

## ROLE STRESSOR AS AN ANTECEDENT OF EMPLOYEES' FAMILY CONFLICT: EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

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**Abstract:** *The role of stressors is recognized as a crucial human resource development and management issue where it can have an overpowering consequence on organizational and employee performance. This study was conducted to discover the relationship between role stressor and family conflict using self-report questionnaires gathered from academic staff of a public comprehensive university in Sarawak, Malaysia. The outcomes of SmartPLS path model revealed three findings: first, role ambiguity significantly correlated with family conflict. Second, role conflict significantly correlated with family conflict. Third, role overload significantly correlated with family conflict. This finding demonstrates that role stressor is recognized in employees' family conflict. The paper provides discussions, implications and conclusion.*

**Keywords:** *role ambiguity, role conflict, role overload, employees' family conflict*

### INTRODUCTION

Extensive studies have highlighted that fast moving local and international markets have radically changed the work climates of many organizations. This climatic change is often driven by multiple causes, especially organizational structure, leadership style and quality, the demands of tasks and roles, balancing efficiency of services with high quality standards, the increasing "24/7" mentality, structural changes and changes in business processes, and the quality of communication throughout the organization. These are some of the causes identified as playing detrimental roles on the employees' stressful level and organizational climate (Holloway, 2012; Hunt & Ivergard, 2007; Manning & Preston, 2003). In general, the ability of an employer to cope with external and internal environmental changes in order to maintain and achieve its strategy and goals may lead to greater employee stress in the workplace (Trayambak et al., 2012).

The concept of stress was first highlighted by Sel ye (1987, p.17) as “the nonspecific response of the body to any demand made upon it”. Stress is a broad concept and may be interpreted based on linguistic and organizational perspectives. In linguistic terms, stress is originally taken from Latin that is *stringere*, which refers to draw tight, to describe hardships and/or affliction (Cartwright & Cooper, 1997). Relying on this view, stress may be said to exist when individual abilities do not match with their job requirements, restrictions and/or prospects. This phenomenon may produce two major types of stress: eu stress (good stress) and distress (bad stress) (Huang, 2010; Ismail et al., 2010, 2010a; Trayambak et al., 2012). Eu stress is often associated with individuals who have experienced moderate and low stress levels, whereas distress is usually seen in individuals who have experienced high stress levels. Individuals who experience eu stress will be able to meet job demands and this may help them to experience positive work life (e.g., satisfaction, motivation, commitment, performance and functional conflict). While, individuals who experience distress will not be able to fulfill job demands and this may cause them to decrease quality of work life (e.g., dissatisfaction, depression, unhealthy and dy functional conflict) (Huang, 2010; Ismail et al., 2010, 2010a; Trayambak et al., 2012).

Organizational stress is typically linked to economic consequences, health problems and their associated expenses. A report published by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (1999) in the USA summarized findings from various surveys on organizational stress and found that between 26 and 40 percent of all surveyed workers experienced very stressful work. Naturally, this leads to increased economic burdens and health related problems. For example, a survey on more than 46,000 US employees showed that health care costs were 46 % higher for workers who experienced high levels of stress (Goetzel et al., 1998). Additionally, reports showed that American corporations are coping with a hefty \$200 billion annually in lost of production, truancy, and job-related casualties due to workplace stress (Sosik & Godshalk, 2000). In 2004, the American Institute of Stress projected that workplace stress costed the nation over \$300 billion in health care, and absenteeism (Schwartz, 2004). Report from the UK also suggests that about the half of all lost days within organizations are related to workplace stress (Cooper et al., 1990).Recent report by Health and Safety Executive in the UK suggests that approximately 27 million working days were lost last year and of those 10.4 million were due to work-related stress (Newcombe, 2012).

In the recent workplace stress literature, role stressor is often viewed as a multidimensional construct and may be interpreted as role related stress that may causes work stress(Ismail et al. 2010, 2010a; Trayambak et al., 2012). Many scholars, such as Abu Al Rub (2004), Eby et al. (2005), Ismail et al. (2010a), Trayambak et al. (2012), and Yu-Fei et al.(2012)highlight that role stressor consists of three influential features: role ambiguity, role conflict and role overload. Role ambiguity is often defined as an individual who does not have clear information about his or her work objective, work scope, supervisor’s expectations, and responsibilities of his or her job may lead to higher job-related tension. Role ambiguity takes place when it is indeterminate what actions should be taken to meet the expectations of the role (Matteson & Ivancevich, 2003; Wright, 2009). Role conflict, on the other hand is usually defined as an employee who is unable to handle job demands; doing things he or she does not want to do, or doing things that is not considered part of his or her job which may result in various types of conflict. The presence of role ambiguity and role conflict requires an individual to make decision and making decision under conflicting demands may frequently invoke conflict with other job or

non-job demands. Role overload is frequently associated with work load beyond an individual's capability to cope with and often resulted in stressful conditions. Role overload affects employees through psychological preoccupation with a specific role (Aryee et al., 1999). This psychological preoccupation is described as high levels of perceived role overload leading to preoccupation with uncompleted tasks even while responding to the demands of another role (Aryee et al., 1999). There are two different forms of role overload as labeled by researchers: quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative overload is often related to having too much work to do, whereas qualitative overload is often associated to a work that is too difficult for an individual to handle (Cartwright and Cooper, 1997; Eby et al., 2005; Ismail et al., 2010, 2010a; Major et al., 2002; Yu-Fei et al., 2012).

Surprisingly, extent studies in the workplace stress reveal that the level of role stressor may have a significant impact on employees' family conflict (Boles et al., 2001; Fu & Schaffer, 2001; Ismail et al., 2010, 2010a; Yu-Fei et al., 2012). From an organizational behavior perspective, family conflict persists when employees unable to handle job stress related problems (Ismail et al., 2010, 2010a; Schiem & Young, 2010). In a work life balance literature, family conflict may occur in three major forms: time-based, strain-based and behavior-based. First, time-based conflict occurs when one has to juggle with two personal demands occurring simultaneously him or her to forgo one for the other. (e.g., working overtime forces an individual to cancel a family outing). Second, strain-based conflict occurs when tension experienced in one role interferes with participation in another role (e.g., meeting a deadline for a tender prevents an individual to concentrates to family matters). Third, behavior-based conflict occurs when behavior patterns appropriate to one role are inappropriate in another (e.g., emotional restrictions at work are contrary with the openness expected by family members) (Boles et al., 2001; Ismail et al., 2010, 2010a; Schiem & Young, 2010; Yu-Fei et al., 2012).

Within a job stress model, many scholars view that role ambiguity, role conflict and role overload, and family conflict are distinct, but highly interrelated constructs. For example, high level of role stressors in the workplace may increase the interference of job problems in employees' family affairs, which in turn lead to an increased family conflict (Goldsen and Scharlach, 2001; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002; Yu-Fei et al., 2012).

Although the nature of this relationship is significant, little is known about the role stressor as an important predicting variable in the workplace stress research literature (Allen et al., 2000; Fu and Schaffer, 2001; Ismail et al., 2010, 2010a; Yu-Fei et al., 2012). Many scholars concur that the predicting role of role stressor is given little attention in the previous studies because they have largely described the role stressor characteristics and employed a simple association method to understand employees' general attitudes toward particular role stressors in the workplace. Consequently, these studies may not provide adequate findings that may be used as guidelines by practitioners in formulating a comprehensive coping strategy to prevent and handle employees' stresses and their negative behavior outcomes in dynamic organizations (Gallie & Russell, 2009; Major et al., 2002; Tatman et al., 2006; Yu-Fei et al., 2012). Therefore, this situation inspires the researchers to further investigate the nature of this relationship.

## **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

This study is propelled by three objectives: firstly is to evaluate the relationship between role ambiguity and employees' family conflict. Secondly, to determine the relationship between role conflict and employees' family conflict. Finally, to measure the relationship between role overload and employees' family conflict.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Relationship between the Interference of Role Stressors and Employees' Family Conflict**

Many previous studies about the role stressor were conducted using a direct effects model based on different samples, such as 513 employees in Fortune 500 Company, United States (Majoret et al., 2002), assessments forms collected by couple and family therapists (Tatman et al., 2006), married/cohabiting employees gathered through European Social Survey (Gallie&Russell, 2009), and 96 employees in higher learning institutions in Sarawak (Yu-Fei et al., 2012). Findings from these studies reported that high levels of ambiguity, conflict and overload in performing job had caused job problems interference into the ability of employees to control family conflict (Gallie& Russell, 2009; Major et al., 2002; Tatman et al., 2006; Yu-Fei et al., 2012).

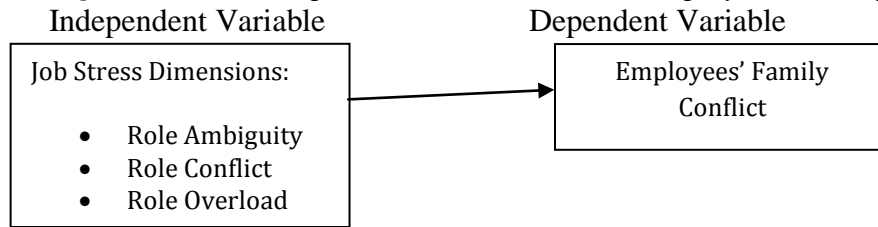
The empirical studies support the notion of Clark's (2002) work/family border theory, which posits that individuals often manage and negotiate the work and family affairs in order to attain balance. If this relationship is not balanced, it will likely increase work disturbances in individuals' family life and thus lead to increased family conflict. The preceding phenomenon is consistent with the theory of work-family balance. Greenhaus et al. (2003, p. 513) have defined work-family balance as "the extent to which an individual is equally engaged in – and equally satisfied with – his or her work and family role". Greenhaus et al. (2003) regard work-family balance as a continuum where imbalance in favor of the work role lies at one end, and imbalance in favor of the family role lies at the other end, and balance lies in the middle favoring neither work nor family role.

The spirit of these theories explains that failure to balance job and family affairs may lead to enhanced employees' family conflict. Extending this theory into a role stressor model shows that role stressor tests the ability of individuals in coping with external and/or internal work challenges. For example, the inability of employees to handle high ambiguity, conflict and job overload may increase the interference of job stress problems in employees' family affairs and decrease their abilities to control family conflict (Gallie& Russell, 2009; Major et al., 2002; Tatman et al., 2006; Yu-Fei et al., 2012).

### **Conceptual Framework and Research Hypothesis**

The reviewed literature has been used as the basis of developing a conceptual framework as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Relationship between Job Stress and Employees' Family Conflict



Based on the framework, it can be hypothesized that:

H1: Role ambiguity is positively related to employees' family conflict

H2: Role conflict is positively related to employees' family conflict

H3: Role overload is positively related to employees' family conflict

## METHODOLOGY

### Research design

Employing cross-sectional research method permits the researchers to combine the role stressor literature, the expert opinion and the actual survey questionnaire as the main procedure in collecting data for this study. Using this procedure may decrease the inadequacy of single method and increase the ability to collect accurate, less bias and high quality data (Creswell, 2013; Ismail et al., 2010a; Sekaran&Bougie, 2010). This study was conducted in a public comprehensive university situated in Sarawak, Malaysia. Firstly, a set of questionnaire was drafted based on the information gathered from the workplace stress literature. Secondly, a group of experts comprising six experienced academic staff representing science and technology, social science, humanities and liberal arts faculties at the chosen university was formed. They were selected based on their work experiences of more than seven years and their familiarity with the nature of academic work culture at the university. In a facilitated group discussion, the experts verified the instrument operationalized to capture the characteristics of role stressor and employees' family conflict. Thirdly, based on the expert opinion, improvements were made to the content and format of survey questionnaire for an actual study. Finally, a back translation technique was employed to translate the content of the questionnaire from Malay to English by English and Malay experts; thus, increasing the validity and reliability of the instrument (Creswell, 2013; Sekaran & Bougie, 2010).

### Measures

The survey questionnaire consists of three sections: First, role ambiguity had 3 items, role conflict had 3 items, and role overload had 3 items that were developed based on the workplace stress literature (Fu & Shaffer, 2001; Gallie& Russell, 2009; Major et al., 2002; Tatman et al., 2006; Yu-Fei et al., 2012). The elements used to measure role ambiguity were: clarity of job scope, job description, and superior's expectations. The elements used to measure role conflict were: conflicting with work ethics, organization's objectives, and supervisor's instruction. The

elements used to measure role overload were: amount of time to accomplish a job, excessive workloads, and multiple tasks. Second, family conflict had 3 items that were developed based on work to family conflict literature (Allen et al., 2000; Boles et al., 2001; Eby et al., 2005; Gallie & Russell, 2009; Matteson & In Vancevich, 2003; Yu-Fei et al., 2012). The elements used to measure these constructs were: attitude at home, time with family, and time to do personal activities. All these items were measured using a 7-item scale ranging from “very strongly disagree/dissatisfied” (1) to “very strongly agree/satisfied” (7). Demographic variables were used as controlling variables because this study focused on academic staff attitudes.

## **Sample**

Unit of analysis for this study is academic staff of the selected organization. Prior to data collection, the researchers had obtained an official approval to conduct the study from the head of the organization and also received advice from him about the procedures of conducting the survey in the organization. Based on the organization rule, and financial and duration of study constraints, the researchers distributed 200 survey questionnaires using a convenient sampling technique to academic staff in the organization. This sampling technique was chosen because the management of the organization did not supply any list of academic staff and this situation did not allow the researchers to randomly select respondents for this study. One hundred usable questionnaires were returned to the researchers, yielding 50 percent response rate. The survey questionnaires were answered by participants based on their consent and on a voluntarily basis. The number of this sample exceeds the minimum sample of 30 participants as required by probability sampling technique, showing that it may be analyzed using inferential statistics (Sekaran & Bougie, 2010).

## **Data analysis**

The SmartPLS 2.0 was employed to assess the validity and reliability of the instrument, and thus test the research hypotheses (Ringle et al, 2005). The main advantage of using this statistical package may deliver latent variable scores, avoid small sample size problems, estimate every complex model with many latent and manifest variables, hassle stringent assumptions about the distribution of variables and error terms, and handle both reflective and formative measurement models (Henseler et al., 2009). The structural model is assessed by examining the path coefficients using standardized betas ( $\beta$ ) and t statistics. The outcomes of SmartPLS path model would recommend whether it is appropriate to test the hypothesized model because the latter will clearly show the significant relationship between independent variable and dependent variable if the value of t statistic larger than 1.96. This result indicates that independent variable acts an important predictor of dependent variable in the hypothesized model (Henseler et al., 2009). In addition,  $R^2$  is used as an indicator of the overall predictive strength of the model. The values of  $R^2$  are considered as follows: 0.19 (weak), 0.33 (moderate) and 0.67 (substantial) (Chin, 1998; Henseler et al., 2009).

**FINDINGS**

Participant Characteristics

Table 1 shows that majority respondents were male (57.0 percent), aged between 40 to 45 years old (38.0 percent), married (81.0 percent), had more than 3 dependents(54.0 percent), those who rarely brought work home (41.0 percent), and who had served from 1 to 5 years (45.0 percent).

**Table 1 Participant Characteristics**

Participant Characteristics	Sub-Profile	Percentage
Gender	Male	57.0
	Female	43.0
Age	< 27	24.0
	28-33	6.0
	34-39	24.0
	40-45	38.0
	> 45	8.0
Marital Status	Single	19.0
	Married	81.0
Dependents	< 2	46.0
	> 3	54.0
Bring Work to Home	Very Often	19.0
	Often	31.0
	Rare	41.0
	Never	9.0
Length of Service	1-5 years	45.0
	6-10 years	18.0
	11-15 years	23.0
	> 16 years	4.0

Validity and Reliability of the Instrument

The confirmatory factor analysis was employed to assess the psychometric properties of survey questionnaire data. Table 2 shows the results of convergent and discriminant validity analyses. All constructs had the values of AVE larger than 0.5, indicating that they met the acceptable standard of convergent validity (Henseler et al., 2009). Besides that, all constructs had the values of  $\sqrt{\text{AVE}}$  in diagonal greater than the squared correlation with other constructs in off diagonal, showing that all constructs met the acceptable standard of discriminant validity (Henseler et al., 2009; Yang, 2009).

**Table 2The Results of Convergent and Discriminant Validity Analyses**

Variable	AVE	Role Ambiguity	Role Conflict	Role Overload	Family Conflict
Role Ambiguity	0.863	0.929			
Role Conflict	0.650	0.163	0.806		
Role Overload	0.726	-0.009	0.064	0.852	
Family Conflict	0.882	0.303	0.435	0.349	0.939

Table 3 shows the factor loadings and cross loadings for different constructs. The correlation between items and factors had higher loadings than other items in the different constructs, as well as the loadings of variables were greater than 0.7 in their own constructs in the model are considered adequate (Henseler et al., 2009). In sum, the validity of measurement model met the criteria.

**Table 3 The results of Factor Loadings and Cross Loadings for Different Constructs**

Construct/ Item	Role Ambiguity	Role Conflict	Role Overload	Employees' Family C
<u>Role Ambiguity</u>				
I have a very clear job scope	0.917129	0.112298	-0.126305	0.217388
The job that I am doing stated in my job description	0.970242	0.151360	0.009140	0.340373
I know my superior's expectations towards me.	0.897563	0.186105	0.068334	0.260541
<u>Role Conflict</u>				
I have been receiving instructions that are complying to moral ethics.	0.349786	0.809009	0.052422	0.376498
The job that I am doing is in accordance with the organization's objectives.	0.207882	0.858854	0.009403	0.366881
The task that I am doing is in accordance to my superior's instruction.	-0.232954	0.747708	0.103207	0.301501
<u>Role Overload</u>				
The time given for me to accomplish academic tasks and research is insufficient.	0.058169	0.082237	0.863500	0.326870
I have excessive workloads.	-0.032831	0.028819	0.886923	0.301719
Sometimes I need to do multiple tasks simultaneously.	-0.060602	0.050720	0.804168	0.257297
<u>Employees' Family Conflict</u>				
I believe that my attitude at work is not affected by my attitude at home.	0.212683	0.391901	0.402764	0.932520
I have enough time to be with my family.	0.349102	0.447154	0.252901	0.948704
I have enough time to do my personal social activities.	0.289776	0.384040	0.328620	0.935873

Table 4 shows the results of reliability analysis for the instrument. The values of composite reliability and Cronbach's Alpha were greater than 0.8, indicating that the instrument used in this study had high internal consistency (Henseler et al., 2009; Nunally & Benstein, 1994).

**Table 4 Composite Reliability and Cronbach's Alpha**

Construct	Composite Reliability	Cronbach Alpha
Role Ambiguity	0.949571	0.920587



Role Conflict	0.847641	0.730957
Role Overload	0.888247	0.811917
Family Conflict	0.957239	0.932976

**Analysis of the Constructs**

Table 5 shows the results of Pearson correlation analysis and descriptive statistic. The means for the variables vary from 5.1 to 5.7 signifying that the levels of role ambiguity, role conflict, role conflict, and role overload, and family conflict range from high (4) to highest level (7). The correlation coefficients for the relationship between the independent variable (i.e., role ambiguity, role conflict and role overload) and the dependent variable (i.e., family conflict) were less than 0.90, indicating the data were not affected by serious collinearity problem (Hair et al., 2006). These statistical results further confirm that the instrument has met the acceptable standards of validity and reliability analyses.

**Table 5 Pearson Correlation Analysis and Descriptive Statistics**

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Pearson Correlation Analysis (r)			
			1	2	3	4
Role Ambiguity	5.7	0.8	1			
Role Conflict	5.5	0.8	0.13	1		
Role Overload	5.7	0.9	-0.02	0.07	1	
Family Conflict	5.1	1.1	0.29*	0.43*	0.34*	1

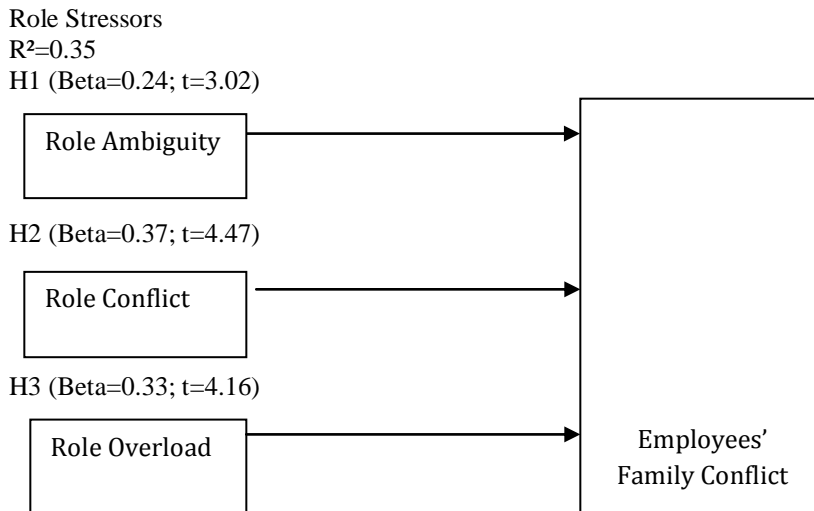
Note: Significant at \*p<0.01

Reliability Estimation is shown in a Diagonal

**Outcomes of Testing Hypotheses 1, 2 and 3**

Figure 2 shows that the inclusion of role ambiguity, role conflict and role overload had explained 35 percent of variance in dependent variable. Specifically, the results of testing research hypothesis using SmartPLS path model revealed three important findings: firstly, role ambiguity significantly correlated with job-family conflict (Beta=0.24; t=3.02), therefore H1 was supported. Secondly, role conflict significantly correlated with family conflict (Beta=0.37; t=4.47), therefore H2 was supported. Thirdly, role overload significantly correlated with family conflict (Beta=0.27; t=4.16), therefore H3 was supported. In sum, the results confirm that the interference of role stressors in employees’ family affairs may reduce their abilities to control family conflict.

**Figure 2**The Results of SmartPls path model



Note: Significant at \*t  $\geq$  1.96

In order to determine a global fit of PLS path modeling, we carried out a global fit measure (GoF) based on Wetzel et al's (2006) guideline as follows:  $GoF = \sqrt{\{MEAN(Community of Endogenous) \times MEAN(R^2)\}} = 0.55$ , indicating that it exceeds the cut-off value of 0.36 for large effect sizes of  $R^2$ . This result confirms that the PLS path model has better explanatory power in comparison with the baseline values (GoF small=0.1, GoF medium=0.25, GoF large=0.36). It also provides adequate support to validate the PLS model globally (Wetzel et al., 2009).

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study show that role stressor does act as an important predictor of family conflict in the studied organization. In the context of this study, management team has properly planned and administered job specifications for academic staff in order to maintain and support its organizational strategy and goals. Majority of employees perceive that the levels of their role stressors and family conflict are high. In this case, it seems that the inability of employees to manage high levels of ambiguity, conflict and overload in performing job has increased the interference of job problems in employees' family affairs and this may lead to decrease their abilities to control family conflict.

The above findings suggest three major implications: theoretical contribution, robustness of research methodology, and practical contribution. In terms of theoretical contribution, the results of this study reveal that the high levels of role ambiguity, role conflict and role overload have decreased the ability of employees to handle job problems and this may decrease their abilities to control family conflict. This result has also supported and extended studies by Major et al. (2002), Tatman et al. (2006), Gallie and Russell (2009), and Yu-Fei et al. (2012). With respect to the robustness of research methodology, the survey data of this study have exceeded

the acceptable standards of validity and reliability analyses. This situation may lead to the production of accurate and reliable research findings.

In terms of practical contributions, the findings of this study can be used as guidelines by the management to overcome negative role stressors in organizations. The possible suggestions are: firstly, the content and methods of training programs need to give more attention on helping employees in coping with physiological and psychological stresses using spiritual meditation, case studies and team building methods. Secondly, humanistic social support need to be encouraged in order to induce positive socialization practices, inculcate caring, build sense of belongingness and promote warm relation among employees. This positive behavior may help to decrease employees' physiological and psychological stresses in executing jobs. Thirdly, membership rewards, especially health insurance coverage needs to protect employees from spending a lot of money in order to get better chronic disease treatments for illnesses such as heart attack, cancer, diabetes, blood pressure and kidney problems. This health insurance may enhance employee satisfaction and commitment with career in the workplace. Fourthly, participative organizational policies and procedures need to be enhanced in order to increase employees' perceptions of justice and decrease deviant behavior in organizations. Finally, employee assistance programs need to be implemented using outsourcing and/or internal counseling unit in order to help employees obtaining proper guidance to handle work and family problems. If management seriously considers the above suggestions they may help enhance the capability of employees to appropriately plan and manage their job and family affairs.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study tested the theoretical framework based on the role stressor research literature. The results of confirmatory factor analysis certified that the instrument used in this study met the acceptable standards of validity and reliability analyses. Hence, the outcomes of SmartPLS path model revealed that the level of role stressor did act as an important determinant of employees' family conflict. Therefore, current research and practice within the workplace stress literature needs to incorporate role ambiguity, role conflict and role overload as critical dimensions of the job stress domain. This study further suggests that the capability of employees to handle role stressors is important to decrease their family conflict and enhance their abilities to induce positive subsequent attitudinal and behavioral outcomes (e.g., quality of work life, work-life balance, satisfaction, commitment and performance). Further, these positive outcomes may lead to maintained and increased organizational competitiveness in an era of globalization.

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