

Emotional labor and burnout among female teachers: Work–family conflict as mediator

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With the increasing number of women in the workforce, there is a need to understand how the interrelationship between emotions and the demands of work and family influence their well-being. This study examined how emotional labor [surface acting (SA) and deep acting] and work–family conflict contribute to explaining variance in burnout (emotional exhaustion and depersonalization). In a sample of 102 married, female Malay teachers, with at least one child living at home, results showed that SA was positively associated with emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. The results also showed that work–family conflict mediated the relationship between emotional labor and burnout. However, no moderation effect of work–family on the SA–burnout relationship was found. The results are discussed with respect to the general literature on the stress–strain relation and work–family conflict.

Key words: burnout, emotional labor, mediator, work–family conflict.

Introduction

Research on emotion at work is increasingly becoming more important as more workers hold jobs that involve emotional labor, requiring them to regulate their emotions. Emotional labor has been defined as the ‘effort, planning, and control needed to express organizationally desired emotions during interpersonal transactions’ (Morris & Feldman, 1996, p. 987), and it is a crucial aspect of person-related work (Zapf, 2002). It is particularly important in service organizations, which presuppose that clients would be more likely to do business with them if their interactions and experience with the service provider is positive. Since the coining of this term by Hochschild (1983), there has been a proliferation of research examining its conceptualization, antecedents, and consequences (e.g. Grandey, 2000; Montgomery, Panagopolou, Wildt, & Meenks, 2006; Schaubroeck & Jones, 2000; Zapf). These studies have shown that emotional labor is associated with various job and health outcomes. However, the mechanism through which emotional labor influences health outcomes is less clear. One construct that has been posited to serve as a link between emotional labor and health outcomes is work–family conflict (Karim, 2009; Montgomery *et al.*).

Work–family conflict is experienced when demands from one role domain interfere with participation or performance of the other role (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). These demands include time spent at work or on family activities, stressors within the work or family domains, and high

involvement in work or family life (e.g. Aryee, Luk, Leung, & Lo, 1999; Beutell & Wittig-Berman, 1999; Frone, Yardley, & Markel, 1997; Noor, 2003). While many studies have shown work–family conflict to have a direct effect on well-being (see review by Michel, Mitchelson, Kotrba, LeBreton, & Baltes, 2008), others have also viewed work–family conflict as a mediator of relationships between work and family role pressures and individual well-being (e.g. Aryee *et al.*; Frone *et al.*; Noor). Most of these studies, however, have not considered emotional labor as an antecedent of work–family conflict or well-being. However, recent research has suggested emotional labor to be an independent antecedent of work–family conflict (e.g. Cheung & Tang, 2009; Montgomery, Panagopolou, & Benos, 2005), as well as well-being (e.g. Karim, 2009; Näring, Briët, & Brouwers, 2006). Other studies have also suggested that work–family conflict might act as a mediator in the emotional labor–burnout relationship (Montgomery *et al.*, 2006; Montgomery, Peeters, Schaufeli, & Den Ouden, 2003). Thus, the present study combines two areas of interest in the current organizational literature: emotional labor and work–family conflict. As a background to the present work, relevant findings pertaining to the two areas are outlined.

Emotional labor and health outcomes

Based on the works of Hochschild (1983) and Grandey (2000), the regulation of emotions in response to appropriate job-related expectations of emotional behavior is carried out in two ways; surface acting (SA; changing one’s outward emotional expressions without attempting to feel the emotions displayed), and deep acting (DA; changing one’s outward emotional expressions, and at the same time,

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attempting to feel the emotions displayed). In linking emotional labor and burnout, Montgomery *et al.* (2006) proposed that emotional labor can be conceptualized using the theories on emotional inhibition and emotional repression, in which inhibition of emotions is associated with increased physiological arousal, and when this becomes chronic, it can have a negative impact on health, as well as well-being. By separating SA and DA as two distinct methods of regulating emotions, it is possible for emotional labor to have both positive and negative outcomes (Grandey, 2000; Monaghan, 2006, unpublished data).

In support of this relationship, previous research has shown that SA is one of the most powerful positive predictors of burnout (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002; Brotheridge & Lee, 2002; Grandey, 2003; Kruml & Geddes, 2000). DA, however, is not associated with these inhibition and repression processes, thus it is less likely to influence outcomes, and might even result in positive psychological well-being (Brotheridge & Lee; Grandey). Further, a meta-analysis by Bono and Vey (2005) on the relationship between emotional labor and burnout indicates significant, positive associations of emotional labor (SA) with both emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, but not with DA.

Among the many health outcomes, burnout is predominant in the help and service industries (Grandey, 2000), and has been considered by many researchers as a work-related indicator of psychological health (Sorgaard, Ryan, Hill, & Dawson, 2007). While Maslach and Jackson (1986) have conceptualized burnout as consisting of three dimensions, emotional exhaustion (feeling emotionally drained by one's contact with other people), depersonalization (negative feelings and cynical attitudes towards the recipients of one's service or care), and reduced personal accomplishment (a tendency to evaluate negatively one's own work), more recent research has recognized only the first two dimensions as being the core dimensions of burnout (e.g. Lee & Ashforth, 1996; Shirom, 2002). Therefore, the dimension of reduced personal accomplishment is excluded from the present study's definition of burnout.

Emotional labor, work–family conflict, and health outcomes

Research has indicated that work–family conflicts are associated with diminished satisfactions and lower levels of psychological well-being (e.g. Frone, Russell, & Cooper, 1992; Kinnunen & Mauno, 1998; Michel *et al.*, 2008). In addition to this direct effect of work–family conflict on well-being, Frone *et al.* (1992) have suggested that work–family conflict might reflect the goodness of fit between work and family life, and function as a mediator between conditions at work and family and outcomes. Many studies have in fact shown work–family conflict to mediate the stress–strain relationship, acting as a mechanism through

which work and family demands influence well-being (e.g. Eby, Casper, Lockwood, Bordeaux, & Brinely, 2005; Frone *et al.*, 1997; Noor, 2003).

However, there are very few studies that have tested for the mediator role of work–family conflict in the emotional labor–burnout relationship. Past studies testing for the mediator role of work–family conflict have tended to focus on aspects of job demands as the antecedent (such as work overload, role conflicts, role ambiguity, and time strains), with hardly any studies considering emotional demand as a source of stress, although emotions and emotional labor are increasingly becoming more significant in many jobs. However, there are exceptions. Montgomery *et al.* (2006) examined the relationship between emotional labor, work–family interference, and burnout in a sample of 174 male and female workers in a Dutch government organization. They found work–family interference to partially mediate the relationship between SA and both cynicism and psychosomatic complaints. However, there was no mediator effect of conflict on the DA–outcome relationship. In contrast, Karim (2009), using psychological distress as the outcome measure, found work–family conflict to mediate the relationship between both SA and DA with distress, in a sample of male and female Pakistani civil service employees.

These two studies imply that work–family conflict might also act as a mediator in the relationship between emotional labor and burnout (notably emotional exhaustion) or distress. The findings also seemed to show that the mediator role of work–family conflict on the emotional labor–strain relationship is less clear in women. If, as argued by Hochschild (1983), women do more emotion work than men, due to the kinds of jobs that they opt for (i.e. jobs that involve more nurturing and caring for others, such as teaching and nursing), then they would experience more work–family conflict, because even with paid work, women have not relinquished their family demands. Dealing with a husband, children, and managing household responsibilities, in combination with work demands, involves emotional labor, and this is taxing, making conflict between the two domains inevitable. Therefore, as suggested by Wharton and Erickson (1995), there is good reason to believe that work–family conflict might act as a mediator variable in the emotional labor–burnout relationship, especially in women. In addition, although both men and women who occupy work and family roles experience overload and conflict, studies have shown women to be more vulnerable to prolonged fatigue as a result of these demands (Jansen, Kant, Kristensen, & Nijhuis, 2003; Lundberg, Mardberg, & Frankehauser, 1994). A more recent longitudinal study also showed that women experienced more burnout at Time 2 as compared to men, even when controlling for levels of burnout at Time 1 (Prieto, Soria, Martinez, & Schaufeli, 2008), thus our choice of sample for the present study.

Present study

In the present study, the focus is not only on women, but on women in a specific occupation: teaching. In Malaysia, 70% of primary and secondary school teachers are women (The Star Online, 2010). Although teaching, learning, and providing guidance might not be solely emotional practices, they are always irretrievably emotional in character-making emotions and emotional labor integral components of the teaching profession (Hargreaves, 2001). For instance, expressing anger in the classroom is believed to provide an unhealthy model to students (Liljestrom, Roulston, & deMarrais, 2007), and the teacher needs to manage his/her emotions and avoid the experience of anger, or in cases where this is not possible, to avoid the expression of anger. Therefore, as the study of Johnson *et al.* (2005) shows, with regards to their experience of job-related stress across 26 occupations, teachers reported worse than average scores on physical health, psychological well-being, and job satisfaction. It is for this reason that teaching has been considered a high-stress occupation (Gold & Roth, 1993). For female teachers, the demands that they faced with at school, the ensuing stress, and the suppression of these work-related emotions might conflict with conditions at home, leading to burnout and poorer well-being.

The present study used the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory developed by Hobfoll (1988, 1989, 2001) to examine how emotional labor and work–family conflict contribute to explaining variance in burnout. The basic tenet of COR theory is that individuals strive to acquire, maintain, and protect things that they value (known as resources), and stress occurs when these resources are lost, threatened with loss, or when individuals fail to replenish these resources after significant investments. Resources include objects (e.g. a car), conditions (e.g. a good marriage), personal characteristics (e.g. a sense of optimism), and energies (e.g. time). The extent to which these resources are valued and ranked is dependent on culture.

Hobfoll (2001) proposed two important principles of the COR model. The first is that resource loss is more much more salient than resource gain. Past studies have indeed shown that, other things being equal, negative events appear to elicit more physiological, affective, cognitive, and behavioral responses than neutral or positive events (Taylor, 1991). The second principle emphasizes the importance of resource investment, where people would try to minimize and protect these resources.

In applying this model to the workplace, emotional labor (an aspect of job demand) threatens an individual's resources, and over time, prolonged exposure to such demand would result in strain, such as burnout. As many individuals now combine work with family roles, this strain might interfere with their family life, paving the way for work–family conflict. As Asian cultures are 'collective and

familial' (Hofstede & Bond, 1988), women are expected to assume the responsibility for the home and children. This traditional homemaker role expectation, combined with work, has resulted in many being prone to stress, role conflict (Noor, 2003), and role overload (Aziz, 2004). In addition, in the workplace, women have to confront the challenges of cultural taboos, negative attitudes, lack of confidence, and trust in women employees (Al-Lamki, 1999). These studies suggest that women cannot evade from the responsibilities assigned to them by traditions and religions, even when they hold high positions in the workplace. In a recent study in Malaysia, Abdullah, Noor, and Wok (2008) showed that contemporary Malay women are caught in a dilemma between the modern challenges of life and tradition. While many are now employed, they are still expected to be responsible for the family and to maintain the traditional perceptions of a woman (i.e. to maintain their femininity, be subservient to the husband, and be willing to make sacrifices when necessary), which tends to increase their conflict and lead to poorer well-being.

There are few Asian studies that have considered the relationship between emotional labor, work–family conflict, and burnout. The study by Cheung and Tang (2009) of 442 Hong Kong Chinese service employees examined the relationship between emotional labor and work–family interference, and the mediator effect of quality of life on this relationship. They found only SA to be related to work–family interference, and partial support for quality of life as a mediator in this relationship. In another study, Karim (2009) examined the relationship between emotional labor, work–family conflict, and psychological distress among a sample of Pakistani employees, and provided support for work–family conflict acting as a mediator in the emotional labor–distress relationship. While both studies used emotional labor as the antecedent variable, the criterion variables were different. While partial mediation was observed in the former, the latter showed full mediation. These studies did not control for sex- or family-related variables, such as marital status or children.

In utilizing this model for the present study, we focused on three pathways through which emotional labor unfolds its influence on burnout (Fig. 1).

Path A is a direct relationship between emotional labor and burnout. Past studies have consistently provided support for the positive association between the two (e.g. Bono & Vey, 2005; Grandey, 2003; Karim, 2009; Montgomery *et al.*, 2006). Therefore, on the basis of past research, the following hypothesis is predicted:

H1: Emotional labor will be positively related to burnout. Of the two measures of emotional labor, we predicted SA to be more strongly related to burnout than DA, because in SA, there is a discrepancy or dissonance between felt and displayed emotions.

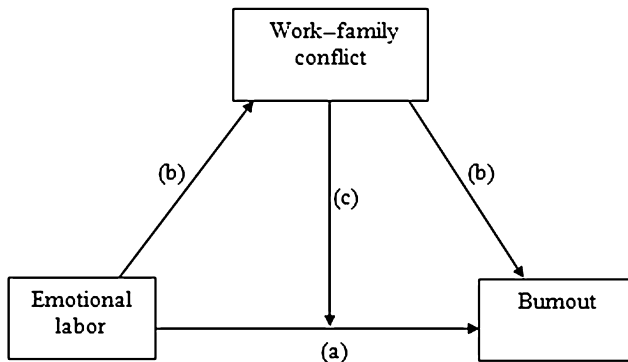


Figure 1 Graphical depictions of the three pathways. (a) Direct effect of emotional labor on burnout (Hypothesis 1). (b) Work–family conflict mediates the emotional labor–burnout relationship (Hypothesis 2). (c) Work–family conflict moderates the emotional labor–burnout relationship (Hypothesis 2).

Path B indicates a mediator role of work–family conflict on the relationship between emotional labor and burnout. While past studies have shown that work–family conflict might mediate the emotional labor–burnout relationship in men, in the few studies that have considered women, the findings are mixed (e.g. Karim, 2009; Montgomery *et al.*, 2006). The mixed results might be due to the samples used, where they were not taken from proper service-related organizations and there was no control for family responsibilities. The present study, in contrast, used a sample of female teachers with family responsibilities. Because we included only women with families (married with at least one child living at home), we knew that their work and family demands would be high. Therefore, we hypothesize the following:

H2: Female teachers who combine work and family responsibilities will experience high emotional labor because they have to constantly regulate their emotions, which will lead them to report more work–family conflict, and consequently, burnout. That is, we expect work–family conflict to play a mediating role in the relationship between emotional labor and burnout.

The third pathway, Path C, shows a moderator role of work–family conflict in the relationship between emotional labor and burnout. In many Malay families, women’s family role is seen to be more salient than the work role, but for many women, work is fast becoming an important aspect of family life because work contributes to the well-being of the family via the income that it provides to the family. Thus, by remaining primarily responsible for housework and childcare, on top of work demands, women would more experience work–family conflict. Therefore, it is not

improbable to assume that the emotional labor–burnout relationship would be stronger in women who experience higher work–family conflict. Thus, the third hypothesis:

H3: Work–family conflict will moderate the relationship between emotional labor and burnout, such that the emotional labor–burnout relationship will be stronger when work–family conflict is higher.

Method

Participants and procedure

Participants were Malay female teachers from several government schools located in the state of Selangor, Malaysia. After permission was obtained from the Ministry of Education, the heads of these schools were approached, and consent was sought to conduct the survey. The school management distributed the questionnaires to female teachers with at least one child, and these were collected within 1 week. A total of 180 questionnaires were passed to the schools, and 102 completed ones were returned, demonstrating a response rate of 56.67%. These 102 responses formed the final sample.

The age of the participants ranged from 26 to 57 years, with a mean of 40.14 years ($SD = 8.23$ years). Participants had between one and eight children; 28% had one child, 23% had two children, 30% had three children, 11% had four children, and the remaining 8% had between five and eight children. The length of the teaching experience ranged from 1 to 34 years ($M = 15.08$ and $SD = 8.71$).

Measures

Emotional labor. SA and DA were measured using Brotheridge and Lee’s six-item scales (Brotheridge & Lee, 1998). A sample item for SA was: ‘On an average day at work, how frequently do you resist expressing your true feeling?’ A sample item for DA was: ‘How frequently do you try to actually experience the emotions that you must show?’ Both items used a five-point scale, ranging from 1 = ‘not at all’ to 5 = ‘always’, with higher scores indicating higher emotional labor. Brotheridge and Lee reported reliabilities for SA and DA as 0.85 and 0.90, respectively. In the present study, the reliabilities were 0.79 for SA and 0.84 for DA, respectively.

Burnout. Burnout was assessed using the Teacher Burnout Inventory (Leong, 1995, unpublished data), which has been adapted from the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) Educators Survey to fit the Malaysian context. The scale, consisting of 22 items, was designed to assess the three

components of burnout – emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment – among teachers. However, in the present study, only the first two components, as explained earlier, were used. The scale used a seven-point response format (0 = ‘never’ to 6 = ‘always’). The 10 items in the emotional exhaustion subscale were meant to assess feelings of being emotionally overextended and exhausted by one’s work. The six items in the depersonalization subscale measured an unfeeling and impersonal response towards recipients of one’s service, care, treatment, or instruction. For both subscales, higher scores corresponded to higher degrees of experienced burnout.

Ping (1997, unpublished data) reported Cronbach’s alphas ranging from 0.74 to 0.79 for the two subscales in a sample of 295 teachers in Malaysia. In the present study, the internal consistency was 0.76 for emotional exhaustion, and 0.72 for depersonalization.

Work–family conflict. This construct was measured using the scale suggested by the Sloan Work–Family Researchers Electronic Network (MacDermid, 2000). It was developed by a virtual think tank comprising of recognized experts in the field of work/life. The measure consists of nine items (Montgomery *et al.*, 2006). Responses were assessed using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = ‘never’ to 5 = ‘always’, with higher scores indicating higher work–family conflict. This scale has been used previously on research in emotional labor and work–life interference, and an alpha level of 0.89 has been reported by Montgomery *et al.* In the present study, the internal consistency was 0.92.

Demographic variables. Information on the women’s age, number of children, and years of teaching experience was collected.

Translation of measures

As the original scales were in English, these measures were translated into Malay using the back-translation method. Two steps were involved. First, the English version of the measures was translated into Malay, the official language used in the teaching profession. Second, the Malay version of the measures was translated back into English. At this stage, any items that appeared discrepant to the meaning of the original items were translated again.

Data analyses

Both descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze the data. Initially, means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations among the variables used in the study were described. Separate hierarchical regression analyses were conducted for the two burnout measures to examine

the direct and moderator effects of emotional labor and work–family conflict on burnout. In the analyses, variables were entered in a predetermined order, with the demographic variables of age, number of children, and years of teaching experience entered as controls at the first step. This was done due to findings from previous research that these variables might influence the hypothesized relationship. For example, Lau, Yuen, and Chan (2005), in their study on Hong Kong secondary school teachers, found that younger teachers and those who have less teaching experience reported more burnout as compared to the older teachers who have more experience in teaching. Number of children has also been associated with increased work and family demands, leading to higher levels of work–family conflict (e.g. Noor, 1994), and consequently, to reduced well-being (e.g. Kinnunen & Mauno, 1998). At Step 2, the emotional labor variables (SA and DA) were entered, followed by work–family conflict at the next step. To test for the moderator effect of work–family conflict, the two interaction terms between emotional labor and work–family conflict were entered after both the emotional labor and work–family conflict terms had been entered as main effects (Cohen, 1978). To facilitate interpretation of the interaction terms, the continuous predictor variables were standardized before analysis.

To test for work–family conflict as a mediator, the studies of Baron and Kenny (1986) and MacKinnon, Lockwood, Hoffman, West, and Sheets (2002) were referred to. Using regression analyses, four separate regressions were recommended. First, the total effect of the independent variable (emotional labor) on the dependent variable (burnout) must be significant. Second, the path from the independent variable (emotional labor) to the mediator (work–family conflict) must be significant. Third, the path from the mediator (work–family conflict) to the dependent variable (burnout) must be significant. Fourth, if the independent variable no longer had any effect on the dependent variable when the mediator was controlled, then complete mediation had occurred. These series of regression analyses were carried out separately for the two burnout measures.

Results

Means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations among variables

The means, standard deviations and intercorrelations among the variables used in the present study are shown in Table 1. As expected, of the demographic variables, age was found to be positively correlated with number of children and length of teaching experience. Of the two measures of emotional labor, only SA was related to work–

Table 1 Means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations of measures

Measures	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Cronbach's α	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Age	40.14	8.23								
2. No.children	2.54	1.40		0.31**						
3. Work experience	15.08	8.71		0.96**	0.31**					
4. Surface acting	7.87	2.06	0.79	0.03	0.13	0.01				
5. Deep acting	9.00	2.19	0.84	0.20*	0.16	0.19	0.36**			
6. Work–family conflict	17.66	6.07	0.92	0.21*	0.02	0.21*	0.43**	0.12		
7. Emotional exhaustion	20.35	8.51	0.76	0.25*	0.11	0.24*	0.36**	0.13	0.46**	
8. Depersonalization	7.01	4.90	0.72	−0.02	0.12	−0.01	0.41**	0.23*	0.35**	0.59**

N = 102; ***p* < 0.01, **p* < 0.05.

Table 2 Regression analyses predicting burnout from emotional labor controlling for age and number of children

Measures	Emotional exhaustion				Depersonalization			
	ΔR^2	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	β	ΔR^2	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	β
Controls:	0.061*				0.017			
Age		5.00	0.028	0.23*		1.65	0.20	−0.06
No. of children		0.16	0.70	0.04		0.30	0.58	0.136
Emotional labor:	0.125**				0.164***			
Surface acting		13.85	0.0001	0.37*		7.22	0.0001	0.361***
Deep acting		0.27	0.61	−0.05		1.08	0.30	0.106
Work–family conflict	0.214***	33.54	0.0001	0.53***	0.051*	6.22	0.014	0.257*
Interaction terms:	0.013				0.020			
Surface acting \times work–family conflict		0.41	0.52	−0.06		2.25	0.14	−0.15
Deep acting \times work–family conflict		1.35	0.25	−0.10		0.03	0.87	−0.02
Cumulative <i>R</i> ²	0.413				0.252			

p* < 0.05; *p* < 0.001; ****p* < 0.0001. β = standardized regression coefficient.

family conflict. Work–family conflict was correlated with both exhaustion and depersonalization. SA was also correlated with the two burnout measures, but DA was correlated only with depersonalization.

Hierarchical regression predicting burnout from emotional labor and work–family conflict

Table 2 shows the results of the analyses predicting burnout from demographic variables, emotional labor, and work–family conflict. Because age and years of work experience were correlated almost perfectly ($r = 0.96$), only age and number of children were entered as controls at the first step of the regression analyses. As can be seen from Table 2 (left side), in the prediction of emotional exhaustion, at Step 1, age was significantly related to exhaustion. At Step 2, when both measures of emotional labor were entered in the regression equation, only SA predicted emotional exhaustion; higher SA was associated with higher exhaustion. Work–family conflict, entered subsequently, was also sig-

nificant. However, the interaction terms between the two emotional labor measures and work–family conflict, entered in the final step, were non-significant. Overall, the model was significant [$F(7,94) = 9.25$, $p < 0.0001$], accounting for 41.3% of the variance in emotional exhaustion.

Using the same model as above, Table 2 (right side) shows that in the prediction of depersonalization, when both measures of emotional labor were entered in the regression analysis, again only SA was significant. Work–family conflict, entered at the next step, was also significantly and positively related to depersonalization. Again, the two interaction terms were non-significant. At this stage, the model was significant [$F(7,94) = 4.42$, $p < 0.0001$], accounting for 25.2% of the variance in depersonalization.

Testing for mediation

Emotional exhaustion as outcome. In the first regression model, after controlling for age and number of children,

Table 3 Testing mediation effect on burnout

	B	SE B	β
Emotional exhaustion			
Surface acting			
Main effect:			
Surface acting	3.16	0.85	0.37**
Testing mediation effect:			
Surface acting	1.06	0.82	0.13
Work–family conflict	0.74	0.13	0.53**
Deep acting			
Main effect:			
Deep acting	–0.45	0.86	–0.05
Testing mediation effect:			
Deep acting	–0.12	0.75	–0.01
Work–family conflict	0.74	0.13	0.53**
Depersonalization			
Surface acting			
Main effect:			
Surface acting	1.77	0.49	0.36**
Testing mediation effect:			
Surface acting	1.19	0.53	0.24*
Work–family conflict	1.26	0.51	0.26*
Deep acting			
Main effect:			
Deep acting	0.52	0.50	0.11
Testing mediation effect:			
Deep acting	0.61	0.49	0.12
Work–family conflict	1.26	0.51	0.26*

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.0001$. B = unstandardized regression coefficient; β = standardized regression coefficient.

when both SA and DA were entered into the regression analysis, only SA was a significant and positive predictor of emotional exhaustion [$F(4,97) = 5.42$, $p < 0.001$]. In the second model, again only SA was a significant and positive predictor of work–family conflict, when both SA and DA were entered in the equation [$F(4,97) = 7.20$, $p < 0.001$]. In model 3, work–family conflict significantly predicted emotional exhaustion [$F(3,98) = 20.54$, $p < 0.0001$], accounting for 36.8% of the variance in emotional exhaustion. In the final model, when work–family conflict was entered with emotional labor, SA was no longer significant, but conflict remained significant [$F(5,96) = 12.53$, $p < 0.0001$], suggesting a complete mediation effect. In other words, the influence of SA on emotional exhaustion was completely mediated via work–family conflict. A Sobel test was also carried out to test whether the difference in the regression weights was significant. The result was significant ($z = 3.75$, $p < 0.001$).

However, DA did not fulfill the necessary mediation requirements (Table 3).

Depersonalization as outcome. In model 1, after controlling for the two demographic variables, only SA was sig-

nificantly and positively related to depersonalization when both the emotional labor scores were entered in the regression analysis [$F(4,97) = 5.26$, $p < 0.001$]. In model 2, again only SA was significantly and positively related to work–family conflict [$F(4,97) = 7.20$, $p < 0.001$]. In model 3, work–family conflict was positively related to depersonalization [$F(3,98) = 5.76$, $p < 0.001$]. In the final model, when conflict was entered, both work–family conflict and SA remained significant, but their effects were greatly reduced [$F(5,96) = 5.68$, $p < 0.0001$], suggesting a partial mediation effect. A Sobel test also indicated a significant result ($z = 1.97$, $p < 0.05$) (Table 3).

Again, DA did not fulfill the necessary mediation requirements.

Discussion

The present study contributes to the understanding of the literature on the emotional labor–burnout relationship in several ways. First, in a sample of female Malay teachers with family responsibilities (married, with at least one child at home), the results showed that when both measures of emotional labor were entered into the regression analysis after controlling for age and number of children, only SA was found to be positively related to burnout. In this more rigorous analysis, DA was not related to burnout, although a significant bivariate correlation between DA and depersonalization was earlier observed ($r = 0.23$, $p < 0.05$). Second, the results showed that work–family conflict mediated the relationship between SA and burnout, with complete mediation for emotional exhaustion and partial mediation for depersonalization. However, no moderation effect of work–family on the SA–burnout relationship was found. These results are further discussed.

Emotional labor, work–family conflict, and burnout

The findings indicating only SA to be positively related to burnout are consistent with many past studies (e.g. Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002; Grandey, 2003; Montgomery *et al.*, 2006), providing cross-cultural support to the negative effect of SA on women’s health. In SA, there is a discrepancy or dissonance between felt and displayed emotions (e.g. a teacher feeling angry with the student, but has to fake and not express the anger as part of the work role), and this emotional dissonance has been shown to be associated with burnout and other negative psychological outcomes. According to Brotheridge and Grandey, SA might also exert its pernicious effect by draining one’s energy. Faking emotional expression, and at the same time realizing that the expression is actually fake, where one could not be her real self, makes one extremely emotionally tired, predisposing her to burnout and other negative outcomes.

DA occurs when individuals actively regulate their outer expressions to be in line with their role and the expressions that they are expected to display. Because this requires conscious regulation on the part of the individual, it is only possible if the primary task is interrupted (e.g. a teacher who is trying to stop feelings of anger at a difficult student might leave the situation and talk to her colleagues), or if a part of the task can be done routinely with little attention. In most cases, teachers do not have the luxury of time to do so, and many would not use this strategy, although it is expected of them. Or as mentioned by Grandey (2003), 'DA minimizes emotional dissonance by bringing feelings in line with expressions, so DA's relationship with emotional exhaustion should be weaker than the relationship between SA and emotional exhaustion' (p. 89). Thus, it is not surprising to find DA to be unrelated to burnout when both SA and DA were entered simultaneously in the multiple regression analysis, despite DA having a significant bivariate correlation with depersonalization.

These findings support past studies on the primacy of SA over DA in the prediction of burnout, and show that the emotional labor–burnout relationship also holds equally well in other non-Western contexts.

The results also showed that one pathway by which SA influences burnout is via work–family conflict, with full mediation observed for emotional exhaustion, and partial mediation for depersonalization. These female teachers who combined work and family responsibilities experience high SA because they have to constantly regulate their emotions, and this in turn leads them to report more work–family conflict, and consequently, emotional exhaustion. For depersonalization, however, mediation was only partial. That is, these mediated pathways imply that for female teachers with family responsibilities, SA exacerbates work–family conflict, which leads to burnout, notably emotional exhaustion. Thus, while employers might have the right to ask their staff to act in a certain way or engage in cognitive activities, emotional regulation might be outside what employers can ask (Briner & Totterdell, 2002). These emotional demands will then spill over from work to family, increasing work–family conflict. Therefore, as suggested by Maslach (1982) and Montgomery *et al.* (2006), people working in emotional and demanding environments might need to 'decompress' themselves before moving home into their private sphere.

While these results might seem contrary to earlier findings reported by Noor (1999), that Malay women might be protected from adverse outcomes by factors within their society, such as religion and kinship support, they are nevertheless consistent with more recent findings. In their community study, Din and Noor (2009) found urban Malay women to report a higher prevalence of current depressive symptoms than rural women. One reason is due to urban women living in isolated nuclear families, no longer

enmeshed within their traditional kin-based support systems. In the present sample, the women were teachers living in urban areas. Being employed, while at the same time raising a family, within a society that still places extreme importance on women's family role and the upholding of traditional perceptions of what a woman should be like (Abdullah *et al.*, 2008), might take an especially high toll on these women.

Therefore, without their traditional sources of support, it follows that these Malay women would be especially vulnerable to work–family conflict, being emotionally drained, and subsequently, depression. In fact, as noted by Yapko (1997), cross-cultural studies data showed that as Asian countries modernized, their rate of depression increased correspondingly.

While the COR model has normally been used to test for the mediating role of work–family conflict in the stress–strain relationship (e.g. Cheung & Tang, 2009), the moderating role of work–family conflict on the emotional labor–burnout relation, although implied by the model, has hardly been considered. We tested for the moderator pathway to examine if women experiencing higher work–family conflict would be worse off in terms of the emotional labor–burnout relationship. The finding, however, was non-significant. Therefore, with respect to work–family conflict on the emotional labor–burnout relationship, only the mediator effect was found, providing further support of the mediating role of work–family conflict within the general stress–strain literature.

Limitations of the study

There are several limitations in the present study. First, the size of the sample was relatively small. In addition, all the women were working in government schools. Thus, the result could not be generalized to teachers who are working in private schools because their responsibilities, workload, and the amount of emotional labor that are required on the job might be different from teachers who are working in government schools. In addition, these teachers were all teaching in an urban area. Also, as the sample consisted of only women teachers, the same could not be said for male teachers, who usually would be less burdened by family responsibilities, as this is seen to be the women's domain. Furthermore, the female–male relationship might again be different in the different ethnic groups in the country, as well as to other cultures outside Malaysia.

Second, all measures in the study were self-reports, subjecting the results to problems of method variance. Although other objective measures would strengthen the study (e.g. from the head teachers and spouses), these sometimes might not be possible, especially when subjective states are assessed. Because what matters to the individual is her perception of her experience, rather than

evaluations made by others, self-reports would reflect the importance and significance of the constructs, as perceived by the woman.

Third, the design of the study was cross-sectional, thus causal relationships cannot be ascertained. In the mediation analysis, for instance, it is equally possible for SA to cause women to suffer from burnout, which is then associated with high conflict. Longitudinal studies would help provide a better understanding of the relationship between emotional labor, conflict, and burnout.

Finally, individual difference variables (e.g. negative affectivity and emotional expressivity), job demands (e.g. job autonomy and overload), organizational climate (e.g. support at work), and support at home (e.g. spouse support and paid help at home) were not controlled. Given that these variables might affect the emotion regulation process, it might be necessary for future studies to consider how they might influence the relationship between emotional labor, work–family conflict, and burnout.

Implications and recommendations

With the increasing number of women in the workforce, especially in the service sector, the help and teaching professions, there is a need to understand how the interrelationship between emotions and the demands of work and family influence their well-being. SA was found to be an important predictor of burnout, and work–family conflict acted as a mediator in the relationship between SA and burnout. That is, work–family conflict had an indirect effect on the SA–burnout relationship, rather than a more direct moderator effect. These results highlight the need to

recognize emotions and emotional work demands as sources of stress that might influence the well-being of female teachers with family responsibilities. Due to their emotional demands, they experience work–family conflict and burnout, thus they need to be assisted in terms of how to manage these demands. Training for teachers that raises awareness of the need to ‘decompress’ when moving from one role situation to another is important.

The finding that DA was not predictive of burnout can be a reference in developing training modules for the teachers. Training programs that teach employees emotional management, specifically on DA strategies, such as ‘psyching themselves up’, before going to work so that the emotions they feel are genuine or to role play emotionally difficult situations without being stretched, would indeed be beneficial for the teachers. Schools can also provide some training programs, such as conflict management, stress management, and relaxation techniques, to help teachers cope effectively with stress and burnout. In addition, supportive work superiors have been shown to influence the emotional experiences of their employees (e.g. McColl-Kennedy & Anderson, 2002).

Finally, to aid these female teachers, policies and guidelines pertaining to their working hours, workloads, and other work–family-related issues, such as child rearing, should be revised or developed to ensure that these women can have some balance between their work and family demands. Moreover, promoting greater awareness on the importance of sharing responsibilities between partners should be carried out so that husbands can play a more equal role at home to reduce the burden of their wives’ work–family conflict.

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