

MARCUS MUELLER

Gender Differences in the Impact of Worklife on Executives' Psychological Health

1. Introduction

Literature points at the substantial impact related to senior executive decisions for themselves, their families, their organizations, and society (Hambrick & Mason, 1984; Kets De Vries & Florent-Treacy, 2002; Kets De Vries & Korotov, 2005). Specifically, senior executives' psychological health has been highlighted as pre-requisite of cognitive performance and sound decision-making, in turn determining the well-being of individuals, organizations and society. If psychological health is positive, senior executives help create "individual and collective value", if negative, they can be "a threat to the executive, the organization, family and community" (Quick & Quick, 2013, p. 798). Senior executives have been further described as a unique research population associated with the specific challenges of executive job environments (Cameron, 2007; Cooper & Marshall, 1978; Hambrick, Finkelstein, & Mooney, 2005; Levinson, 1964/1985, 2006; Loehr & Schwartz, 2003; Lynch, 2000; Quick, Mack, Gavin, Cooper, & Quick, 2004; Quick & Quick, 2013). This postulate has recently been extended to questions of diversity in the upper echelons

Marcus Mueller, Ph.D.,
 Professor of Management,
 Sacred Heart University, Luxembourg,
 ID ORCID: 0000-0001-8311-3331.

by claiming that “research is still lacking investigations into gender differences in psychological well-being in the context of organizations, and the few studies exploring such considerations either neglected senior leaders or were limited to qualitative research” (Mills & Grotto, 2017, p. 83).

This large-scale, quantitative investigation examined the psychological well-being (PWB) of senior executives, specifically gender differences in the relationship of worklife factors and PWB. The outcomes of this study deliver theoretical findings on the psychology of senior executives as a basis for future research. In practice, the results could form the basis for gender-specific organizational design, training and development programs for senior leaders.

2. Literature Review

Senior executives. In 2013, popular press articles featured the suicides of Carsten Schloter, CEO of Swisscom, shortly followed by Pierre Waulthier’s, CFO of Zurich Insurance, postulating intolerable stress and pressure at top management levels. For example, a rage of print media pointed at increasingly hostile and lonely executive work environment, rising stakes related to senior executive decisions, rising tensions with stakeholders, depersonalization and a disintegration of private life and support due to over-commitment at work (Reuters, 2013). At the same time, there has been a recent increase in the inflow of women into senior executive positions, for example Marissa Mayer at Yahoo, Sheryl Sandberg at Facebook, Merilyn Hewson at Lockheed Martin, or Mary Barra at General Motors. Science does not seem to have responded to recent business challenges such as senior executive diversity and well-being by increasing levels of research activity. About a decade ago, Ashkanasy and Jordan (2008) pointed at a lack of research in the organizational sciences exploring aspects of people’s inner life at work. Amabile and Kramer (2007) commented in similar fashion, displaying their dissatisfaction with the quality and quantity of academic findings on workplace psychology as a driver of performance and well-being. According to a review of literature, this lack of research into work life psychology seems to persist to date. It also appears to be particularly salient with regards to the psychology of senior executives. This perspective is further supported by Quick and Quick (2013) who specifically highlight the need for gender studies into senior executives’ psychology and well-being as “fertile ground for inquiry” (pp.809-10).

Scientific studies investigating gender differences in the psychology of senior executives have been limited (Jayanthi & Vanniarajan, 2012; Mills & Grotto,

2017). So far, research has not detected an overall difference between women and men's levels of psychological well-being. At the same time, several studies seem to indicate that differing social contextual factors such as community and work-life balance are related to differing levels in PWB by gender. For example, in respect of the community factor, women in male-dominated settings such as today's executive teams ('one in five C-level executives is a woman' McKinsey, 2017) have been found to have worse PWB than their male colleagues (Gardiner & Tiggemann, 1999; Wegge, Roth, Neubach, Schmidt, & Kanfer, 2008). In the context of work-life balance, compared to men, fewer female senior executives were found to be married with fewer children than desired, negatively impacting their PWB (Hewlett, 2002; Hurley & Choudhary, 2016). A recent quantitative study by Mueller and Lovell (2018) identified a complementarity effect in senior executives' PWB showing that female executives' PWB was exclusively driven by feelings of relatedness at work. In contrast, male executives' PWB did not show a significant relationship with relatedness but was strongly associated with feelings of autonomy and competence at work instead.

Relatedness has been defined as "(a) frequent personal interactions marked by (b) stability, and mutual affective concern" (p. 500) and "feeling connected with others and having a sense of belonging within one's community. Relatedness satisfaction entails a sense that one is significant to others, which is often manifest in others' willingness to care for one or to receive the care one has to offer". It seems that the social contextual factors of community and work-life balance give expression to female executives' need for relatedness, in turn, predicting female executives' PWB.

In conclusion, Mills and Grotto (2017) suggest that the field of gender differences in PWB in organizations was still under-researched, neglecting senior executives and limited to qualitative research designs (p.83). However, the limited research seems to indicate that there are significant gender differences in the impact of social contextual factors on senior executives' PWB. Such differences appear to be particularly salient in the areas of 'community' and 'work-life balance'.

Well-being. "Psychology has, since World War II, become a science largely about healing" focusing on "repairing damage within a disease model of human functioning" with "almost exclusive attention to pathology" (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 5). The origins of modern psychology studying well-being are credited to Diener's seminal work in the field of subjective well-being (Diener, 1984) and Seligman's foundational contributions on positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Since then, well-being has received increasing attention by social scientific research. Two dimensions of well-being

have crystallized as a result of an evolving theory of well-being: a hedonic view and an eudaimonic view (Huta & Ryan, 2010; Ryan & Deci, 2001).

When Kahneman et al. (1999) first introduced what he called a “new field of psychology” (p. ix), the concept of well-being was considered from a hedonic perspective, focusing on outcomes such as “feeling good, seeking pleasure and maximizing happiness”. On the other hand, eudaimonic well-being represents the second dimension which is rather process- than outcome-focused, which means living well (Ryan & Deci, 2001) and in congruence with one’s true self (Waterman, 1993). Huta and Ryan (2010) conclude “that hedonia and eudaimonia occupy both overlapping and distinct niches within a complete picture of well-being.” (p.735). In summary, when researching well-being, scientists need to clearly spell out the theoretical perspective of their investigations: eudaimonic, hedonic, or both.

This study was undertaken on the basis of the eudaimonic understanding of well-being. For example, scientific work based on self-determination theory (SDT) has yielded the concept of vitality, “a positive and phenomenologically accessible state of having energy available to the self” (Ryan & Deci, 2001, p. 152) as a measure for well-being. Ryan and Frederick (1997) could show in a series of six studies how subjective vitality correlated with both, psychological and physical factors, suggesting it as a well founded predictor of psychological and somatic well-being.

Psychological well-being (PWB) is a comparatively new aspect in the context of organizations. Historically, employers have focused on the somatic perspective of workers’ and employees’ well-being. Occupational health and safety regulations, for example by the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2016), have focused on the industry-specific prevention of physical harm at workplaces. Only recently, regulators have started campaigning for preventive actions in the field of psychological ill-being at work (EU-OSHA, 2012; SafeWorkAustralia, 2012), highlighting psychological ill-being as “an imminent burden on global social welfare due to increasing health-related cost and a threat to organizations based on decreasing productivity of workers and employees” (Dollard & Bailey, 2013; Hall, Dollard, & Coward, 2010). PWB seems to be a particularly challenging topic for senior executives. For example, Quick et al.’s (2013) review of literature identified “stress, burnout, social isolation, traumas and tragedies”, and toxic emotional effects including “anxiety, anger or rage”, as specific factors draining senior executives’ PWB. Even though there is literature on the psychology of senior executives, it is mostly based on qualitative research designs raising questions over the reliability and generalisability of its findings (Mills &

Grotto, 2017). The prevailing method of data collection was through case studies from the medical profession or coaching situations such as Kets de Vries' work on toxic leader pathologies (Kets de Vries, 2014). This investigation used a large-scale quantitative sampling method to address the above limitations of previous, qualitative research.

This present research. In the light of the identified gaps in literature, this study investigated gender differences in work-life factors predicting senior executives' PWB with a particular focus on the social contextual factors of community and work-life balance.

3. Method

Procedure and Participants. A total number of 481 senior executives provided data for this study. The author sent an email to his network of contacts. It included a link to an online survey. Recipients of the email were asked to further distribute the link to their respective networks. Consent was received by participation. No incentives or compensation were provided for participation.

Survey participants were categorized as senior executives based on self-reported data in terms of: holding a 'chief' (C-level) position such as Chief Executive Officer, Chief Financial Officer, Chief Operating Officer, or Chief Marketing Officer (*response: Yes/No*) and fulfilling at least 4 of the five core qualifications criteria of the U.S. government's senior executive service (SeniorExecutiveService, 2012) they were performing as part of their job (*response: ticking/not ticking each of five options*). Of the 481 participants that were categorized as senior executives (24% women, $M_{age} = 49.2$ years, $SD_{age} = 6.2$), 25% came from North America, 24% from Europe, 21% from Asia, 18% from Australia, 10% from South America and 2% from Africa.

Measures. All survey items were in English. Given that senior executives are very busy and concerned for confidentiality (Conti & O'Neil, 2007; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, & Jackson, 2008), survey format and the number of questions were tested with several senior executives during the design phase of the research project. As a result the questionnaire was limited to 40 questions to ensure feasibility. Unfortunately, this limit did not allow for questions on potential control variables such as tenure, time in position, level of education, or income were kept to a minimum which represents a limitation to study outcomes.

Worklife factors. The Areas of Worklife Scale (AWS; Leiter & Maslach, 1999) was used to assess worklife factors. The original 28-item scale has six dimensions,

workload (5 items), control (4 items), reward (4 items), community (5 items), fairness (6 items), and values (4 items). For this study a seventh dimension was added, namely work-life balance (3 items). Responses were made on a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Scores for each subscale were computed by averaging associated individual item scores; high scores indicated a high degree of alignment between individual work factors and participants' preferences.

Psychological well-being. PWB was measured by using the the trait Subjective Vitality Scale (SVS, Ryan & Frederick, 1997). Responses were made on a 7-point Likert-type scale indicating the degree to which a statement (e.g. 'I feel alive and vital') was considered true in general, ranging from 1 (not true at all) to 7 (very true). The score was computed by averaging the individual item scores; a high score represented higher PWB.

4. Results

One-way between groups analysis of variance (ANOVA) and independent t-test did not demonstrate any significant mean differences in the levels of the seven worklife factors and PWB by gender. In a second step, a standard multiple regression (MRA) analyses for gender differences in the relationship between PWB and worklife factors was performed. Table 1 shows the results for each worklife factor for male and female senior executives.

Table 1. Standardized (β)Regression Coefficients, and Squared Semi-Partial Correlations (sr^2) for each Worklife Factor in a Regression Model predicting PWB by Gender

| | Female | | | Male | | |
|---------------------------------------|---------|--------|-----------|---------|--------|-----------|
| | β | sr^2 | p | β | sr^2 | p |
| Workload | .231 | .029 | < .05* | .020 | .000 | |
| Control | .007 | .000 | | .013 | .000 | |
| Reward | .391 | .049 | < .05* | .289 | .051 | < .01** |
| Fairness | .004 | .000 | | .324 | .040 | < .05* |
| Community | .337 | .034 | < .01** | .320 | .026 | < .05* |
| Values | .023 | .000 | | .691 | .090 | < .001*** |
| Work-Life Balance | .675 | .080 | < .01** | .199 | .033 | < .01** |
| Adj. R^2 (Combined ^(a)) | | .156 | < .001*** | | .212 | < .001*** |

^(a) Represents the combined effect of all worklife factors on PWB; if this study would be replicated many times with samples drawn from the same population, worklife factors, on average would account for 15.6% of the variance in female executives' PWB and 21.2% of the variance in male executives' PWB.

Source: own study

Data analysis showed extremely large effects of worklife factors on both female and male senior executives which were significant at the $p < .001$ level. For female executives, *work-life balance* was the strongest predictor of PWB, followed by *reward*, *community* and *workload*. The worklife factors of *control*, *values*, and *fairness* did not show any significant levels of relationship with female PWB. In contrast, *values* was the dominant worklife factor associated with male executives' PWB, followed by *reward*, *fairness*, *work-life balance*, and *community*. No relationship could be detected between the worklife factors of *workload* and *control* and male executives' PWB.

5. Discussion

The review of literature at the beginning of this article highlighted the impact of senior executive psychology on their own well-being as well as the well-being of organizations and society. However, the substantial ramifications of senior executive psychology have not been reflected in a comparative level of scholarly research activity. For example, Hambrick et al. (2005) emphasized the exceptional conditions of senior executives' environments and described senior executives as the most promising but overlooked field of academic inquiry in the organizational sciences. Despite Hambrick et al.'s (2005) call for an increase in attention to senior executive psychology, more than a decade later, Mills and Grotto (2017) arrived at similar conclusions. Specifically, Mills and Grotto (2017) propose senior executive psychology as a unique but neglected field of investigation to further suggest a particular gap at the intersection of gender differences and well-being. This large scale, quantitative study responded to the above shortcomings by investigating gender differences in relationship of senior executives' perceptions of worklife factors and PWB with a particular focus on community and work-life balance.

This investigation found significant differences between female and male senior executives when it comes to the relationship between worklife factors and PWB. There are three areas of research that may provide perspectives on the above results.

First of all, academic scholars have identified gender-based behavioral differences. Men tend to be more task-oriented, opinionated, as well as assertive and women more process-oriented, caring, as well as agreeable (Karakowsky & Siegel, 1999; Myakowsky, Unikel, & Dew, 2005; Wegge et al., 2008). In turn, such gender-specific behavioral patterns are associated with perceptions (Hurley

& Choudhary, 2016). That is, men and women are filtering and interpreting environmental cues according to their respective behavioral patterns. The significant differences in worklife factors predicting PWB between male (top 3: values, reward, fairness) and female (top 3: work-life balance, reward, community) executives may be explained by this mechanism.

Secondly, despite an increasing number of women advancing to senior leadership positions, they still do at a comparatively lower rate than men (McKinsey, 2017). However, based on the above behavioral pattern, women traditionally continue to care for familial needs (Schiebinger & Gilmartin, 2010). As a result, senior executive women have been struggling with interrole conflict due to overcommitment at work and at home. This may explain the strong links between work-life balance and, to a lesser extent, the related factor of workload on senior executive women's PWB. In addition, the results of this study provide an organizational perspective on fewer female senior executives being married with fewer children than desired (Hewlett, 2002; Hurley & Choudhary, 2016), possibly in order to avoid work-home conflicts. This hypothesis seems to be valid based on a recent proliferation in literature postulating increasing needs for flexible work arrangements ('flexwork') to support upper rank women in the resolution of interrole conflicts (DiRenzo, Greenhaus, & Weer, 2011; Mills & Grotto, 2017; O'Brien, Martinez, Ruggs, Rinehard, & Hebl, 2015). *Work-life balance* was also significantly related to male senior executives' PWB. Given that familial responsibilities are increasingly also expected of and performed by men (Mills & Grotto, 2017), organizations may need to adjust their support for both male and female leaders.

Thirdly, diversity literature in the field of group dynamics has offered inconsistent results on the relationship between gender diversity and PWB. However, a study by Wegge et al. (2008) identified group size as a moderating factor in that relationship. Wegge et al. (2008) findings suggest that the PWB of a minority within a group increases with the size of the group due to an increased perception of *community* based on "(a) the same proportion of a minority is subjectively more prominent in larger teams and (b) the likelihood of same-gender dyadic communication processes also increases with team size" (p. 1310). Given the significance of community on female senior executives' PWB in this study, the results can help explain why in male-dominated settings such as today's executive teams have been found to have worse PWB than their male colleagues (Gardiner & Tiggemann, 1999). Too few female senior executives as part of an executive team may feel excluded, rejected, or ostracized.

Limitations and Future Research. There are limitations to this study. First of all, this investigation into worklife factors and PWB in senior executives does not allow for conclusions in the context of cause and effect. Even though worklife factors have been postulated as antecedents of PWB (Leiter & Maslach, 1999), a reverse causal effect between worklife factors and PWB could be possible. For example, possibly people with higher PWB may derive more *community* or better *work-life balance* from the same environmental cues than individuals lower on PWB. Longitudinal as well as experimental designs could help examine causality as part of future research. Secondly, only a very limited amount of demographic information was collected from participants. For example, demographic data such the level of education, tenure, income, firm size, years in company and position, location, marital status, or number of children could have effects that were not addressed by this study. Given the challenges of studying senior executives, future research may be expected to progress in comparatively smaller steps based on the limited scope for designs. Thirdly, this study collected large-scale, quantitative data only. As a result, the findings are high on reliability but low on validity. That means, this research provides little practical guidance on actual organizational design, training, and development measures. Instead, the findings can serve as a navigation tool for “where to look” for future research questions and organizational solutions. For example, qualitative, constructivist study designs exploring the meanings of worklife factors to male and female senior executives could provide more valid academic and practical insights into how to design and implement organizational measures.

Practical Implications. From an organizational design, training, and development perspective, the results of this research could serve as guide for a module in an executive development program identifying how male and female executives conceptualize and perceive individual worklife factors in their respective work environments. For example, in the context of *work-life balance*, individual executives could be asked to respond to the following questions as part of a coaching or development session:

1. What does work-life balance mean to you?
2. What is negatively impacting your work-life balance from a work perspective?
3. Which change(s) at work would support your work-life balance?

Individual responses to the above questions could then be translated into organizational re-design measures such as flexwork as well as training on improving senior executives’ work-life balancing skills. In the context of *community*, the findings suggest a ‘meaningful’ gender-mix at the top as

a comparatively small group of female executives may suffer from feelings of exclusion, rejection, or ostracism, leading to lower levels of PWB.

6. Conclusions

This research identified significant gender differences in the profiles of senior executives worklife factors in relation to their PWB. Even though this study was not designed to draw causal conclusions, literature has highlighted worklife factors as antecedents of organizational outcomes such as motivation, performance, and well-being (Gagné & Deci, 2005; Leiter & Maslach, 1999; TheGallupOrganization, 1992-1999). Study results suggest that female and male senior executives differ significantly in terms of the profile of worklife factors impacting their PWB. Given the high stakes associated with senior executives' actions, organizational design, training and development programs should identify aspects of worklife factors negatively impacting senior executives' PWB as a contribution to executives', organizational, community, and societal well-being.

Summary

The Impact of Worklife on Executives' Psychological Health

Purpose: This is the first scientific research studying the impact of worklife factors on executives' psychological health by gender. The study has a particular focus on the factors of 'Community' and 'Work-life balance'.

Design: Survey data were collected from N=481 senior executives to measure seven worklife factors and psychological health. Standardized regression analysis was performed for each worklife in a regression model predicting psychological health by gender.

Findings: Results showed significant differences between female and male senior executives in the profiles of seven worklife factors in terms of their relationship with psychological health. 'Work-life balance' was the strongest predictor of female executives' psychological health, 'Values' for male executives' psychological health. 'Community' showed similar levels of association for both women and men.

Originality/value: This research addresses the literature gap of large-scale, quantitative investigations into the psychology of senior

executives. The results can be applied as a guide for organizational design, executive training and development programs accounting for differences by gender.

Keywords: *Leadership, Executives, Well-being.*

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