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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.

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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Sav et al. (2013) indicate that although men experience work-life conflict, their perception of work as an obligation and a way of supporting their families influences their experience, where this perception dilutes the negative effect of work-life complications and conflicts. As for Hofacker and Konig's (2013) findings, men and women differ in the way that they deal with work arrangements, where flexibility in work arrangements leads to a decrease in work-life conflict for women but an increase in work-life conflict for men.

Literature on men's work–family conflict centers on work as a source of identity shaping and self-esteem for men, portraying fatherhood as a less significant obligation. The literature still considers women as victims of cultural expectations to spend more time at home with their children, and as less committed to paid work than men (Watts, 2009). Research states that men, as fathers, spend more time at work to compensate for the income decrease resulting from the wife leaving her job to take care of the kids or simply use work as an escape to a calmer atmosphere (Watts, 2009).

3. Method

This article posits a model with stress mediating the relationship between locus of control and PLIW and WIPL. The study examines this proposed relationship in both men and women. Fig. 1 depicts these theorized relationships.

3.1. Research design and data collection

Employees working within the Lebanese banking sector completed a questionnaire survey, guaranteeing the respondents full anonymity and confidentiality. This study chose the banking industry in Lebanon due to its major contribution to the Lebanese economy and its wide range of functions. The study targeted employees with a managerial post and in the 25–40 year age range, since managers within this age range seem to suffer the most from work-life conflicts. The collection of data occurred between the months of August to November 2014, with a total of 320 responses. The questionnaire collected information on external and internal locus of control, levels of perceived stress at work, levels of work-life balance for employees, and the demographic characteristics of the respondents.

3.2. Construct measures and method of analysis

Spector's (1988) WLOC scale measured locus of control. The questionnaire asked respondents to rate ten statements on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree), where lower scores represent lower levels of control (i.e., external locus of control) and higher scores represent higher levels of control (i.e., internal locus of control). Previous studies with alpha coefficients ranging from 0.75 to 0.85 confirmed both the scale's reliability and its construct validity (Spector, 1988). This research found a similar Cronbach alpha score for the WLOC items, with a value of 0.78.

Cohen et al.'s (1983) scale measured perceived stress. Respondents rated five items on a 5-point scale (1 = Very Often; 5 = Never), where higher scores represent higher levels of perceived stress. Studies confirmed this scale's validity and reliability, with a Cronbach alpha of 0.82 (Andreou et al., 2011); additionally, this study found a similar value of 0.901. Hayman's (2005) scale measured work-life balance, selecting two out of three dimensions for this study: PLIW and WIPL. Respondents rated, on a 5-point scale (1 = Never; 5 = Very Often), five items that measured PLIW and six items that measured WIPL. Higher scores indicate that respondents frequently experience a conflict between work and personal life and thus have a lower level of work-life balance. Studies confirm this instrument's reliability and validity with a Cronbach alpha of 0.70 (Fisher-McAuley et al., 2003); additionally, this study found similar values of 0.79 for the PLIW items and 0.86 for the WIPL items.

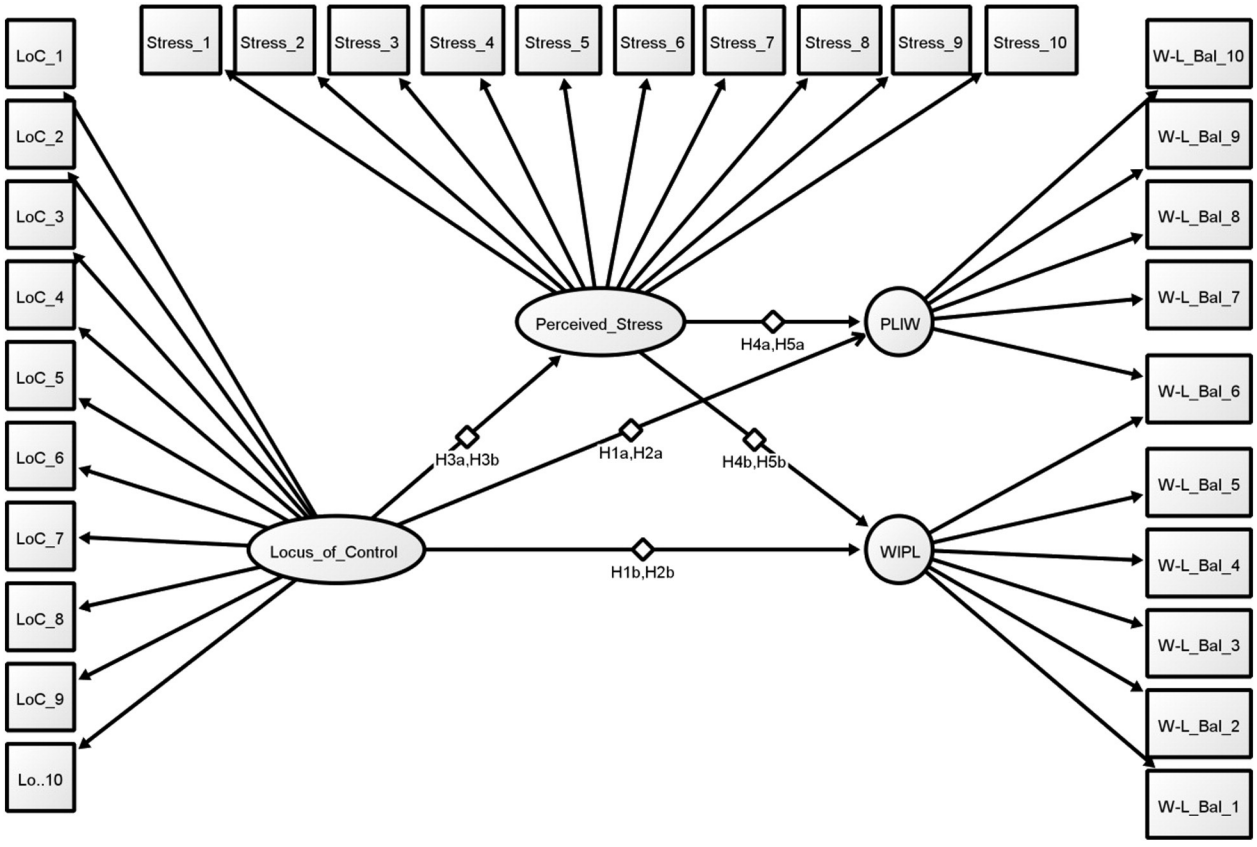

Fig. 1. General model for research.

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Table 1
Summary of descriptive statistics for all variables.

			LoC (10 items)	Perceived stress (10 items)	PLIW (5 items)	WIPL (6 items)
Cronbach's Alpha (full dataset, n = 320)			0.775	0.901	0.798	0.863
External LoC	*Male*	Mean	30.29	3.36	2.86	3.25
		N	80.00	80.00	80.00	80.00
		Std. Deviation	3.97	0.67	0.72	0.82
	Female	Mean	29.63	3.22	2.48	3.18
		N	73.00	73.00	73.00	73.00
		Std. Deviation	4.21	0.67	0.75	0.81
	Total	Mean	29.97	3.30	2.68	3.21
		N	153.00	153.00	153.00	153.00
		Std. Deviation	4.09	0.67	0.75	0.81
Internal LoC	*Male*	Mean	39.94	2.79	2.70	3.08
		N	80.00	80.00	80.00	80.00
		Std. Deviation	3.06	0.68	0.76	0.78
	Female	Mean	39.63	2.66	2.17	2.62
		N	87.00	87.00	87.00	87.00
		Std. Deviation	2.97	0.71	0.66	0.70
	Total	Mean	39.78	2.73	2.42	2.84
		N	167.00	167.00	167.00	167.00
		Std. Deviation	3.01	0.70	0.75	0.77
Total LoC	*Male*	Mean	35.11	3.08	2.78	3.16
		N	160.00	160.00	160.00	160.00
		Std. Deviation	5.99	0.73	0.74	0.80
	Female	Mean	35.07	2.92	2.31	2.87
		N	160.00	160.00	160.00	160.00
		Std. Deviation	6.15	0.75	0.71	0.80
	Total	Mean	35.09	3.00	2.54	3.02
		N	320.00	320.00	320.00	320.00
		Std. Deviation	6.06	0.74	0.76	0.81

This study used the SPSS software to perform correlation analysis on the variables, along with descriptive statistics for each variable. The analysis used the "Ωnyx" software, a graphical interface for Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), to impute latent, unobserved variables (locus of control, stress, and work-life balance) from the observed measures that the research obtained through the survey.

4. Results and findings

Descriptive statistics of the respondents show that half of the employees are female employees and the other half are male. The majority is between 20 and 30 years, hold a Bachelor's degree, and have between 1 to 5 years of experience.

4.1. Correlation analysis results

While the performance of the SEM uses standardized means, the non-standardized means for each measure are also instructive. Table 1 summarizes the mean and standard deviation for the locus of control variable. The locus of control variable serves to divide further the respondents into two groups, one with a high external locus of control, and one with a high internal locus of control. The research uses the median value in the full locus of control measure to make this split.

As Table 1 shows, the external locus of control group has a mean of 29.97 with a standard deviation of 4.09, while the internal locus of control group has a mean of 39.78 with a standard deviation of 3.06. These numbers indicate a significant difference between the means for the External Control scores and those for the Internal Control, which justifies the grouping of the respondents into the external locus of control and internal locus of control groups. Subdividing these groups by gender reveals that the locus of control measure is not correlated to gender. Hence, the total number of respondents fell into four different categories: "Male, External LoC" (80 respondents), "Female, External LoC" (73 respondents), "Male, Internal LoC" (80 respondents), and "Female, Internal LoC" (87 respondents). The results of Table 1 show that the Cronbach alpha values for all the variables in this study are above 0.70, thus indicating a high internal consistency and reliability.

Table 2 shows the Pearson Correlation results between WLOC and each of the three variables: PLIW, WIPL, and perceived stress. The groups of respondents draw on gender and locus of control.

Drawing from the results in Table 2, the correlation between WLOC and perceived stress is significant, moderate, and negative for all categories (i.e., "Male, External LoC", "Female, External LoC", "Male, Internal LoC", and "Female, Internal LoC"). However, the relationship between WLOC and perceived stress seems to be stronger for the External LoC category (both males and females), as compared to the Internal LoC category. The External LoC category (both males and females) also shows a much stronger and higher significant negative correlation between WLOC and WIPL than the Internal LoC category. Thus, within the External LoC category a shift towards a higher level of LoC has significant impact on the reduction of Work Interfering in Personal Life. For all categories the relationship between WLOC and PLIW is weak, negative, and only of borderline significance.

4.2. Structural equation modeling (SEM) results

Table 3 shows the chi-squared (χ^2) fit, the estimates that predict the relationship among the variables under study, and the significance of the relationship between each set of variables in the model across the four categories of respondent. These results appear on their respective paths in Fig. 2a–d, for each category of respondents. Note that in fitting these models, perceived stress fully mediates the relationship between the locus of control and PLIW. As such, the direct relationship with a value of zero between locus of control and PLIW does not appear in the diagrams.

4.3. Discussion and conclusion

Drawing from Table 3, the chi-squared values (χ^2) range from a minimum of 10.57 for the Female, External LoC group and a maximum of 40.56 for the Male, Internal LoC group; all of which are sufficiently small to indicate acceptable model fit. For all respondents, the relationship between the locus of control and perceived stress has a weight between −0.08 and −0.06, indicating a statistically significant but slight negative relationship between the two variables. These results imply that as the locus of control shifts towards an internal locus, the level of stress decreases slightly. Hence, these findings partially support hypotheses H3a and H3b, since the level of stress decreases slightly because of a shift towards an internal locus of control, that is, higher control levels.

For the external locus of control group, in the relationships between perceived stress and both PLIW and WIPL, the weights are higher in females than males: 0.59 and 0.56, compared to 0.37 and 0.39 respectively. Thus, as the level of perceived stress increases, the PLIW dimension of

Table 2
Correlations between gender, locus of control, and work-life balance variables.

				PLIW	WIPL	Perceived stress
External LoC	*Male*	WLoC	Pearson Correlation	−0.22	−0.30	−0.36
			Sig. (2-tailed)	0.05	0.01	0.00
			N	80	80	80
	Female	WLoC	Pearson Correlation	−0.17	−0.48	−0.46
			Sig. (2-tailed)	0.14	0.00	0.00
			N	73	73	73
Internal LoC	*Male*	WLoC	Pearson Correlation	−0.26	0.06	−0.35
			Sig. (2-tailed)	0.02	0.61	0.00
			N	80	80	80
	Female	WLoC	Pearson Correlation	−0.12	0.00	−0.28
			Sig. (2-tailed)	0.26	0.98	0.01
			N	87	87	87

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Table 3
Summary of SEM results.

	Male, External, n = 80		Female, External, n = 73		Male, Internal, n = 80		Female, Internal, n = 87	
χ^2	18.10		10.57		40.56		39.99	
Path	Estimate	Sig.	Estimate	Sig.	Estimate	Sig.	Estimate	Sig.
WLoC → Stress	0.06	0.00	0.07	0.00	0.08	0.00	0.07	0.00
Stress → PLIW	0.37	0.00	0.59	0.00	0.72	0.00	0.52	0.00
Stress → WIPL	0.39	0.00	0.56	0.00	0.43	0.00	0.61	0.00
WLoC → WIPL	0.04	0.05	0.05	0.01	−0.05	0.05	−0.04	0.03

work-life balance also increases; however, while this increase seems to be consistent among females with an internal locus of control and females with an external locus of control (weights of 0.59 and 0.52, respectively), the opposite is true for males. With the male groups, the respondents with an external locus of control experience a weaker relationship between stress and PLIW when compared to male respondents with internal locus of control (weights of 0.37 and 0.72 respectively). As the level of perceived stress increases, the level of WIPL for both males and females also increases. For both male and female respondents, this relationship is stronger for the respondents with an internal locus of control rather than an external locus of control. This is true for both males and females: the weights are 0.39 for males with an external locus of control versus 0.43 for males with an internal locus of control, and 0.56 for females with an external locus of control versus 0.61 for females with an internal locus of control. The results from Table 3 support the hypotheses H4a, H4b, H5a, and H5b, that is, a positive relationship exists between perceived stress levels at work and the WIPL and PLIW dimensions of work-life balance, with differences in the significance and strength of the relationship between perceived stress and the work-life balance dimensions, among the four categories of respondents.

Other observations include the fact that as the locus of control increases, the WIPL variable decreases for both males and females with an external locus of control, implying that as the locus of control moves towards an internal locus of control, the work interference with personal life decreases. However, for all respondents with an internal locus of control, an increase in the locus of control leads to an increase in the WIPL. This reverse relationship reflects in the positive weights on the path between locus of control and the WIPL variables (0.05 and 0.04 for the male and female internal groups, respectively). The findings fully support hypotheses H1b and H2b for the respondents having an external locus of control, thus implying the existence of a negative relationship between locus of control and the WIPL dimension of work-life balance for men and women with an external locus of control. However, for males and females having an internal locus of control, the results do not support hypotheses H1b and H2b, that is, an increase in control levels results in an increase in the WIPL dimension of work-life balance. This result indicates that respondents with high levels of internal LoC, regardless of gender, might be allowing the interference of work life in their personal life. For all categories, the results do not support hypotheses H1a and H2a, due to a lack of direct relationship between LoC and the PLIW dimension of work-life balance. As this article mentions previously, perceived stress fully mediates the relationship between LoC and PLIW.

The relationships between locus of control and perceived stress, perceived stress and personal life interference with work (PLIW) and perceived stress and work interference with personal life (WIPL) all have a similar direction and significance across males and females. Drawing from these results, the level of perceived stress at work fully mediates the relationship between locus of control and PLIW, where the relationship between perceived stress and PLIW is highly significant and positive for all respondents, regardless of gender and type of locus of control. On the other hand, the level of perceived stress at work partially mediates the relationship between locus of control and the WIPL dimension of work-life balance, where the relationship between perceived stress and WIPL is positive for all respondents. Furthermore,

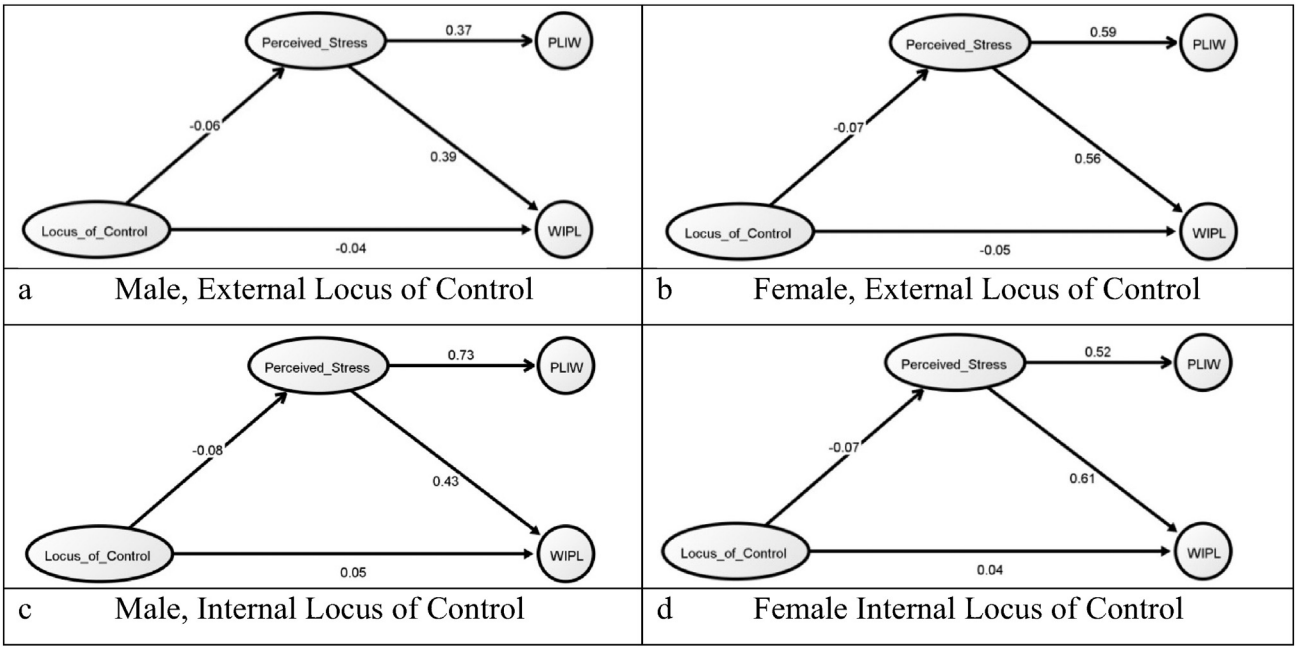

Fig. 2. Structural models with path weights for male and female groups separated by internal and external loci of control.

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the relationship between locus of control and WIPL is negative for males and females with an external locus of control, but positive for males and females with an internal locus of control. In other words, for those with an external locus of control, an increase in locus of control level (i.e., as they move towards having an internal locus of control), decreases the interference of work with their personal life. However, an increase in the locus of control implies a greater interference of work in personal life for respondents having an internal locus of control.

Among the respondents with an internal locus of control, the females show a stronger positive relationship between perceived stress and WIPL when compared to the relationship between perceived stress and PLIW; as for males, the opposite is true, (i.e., men show a stronger positive relationship between perceived stress and PLIW when compared to the relationship between perceived stress and WIPL). This outcome goes back to the traditional perception of working women, that is, most managers and supervisors seem to be more forgiving and understanding towards females as compared to males, regarding their need to leave work to attend to family demands and needs. For example, companies view differently the scenario of a woman requesting to leave work to pick up her sick child from school or daycare than that of a man requesting the same thing. This situation explains why for men, a strong relationship exists between levels of perceived stress at work and PLIW.

5. Limitations and directions for future research

As this article previously discusses, a low level of work-life balance can negatively influence employees and organizations; hence, organizations should work on ensuring that all employees enjoy healthy levels of work-life balance and control levels through the implementation of suitable training programs and workshops. In addition to that, the level of perceived stress also seems to have an indirect relationship with work-life balance. Thus, providing employees with effective stress reduction strategies, tailored to their locus of control perceptions, may benefit them. As this article mentions previously the levels of perceived stress at work highly influence males' personal life interference with work levels, as compared to their female counterparts; hence, solid organizational policies dictating equal treatment for males and females concerning work leaves or postponing work duties to attend to family demands are crucial in any organization.

Finally, these results are difficult to generalize, because this study takes place in a small country (Lebanon) in only one sector (Banking). As such, future research should seek to verify the findings on a larger and more diverse set of employees. Furthermore, the assumption of a stable employment context is the foundation of this study. Increasingly, employees are piecing together part-time work at multiple firms, and therefore, the dynamic of work-life balance in such settings is certainly a field for future research.

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