reflects that the hierarchy of salience between family and work roles depends on the situation. Therefore, she will not have a fixed hierarchy of salience in her work and family roles; rather, the highest position will depend on the needs of the roles.

## 5.0 Discussion

It has been cited in numerous studies that many challenges created by work have had many impacts on dual-career couples (van der Doef & Maes, 1999; Blair-Loy, 2003; Santos & Cardoso, 2008). The struggle has increased the conflict between work and family and, henceforth, affects the employees' ability to achieve a good work and family balance (Acker & Armenti, 2004; Doherty & Manfredi, 2006; Byron, 2005; Barnett, 2006; Wharton & Blair-Loy, 2006; Allan et. al., 2007; Pocock et. al., 2007). Similarly, the couples in this study reported that both partners are burdened by heavy workloads that usually interfere with their family time and affect their ability to portray a high family salience. Consistent with previous research by Cinamon and Rich (2002), Malaysian participants who place high salience on both work and family roles are found to face greater struggle in balancing their commitments in these roles. The workload they carry has been reported to cause stress that impacts either emotionally or physically, and it becomes worse when both home and work demands clash. However, following traditional gender role ideology, women are reported to be more affected, and some couples reported that the mother will have to spend more time with the children despite both having heavy workloads. This is parallel with empirical finding by Wallace and Young (2008) regarding the effect of caring responsibility among working parents.

The respondents also mentioned that they have encountered many work challenges, such as heavy workloads and long working hours that impact on their time available for the family and sometimes result in them bringing work home. Clashing work and home demands, which are usually felt more by the women, and affects their ability to display a high salience in their work and family roles were also mentioned by the participants, besides other challenges, such as unsupportive supervisors and work environment.

The current research has revealed the different kinds of coping strategies used by the couples. Consistent with what has been suggested by previous literatures, couples tend to adopt different kinds of coping behaviour that can either be classified as problem or emotion-focused strategies (Bird and Schnurmann-Cook, 2005; Higgins et al., 2010). Through problem-focused coping, the participants are found to utilize several organizational skills such as time management and prioritizing. Moreover, participants adopt emotion-focused strategies such as avoiding tension, putting more focus at work and trying to enjoy work to avoid stress. In addition, some participants are reported to be less fastidious about tidiness and cleanliness at home.

Malaysian couples are also reported to depend on various social supports which are similar to those in the West. This includes social supports in the workplace, such as the support of supervisors and co-workers which has a positive impact on work outcomes (Allen, 2001; Behson 2004; Marcinkus et al. 2007). Social supports outside of work, such as that provided by spouses, family, friends and helpers, have a positive impact on work-family balance (Carlson & Perrewe, 1999; Marcinkus et al. 2007; Ezzedeen & Ritchey, 2009). The supports and coping strategies mentioned are found to be helpful in assisting couples to put in more commitment and increase their performance in the work and family roles, thus helping them to maintain dual salience in both of these roles. It was also found through the interview that coping with work and family demands have a significant impact on their role salience. It was revealed that the way some participants cope with or handle their work and family demands depends on the work or family demands that should be fulfilled first, which may change the participants' role salience. Hence, these participants do not have a fixed hierarchy of salience; instead, the highest position will depend on the roles that should be prioritized at a certain time.

## **6.0 Conclusion**

The current research has made some important theoretical and practical contributions. Firstly, it fills the gap of dual-career couples' literatures which have been carried out mainly in the West and provides knowledge about universal and culturally-specific work-family experiences that would be beneficial for practitioners. It presents a cross-cultural perspective on dual-career couples in Malaysia in contrast to those in the Western countries and some non-Western countries where applicable.

The study also extends the use of gender role ideology and role salience in examining the couples' context. It has been revealed that role salience of the individuals within the couple may be shaped by their interactions with each other, in which the hierarchy of salience in work and family roles for dual-career couples are influenced by each spouse's work situation. It was also found that coping with work demands have a significant impact on the participants' role salience. In this case, some individuals within couples do not have a fixed hierarchy of salience; instead, the highest position will depend on the roles that should be prioritized at a

certain time. Couples who conform to traditional gender roles are much more likely to place differing emphasis of salience on certain roles.

The study extends the value of interviewing both husband and wife in dual-career couples by exhibiting the usefulness of this method in highlighting the connection of gender role attitude and role salience in their life, in a Malaysian context. Through the data gained from both spouses, this method is useful in explicating their experiences and creating a clear picture on how the dynamic of the interaction between their gender role attitude and role salience affect their work and family experience.

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