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A gender perspective on work-life balance, perceived stress, and locus of control☆

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ABSTRACT

Given the crucial role that work-life balance plays in the well-being of employees, the literature devotes extensive research efforts towards determining the effect of different variables on the quality of work-life balance of employees. In this study, the researchers probe the compound relationship between external and internal locus of control, levels of perceived stress at work, and work-life balance. This study focuses in exploring the role of gender in the relationship between the aforementioned variables. A sample of 320 employees (160 females and 160 males) working in the Lebanese banking sector contribute to the empirical results of this research.

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1. Introduction

Balancing work and family demands is a struggle that almost all employees deal with on a daily basis, consequently incurring high levels of job-related stress. Job stress plays a major role in creating various types of work-related conflicts for employees, being one of the largest problems in the European Union working environment (Bell, Rajendran, & Theiler, 2012). Nevertheless, employees with less conflict between their work and family lives apply positive behaviors from their personal life on their work life (Qu & Zhao, 2012).

Recent changes in the workforce composition further contribute to the concept of work-life balance (Ehrhart, Mayer, & Ziegert, 2012). As more women join the workforce and dual-income families become more common, both men and women face the need to balance between family and work life. Recently, most gender-oriented studies revolve around the effect of gender on work-life balance and more specifically about whether men face the same degree of difficulty in juggling work and family demands or are at some sort of advantage over women. This study aims to determine whether high levels of control, mainly internal control, lead to a higher quality of work-life balance, with perceived levels of stress as a mediator between the two variables. Furthermore, this article examines this relationship in both female and male respondents separately, to shed light on the role of gender

regarding the variables under study. Thus, this study aims to address two main research questions:

Research Question 1: How do the two variables, *locus of control* and *perceived stress*, influence the quality of work-life balance among employees?

Research Question 2: How does gender play a role in the proposed relationship among the three variables *locus of control*, *perceived stress*, and *work-life balance*?

This study focuses on how gender contributes in predicting employees' quality of work-life balance. This article enhances the existing literature, as few studies attempt to draw a comparison between men and women's way to deal with work-life conflicts. The article also identifies the predictors of a balanced and conflict free work life. In addition, this study broadens the scope in terms of employees' locus of control, differentiating between an external and internal locus of control and studying the role of each, relative to gender, in predicting levels of perceived stress at work and work-life balance.

2. Theoretical framework

The primary interest underpinning this research is the relationship between the locus of control and work-life balance. This study adopts a contingent positivist approach in studying these variables and the relationship between them. As such, this section begins by outlining the theoretical background of the concept locus of control and the scales for measuring work-life balance. Beyond this primary relationship, this research also seeks to establish the role of stress as a mediator—the topic of the second subsection. Finally, gender might also moderate the relationship between locus of control and work-life balance, with the

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mediation of stress. As such, the last subsection examines the theoretical background for the role of gender in this domain.

2.1. Locus of control

Several researchers try to define and introduce the concept of locus of control while also formulating a scale to measure this construct. For instance, Spector (1988) introduces the term *work locus of control* (WLOC). WLOC mainly determines the extent of one's personal view regarding the level of control in a given work setting. A person that feels that job success depends on their own hard work has an internal locus of control, while a person that feels that many externalities are responsible for their success has an external locus of control. More recent studies focus on the link between these individual views and work conflict. For instance, Michel, Kotrba, Mitchelson, Clark, and Baltes (2011) imply that individuals with a high internal locus of control should be able to effectively balance their work and family demands, as opposed to individuals with high levels of negative affectivity/neuroticism and psychological distress.

According to Ngah, Ahmad, and Baba (2009), women employees who experience higher control levels encounter less work conflict and are more satisfied in their occupations. Similarly, internal locus of control aids individuals in avoiding conflicts between work and family demands (Allen et al., 2012). However, some authors find that women experience lower levels of internal control than men, because entrepreneurial skills are male-stereotyped and make women feel less confident of themselves and their work abilities (Maes, Leroy, & Sels, 2014).

In an attempt to accurately measure the level of employees' work-life balance, Fisher's (2001) 19-item measure, a valid and well-developed scale, measures work-life balance building on three aspects: work interference with personal life (WIPL), personal interference with work (PLIW), and work/personal life enhancement (WPLE). However, this research focuses on the first two dimensions of the measure: WIPL and PLIW (Fisher-McAuley, Stanton, Jolton, & Gavin, 2003).

Drawing on the theoretical negative relationship between internal locus of control and the level of conflict between work and personal life, this study proposes the first set of hypotheses, posing each hypothesis for both a female sample and a male sample separately to account for gender differences. The first two sets of hypotheses for this study are as follows:

H1a. A negative relationship exists between locus of control and PLIW for women.

H1b. A negative relationship exists between locus of control and WIPL for women.

H2a. A negative relationship exists between locus of control and PLIW for men.

H2b. A negative relationship exists between locus of control and WIPL for men.

2.2. Perceived stress

Nowadays, not only are employees being overloaded with demanding and complex job tasks but are also experiencing high levels of job insecurity, which comes hand in hand with high cognitive and emotional demands. Thus, employees need the ideal physical and psychological state to provide them with the necessary focus and energy to cope with these demands (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2014).

The importance of achieving a healthy level of work-life balance directly relates to an individual's overall stress levels, where workers who claim that they are able to balance their work and personal lives experience lower stress levels than those who lack this balance (Ross & Vasantha, 2014). Likewise, the strong positive relationship between

work-life imbalance/conflict and psychological distress reveals that higher levels of conflict lead to higher levels of psychological distress (Brough et al., 2014).

According to Chen and Silverthorne (2008), a higher internal locus of control contributes to lower job stress levels, since internals cope more effectively with stressful events as opposed to externals, who believe that fate or luck controls their life outcomes (Gray-Stanley et al., 2010).

Perceived stress is the degree of stressfulness of a certain incident, with the influence of an individual's surroundings, personality traits, and ability to cope with stressors (Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983). The study proposes the second set of hypotheses addressing the relationship between perceived stress and control and the relationship between perceived stress levels and work-life balance, while also taking into account gender differences. The second set of hypotheses uses perceived stress as the dependent variable and locus of control as the independent variable for hypotheses H3a and H3b. As for hypotheses H4a, H4b, H5a, and H5b, PLIW and WIPL are the dependent variables, whereas perceived stress is the independent variable.

H3a. A negative relationship exists between locus of control and perceived stress for women.

H3b. A negative relationship exists between locus of control and perceived stress for men.

H4a. A positive relationship exists between perceived stress and PLIW for women.

H4b. A positive relationship exists between perceived stress and WIPL for women.

H5a. A positive relationship exists between perceived stress and PLIW for men.

H5b. A positive relationship exists between perceived stress and WIPL for men.

2.3. Work-life balance: a gender perspective

The effect of gender on employees' ability to juggle work and family demands remains significant, where gender acts as a moderator, influencing the perception of work conflicts, the coping skills to deal with this conflict, and the manifestation of the conflict (Higgins, Duxbury, & Lee, 1994).

Unsurprisingly, women report significant challenges when balancing their work and family lives, due to the lack of sufficient time, their husbands' non-involvement in house chores, cultural norms, and gender biases that still exist in the workplace until this day (Rehman & Roomi, 2012). Karkoulian and Halawi's (2007) study shows that female managers' overloading childcare and household responsibilities influence their career achievements. On the other hand, the presence of female employees in the organization seems to encourage the implementation of work-life balance supporting measures (Adam, Capilliure, & Miquel, 2015). Female employees also tend to present a more positive work attitude compared to male counterparts (Selvarajan, Slattery, & Stringer, 2015).

The literature on work-life balance issues for men remains inadequate; however, Evans, Jamie, and Morgan (2013) claim that societal and personal expectations for men's careers and their role within their families and their relationships make work-life balance issues more complex. Similarly, society's expectations for men to act as *financial providers* for their families, as well as societal pressures, cause men to work for longer hours to meet their financial obligations. In addition, since men also desire to spend more hours at home with their families, they end up facing even higher levels of stress or *role overload* (Evans et al., 2013).

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