Attitudes to Work-Life Balance of Women in Singapore, Hong Kong and China: Working for the Family and More?
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Abstract

Issues related to ‘work-life balance’ have recently come to the fore in public policy debate and academic inquiry in Australia. As yet, however, these questions have been relatively under-explored in the context of Asian business and society. This paper reports on focus group and interview data gathered from professional women between the ages of 25 and 45 and living in Singapore, Hong Kong and China. The data collected was used, first, to describe how these women perceive why they engage in paid work, and what approaches the women in these countries use to handle work/life conflicts in the context of varying economic, political, cultural and social/family situations (e.g. making use of family members and/or maids for help with household chores and child caring, rather than a spouse or a childcare facility/centre).

Introduction

The paper builds on other work, especially by De Bruin and Dupuis (2004), which has questioned the cultural specificity of terms such as work/life balance and, in turn, challenged the appropriateness of applying western-style human resource management policies in other contexts. In preference to the notion of the work and the home as separate domains and ‘in conflict’ with each other, our findings indicate that an interactive model might be a better analogy for understanding the dynamics of work, home and personal life among Chinese employed in the increasingly global cities we studied.

A range of cross-cultural studies have pointed to cultural differences in how employees and employers in different countries tackle work and family issues. One example is a recent study by Joplin, Francesco, Shaffer and Lau (2003), which identified macro-level factors (economic, social, technological and legal) that could explain observed differences in organisational approaches to work and family in five countries (China, Hong Kong, Mexico, Singapore, and the United States). It observed that work was a priority in China, Hong Kong and Singapore; however, it also noted that employees in these countries were spending increased hours at work and that work intensification and work overload were becoming increasingly prevalent.
The priority attached to work observed by Joplin et al. appears, at face value, to conflict with some parts of the literature on Asian/western cultural values. This asserts that, on a continuum of individualistic to collectivistic cultures (Harzing and Hofstede, 1996), China, Singapore and Hong Kong are still more collectivistic than individualistic and therefore more family than work oriented. Yang, Chen, Choi and Zou (2000), in a study comparing Chinese and American women, described the collectivistic orientation in China, contending that sacrificing family time for work is viewed as self-sacrifice for the benefit of the family or as a short-term cost incurred to gain long-term benefits. In contrast a more individualistic orientation was evident in the United States where sacrificing family time for work is often perceived as a failure to care for significant others in one’s life.

Similar findings were reported by Granrose, Chow and Chew (2005) who examined Chinese women’s employment in different government contexts, including Hong Kong, China and Singapore. In most Asian countries filial piety operates within hierarchical family structures causing women to have multiple obligations to their immediate family, their elderly parents and to their jobs. Confucianism affects working mothers as the family is seen as a fundamental unit within this tradition. Chang and Lee (1995) also suggest that the family in a Confucian society takes precedence over its individual members. Industrialisation and globalisation may have reduced the influences of these Chinese traditions; however, Confucianism still has an impact on the cultural worlds of these Chinese women.

Lau (1981) coined the term “utilitarianistic familism” to describe the family work interface in Hong Kong. This term could apply to each of these societies where the tendency is to place family interests above those of the individual. Work is then often seen as instrumental in serving the economic needs of the family. A remark by Aryee, Fields and Luck (1999) about Hong Kong Chinese women could apply to each of these societies: “… employees may perceive work success as important primarily because it is instrumental in the family’s economic well-being” (p. 495). Describing the Hong Kong Chinese, Redding, Norman and Schlander (1994) observed that commitment to the work role is a means-to-an-end, and the end is the family’s
financial security. This overlapping of the work and family roles is common across these three societies. (See also Redding, 1993; Redding & Wong, 1986).

Pursuing a similar argument but relating it directly to the question of work-life balance, Greenhaus et al. (1989) claimed that in Asian societies the motherhood mandate is firmly entrenched and, therefore, married professional women may have more difficulty than men in managing the work-family interface and thereby experience more work-family conflict. Supporting these conjectures, a survey of Singaporean workers (Skitmore and Ahmad, 2003) indicated that many women would trade some earnings for family time. However, the survey respondents asserted that they valued more flexible working hours and a high work profile ahead of leisure activities. This is an important finding in the context of our own inquiry as it suggests that a focus on work does not imply an individual focused on themselves or, conversely, that if they seek time away from work it is for ‘leisure’. Rather, Skitmore’s and Ahmad’s research implies that work may be sought for the benefit of the family and that time away from work may also be sought to support family needs or priorities.

This emphasis on the family is also evident in Lo’s (2003) study of married female professionals with children in Hong Kong. She found that the traditional nature of the Hong Kong family, compounded by long working hours, led to an exhausting lifestyle for her respondents. The women expressed a preference for more flexibility in their work and shorter working hours. However, the women were described as family oriented with little support from their husbands or their organisations to assist them in family matters.

The relevance of these findings on cultural attitudes to work and life to the whole concept of work-life balance is apparent in Runté and Mills (2004) feminist post-structural critique of the discourse of work-family conflict. They call into question the dominant discourse that presents work-family conflict as an inherently neutral process asserting that this discourse actually serves to privilege the existing power relationships. They thus help locate the nature of women’s work-family conflicts in existing power relationships, many of which are supported by prevailing cultural
norms and other institutions. They also caution against believing that the ‘resolution’ of the conflict won’t also be affected by power relationships and associated cultural contexts.

**Methodology**

Our study of women’s attitudes to work-life balance issues in Singapore, Hong Kong and China reflects the nature of this discussion. It is an example of a multi-level approach to cross-cultural research similar to that of Korabik, Lero and Ayman’s (2003). Specifically we sought to balance the “macro-level” perspective on the work-family interface, with a “micro-level” analysis of the voices of women as they described the ways that they experienced the issues. By interviewing women about their work experiences we gained insights into how these women perceive why they engage in paid work; their experiences of the day-to-day support available to women with family obligation; and, thus, how likely it is that work-life conflicts facing women will be resolved in their favour.

Using focus groups and individual interviews, we gathered the perceptions of mainly professional women in Singapore, Hong Kong and in two cities in the People’s Republic of China (hereafter referred to as China), Shanghai and Nanjing. The interviews were conducted in English in Singapore and Hong Kong and in Chinese in China, with some participants responding in English. The Chinese was translated into English by a native Shanghai woman.

We interviewed 73 Chinese women in 16 focus groups during 2005 and 2006 in Singapore, Hong Kong and China (Nanjing and Shanghai). The majority of participants were employed full-time (93.7%), with only four participants working part-time. Their ages ranged from 19 to 52, with a mean age of 33. Over 50 percent of the women who participated in this study had Bachelor degrees (34 per cent) and Masters level degrees (18%), while those participants with high school and diploma level qualifications comprised nearly one quarter (12% each) of participants. Close to 30 percent of the participants had children (ranging from 1 to 3), while single women made up 57 per cent of the sample. The working hours per week ranged from 9 to 66 and, on average, one in five participants (22 per cent) reported that they worked
up to 50 hours a week. The participants worked in a range of industries including finance, insurance, law, marketing, hospitality, and services.

We asked the women in each of the groups whether they were able to balance the competing demands of work, family and personal activities or whether they found themselves in conflict over which demands should take precedence over others. Our aim was to explore how women in Asian countries perceive work/life conflicts? And what approaches they used to handle work/life conflicts in the context of varying economic, political, cultural and social/family situations (e.g. making use of family members and/or maids for help with household chores and childcare, rather than a spouse or a childcare facility)? We divided the interview protocol into five sections: work/life issues, work/family issues, family-friendly policies, gender stereotypes about home duties and work for women and couple dynamics.

Findings

Centrality of the family: Working to support the family

Work was a priority for the professional women in our study. However, in line with the literature summarised in part 1 of this paper, our findings here suggest that the majority of women were working for the goal of bettering their families. They had adopted Lau’s (1981) notion of utilitarianistic familism. Also supporting the existing literature on the role of the family, the dominant family type among the group of women who participated in our study was one in which parents lived with their children or children stayed with their parents. One participant described the “family dynasty system” that she had married into. She married the eldest son in a large family and, because he was the eldest, all the siblings came to stay with them in a big house.

At one time there were fourteen of us and four generations under one roof: my great grandmother-in-law, my grandmother-in-law, my mother in law and my family. I have three boys and I want them to learn the meaning of give and take and sharing...we have a family goal and a family plan that tells us what’s up for this year. (Small business manager/owner with children, Singapore)
In a focus group with three young lawyers in Singapore, the collectivistic nature of the family and the importance of family needs in decisions about work were clearly evident.

*Here people work because it’s a family thing…we come together for a joint income for the whole purpose of the family…that’s the collectivist culture.*

(Lawyer in Singapore)

*It’s a real collectivist effort as well because the mothers and the mother-in-laws kick in automatically when you go in to work. I mean collectivism, because at the end of the day even though I am working, I am working for the family.*

(Lawyer in Singapore)

Work was seen, by many participants in all three countries, as instrumental to have enough money for the family. The family was most often seen as more important but work had to come first so they could earn the money to support their family.

*If you want to know the sequence, work is first, family second and third is leisure time. As I need to earn money to support my family and provide the best educational conditions for my child.*

(Government Mental health workers with children all agreed upon this sequence, Shanghai)

*Without financial support, how can you provide enough care for the children?*

(Office manager, single, 41 years old, Hong Kong)

*I think working mothers are more valued because they provide for the family.*

(Real estate advisor, single, Hong Kong)

When asked, if you had to choose between having a career and having a family?

*I think I can do both, if I get married, I will treat my job as my career [now], but after marriage, I think it is only a job to earn money for living. I would like to spend more time with my family, especially when I have kids.*

(Office manager, single, 41 years old, Hong Kong)

*I don’t ask those questions. I definitely need to have a job to get enough income first, and then there will be a possibility to support and take good care of my family.*

(Private company logistic worker with child, Shanghai)

*Basically I earn money to support my family and help my sister.*

(Entry-level manager, single, Singapore)

*I told myself that I am working so that we can have a double income and can provide a bigger house for the children and also further education for them. I have two maids to help me.*

(Marketing Executive with children, Singapore)

The majority of the women in all three countries believed that the primary reason that they were engaged in paid work was to provide for the financial and material needs of their family members, rather than for themselves. While the participants
recognised that this required a great deal of physical absence from the home, their emotional attachment and sense of devotion to their families was clearly evident.

**Working to provide financial support to the family and more?**

**Working in response to social and familial expectation**

An additional reason for the women to prioritise work appeared to be related to considerable pressure from families and friends to demonstrate career success. These pressures came through the social expectations of close family members that their financial investments in a potentially successful career would need to be realised. In some cases, these expectations of delivering on career success were reinforced by offers of childcare support from grandparents to enable these young women to work. In Singapore, the highly competitive nature of Singaporean society, combined with the notions of ‘status’ and ‘face’, added to these high expectations.

*My parents expect me to work while they look after my baby. Because they think, well, if you were going to stay at home, you did not have to get a bachelor’s and a master’s degree. There is also a lot of peer pressure when I go out with my friends everybody is getting their promotion.* (Manager in Singapore)

*Because you have to be a very successful career woman, you have to be a good mother and you have to be a wonderful wife.* (Lawyer in Singapore)

*Personally I feel quite a lot of expectations from my mother because she has always told me, “don’t quit”; I will help you look after your children.* (Lawyer in Singapore)

**The need to work hard and be competitive was just part of the culture.**

*In Singapore, you must go to this school, you must earn A’s. Since we were young, we thought we must constantly work our brains.* (Manager in Singapore)

*You strive for the highest you can go, the best house, and the best car.* (Entry-level Manager in Singapore)

It was apparent that the women’s desire to provide material benefits for the family and to live up to familial and societal expectations created real personal dilemmas and anxieties for them. In the case of working mothers, however, this was compensated significantly by the amount of support and help that their parents were ready to provide to facilitate the continuation of careers after childbirth.
I am very lucky that my mom takes care of my son. During the first year, I hired a maid, and my mother also has a maid. So there were three people looking after him. That’s why I was able to start my postgraduate course. (Manager in insurance with one child, Hong Kong).

Because my mum takes care of my son, so I go to my mum’s house everyday, I keep a very close contact with them. (Manager with an international bank, married with a child, Hong Kong).

**Working for individual material aspirations and sense of success**

Although family needs featured in discussions about the importance of work, many comments directly linked work to individual material aspirations and economic and social exigencies: There were many women who expressed the need to work for their own financial independence.

I don’t think so, because there are many reasons why someone has to work and could not take care of the child. The living standard here is very high so we need enough money for the family. (Manager with an international bank, married with a child, Hong Kong).

Singaporeans work too hard basically. They want to earn money because Singapore isn’t cheap to live in so you have to get money, and in turn that money is used to enjoy life. (Entry-level Manager in Singapore)

The reality here is that a lot of us have huge mortgages, huge car loans, you just don’t want one person to bear them. (Lawyer in Singapore)

Many women in our discussion groups provided reasons for working other than their own financial independence, such as a sense of intrinsic satisfaction derived from career success. When asked if they would carry on working if they could afford not to, many responded that they would continue working (perhaps in relatively less stressful environments than their current jobs), mainly for reasons of mental stimulation, keeping abreast with current developments in the society and socialising.

I want to keep abreast of society and be able to talk with my husband. (Manager in Shanghai)

After being at home for 6 months, I found it was so nice to be in an office environment and interacting with colleagues. I loved interacting with professionals. (Manager in Singapore)

I know my personality type. I cannot live without work, it gives me a sense of purpose and identity and self worth. (Lawyer in Singapore)
Summary and Conclusion
The study is in an early stage of an on-going research and data collection process, and thus, this paper only reports on the preliminary ‘impressions’ of a large amount of qualitative data. Nonetheless, the paper achieves its objectives in attempting to describe the nature of work/family conflicts in the three selected countries (Singapore, Hong Kong and China). It has shown the central role of family networks in shaping women’s decisions on the extent to which they engage in paid work – with participants citing, above all other considerations, the importance of working to provide for the collective financial needs of the family. The centrality and closeness of family in the lives of the women in the study stands to illustrate the complex nature of work/family dynamics in Asian societies, whereby women commit to serving collective financial needs, which typically involve lengthy periods of physical absence from the home. In return, parents or members of the extended family reciprocate by rendering tremendous help with childcare and maintenance of the home.

Notably, there were indications that this family based system of managing work/life conflicts was not an entirely voluntary matter of individual ‘choice’ as several participants felt that there was pressure from close family members to realise their individual earning potential and that there was an expectation that successful careers were a necessary return for past investment in education. These pressures and expectations were reinforced by wider cultural norms that stressed the value of competition, hard work, and increasing wealth and status. While of seemingly lesser significance than collective interests and social expectations, some participants also suggested that work was a means of achieving individual material goals and a sense of individual identity and personal satisfaction. Thus, the study provides insights into the complex nature of the interaction between the individual and the collective in Asian societies.

Through qualitative analysis, this exploratory study aimed to deepen the findings of existing studies. It focused on aggregating emergent themes that were common across the various groups. Congruent with the literature, our findings support the
notion of the centrality of the family along with its social pressures that these women should work to provide financial support for their families. However, there was some evidence of changes away from extended families towards nuclear families and women desiring careers for their intrinsic satisfaction. Given the fact that single women made up half of the sample, we intend to analyse our data further to provide comparisons between married and single women and their work/life conflicts. It is our intention that future research will provide a closer examination of the suitability of government policies in relation to prevailing cultural norms.
References


