How Asian Sandwich Generation Managing Stress in Telecommuting during Covid-19 Pandemic

Septian Sugestyo Putro*, Setyo Riyanto**

*(Master of Management Student, UniversitasMercuBuana, Jakarta, Indonesia
Email: septiankuliahlagi@gmail.com)
** (Associate Professor, UniversitasMercuBuana, Jakarta, Indonesia
Email:Setyo.riyanto@mercubuana.ac.id)

------------------------------------************************--------------------------------

Abstract:

It has been almost a half year since the first Covid-19 outbreak in Asia and people now getting used to how their government applying lockdown and social distancing for their citizens. The pandemic has forcing white collars to work from as the government restricts any activity involving a massive number of people to gather at the same place. In the meantime, the educational organization also closing their school and universities to prevent the virus from widespread. Telecommuting, popular term to describe work from home activity, is now a system that has been applied in majority organizations in Asia that has become a new norm. Most research examine the effectiveness and impact of telecommuting to organizational performance, but rarely examine the struggle white collars must face behind telecommuting. This research is the continuation of existing research examined the stress impact of work from home during the pandemic; intended to review how Asian sandwich generation managing stress from telecommuting. With literature review methodology, the research then supported by virtual face-to-face interviews with 32 sandwich generation couples actively working as white scholars in one of the most crowded capital cities in Asia. From both methodologies perspective, the research results leading to the importance of setting boundaries between telecommuting and home life.

Keywords —**Covid-19, stress, telecommuting, work from home, pandemic, sandwich generation**

------------------------------------************************--------------------------------

I. INTRODUCTION

Since the first known outbreak identified in Wuhan in December 2019 (Wang et al, 2020), Coronavirus Disease 2019 (Covid-19) has been spread out massively to another 215 countries causing 310,391 deceased as per May 18th, 2020 (covid19.go.id). Considering the virus has high infectiousness ability (Alimohamadi et al, 2020), governments in Asian countries decided to initiate a social distancing program to prevent the infection widespread including in Jakarta, Indonesia. Formal regulations then released for the government to have legal standing to terminate any non-essential business activity in the city. The pandemic has forcing white collars to work from home as their organization has to obey the government to restrict any activity involving a massive number of people to gather at the same place.

The regulations released by the government not only affecting non-essential business activity, but also instruct all educational organizations and shopping centers to be closed in objective to keep social distancing program effective in preventing infection widespread. To keep the education progress on track based on the curriculum, all the activity in schools, colleges, and universities transformed into online class learning at home, virtually monitored by the lecturers. With the students and their white collars parents moving their activities from school and offices to their home, the parents are facing a new problematic dilemma in which they must maintain work and home life with no clear boundaries. Recent research has evaluated that work from home has been more stressful in the objective of balancing work-home life activities than what the parents have regularly before the pandemic (Septian&Setyo, 2020).

Most psychology and human resource research focused in finding out how office workers attempting to have work-life balance in regular daily basis, while others focused on evaluating how occasional work from home can improve work-life balance, as work-life-balance and flexible working hours are two most factors that can increase employee engagement (Setyo&Lukertina, 2019; Setiyani&Setyo, 2019). Covid-19 pandemic brings up different conditions to surface for both work from home and work-life balance, as it moved from occasionally to regularly, following the social distancing period. This paper intends to dig into Asian white collars' perspective in their attempt to manage stress while living in shady boundaries between work from home and home-life activity in one place. Works of literature from previously published research were reviewed and supported by interviews with white collars sandwich generation couples in Jakarta to get a comprehensive view on their way of managing stress during the pandemic.

II. METHODOLOGY

This research utilizes qualitative methodology such as literature review and face-to-face interviews with 32 sandwich generation subjects.

A. Literature Review

1) Telecommuting, a way to work from home

Telework or telecommuting, defined as any activity that occurs when an employee is paid to work at any other location than the workplace (Mariani, 2000). In this digitalized era, telecommuting proceeds in the form of electronic outworking involving any mobile devices to process mobile work while carried out to other places than the central office (Tremblay, 2002). From managers' point of view, Telecommuting also comes as a transition from direct supervision to remote managing, from face-to-face communication to virtual meeting, from offsite working to outside working, with all telecommunication connected via phone or virtual internet-based media (Bailey, 1999). From these definitions, the terms work from home can be described as telecommuting or telework, as employee bring their work and continue to process it at home. The term telecommuting in this paper will not scope any home-based telecommuting which refers to regular basis work at home (Bailey, 1999) as these are not any white collars do on a daily basis and not relevant in how white collars managing stress.

Telecommuting is a relatively still new way of working desired by many professional workers, and getting permission in doing telecommuting will require high trust from their manager (Kossek et al, 2006). On a regular daily basis, Harpaz (2002), Khalifa and Davison (2000) conclude that telecommuting invites interesting benefits for both organization and employee. Organizations can have reduced overhead costs, better staffing flexibilities, increased productivity and improved employee retention. As for employees, telecommuting can

bring them a better quality of life, eliminates transportation cost and duration, and flexible work schedules. Kossek (2006) also agrees that telecommuting can result in great psychological job control that turning down turnover intention for employee, reduce work-family conflict and depression. Some organizations in Jakarta have applied this way of working, allowing employees to take a day work from home once a week or two, while other employees in different organizations still see telecommuting is a precious way of work that no one can easily get. In a situation of the pandemic where non-essentials activity at the workplace is terminated, these white collars can have what they wish for, telecommuting, with no clear period when the termination will end.

2) Sandwich Generation and Stress

Sandwich generation has been used as a term to describe middle-aged people who support their minor children emotionally and financially while taking care of their aging parents with providing physical, financial, emotional, and legal assistant support (Mobily & Teague, 2012). High land and housing price in Jakarta causing its millennials to find it difficult to buy them with their current financial ability. Most of them have to choose between staying with their parents or buying a house in satellite cities surrounding Jakarta. Both option options provide disadvantages affecting their work-life activity, high transportation cost, and duration in going and of work if they choose living in a satellite city, or higher stress and living cost if they chose to live in Jakarta with their aging parents.

Living with both minor children and aging parents, is the top challenge for sandwich couples in their attempt to seek work-life balance, which subjectively defined as a balance between work activity and the rest of an employee's life (Guest, 2002). Employees living with children having more job stress than those without children, and the stress

more likely to be work-family conflict rather than family-work (Byron, 2005). Sandwich couples experience stress in their objective to manage their responsibilities as parents, as employees that have to do the works, as teachers for their children, and as a housemaid for their home (Lee et al 2007). As couples with multiple roles as caregivers that have to take care of their aging parents, the sandwich generation also openly exposed to stress risk (Neal & Hammer, 2006). Supported by Valcour et al (2005) that also concludes family intervention to work is more likely to happen and predictable in causing stress rather than work interference with family. Imbalance between family life and work-life can become the highest risk factor that caused metal disorders rather than work stress (Wang et al, 2008). Therefore, sandwich couples always aim to be at a balanced position to keep mental health, but there is a high risk for them to be exposed to stress during their attempt to reach their objective.

Eastern philosophies define stress as an absence of inner peace, while western culture tends to describe stress as the loss of emotional control. It is the body nonspecifically respond to any adaptation to demands that cause pain or pleasure (Seaward, 2017) and the stressor can be categorized into three groups: bioecological influence, social influence ad psycho-intrapersonal influence. In the same thought, Radhakrishnan &Mallammal (2018) also define stress is an automatic response of the body to any demand in the form of physical or mentally placed upon it. Stress can occur whenever an individual is not sufficient to cope with their resource with the pressures and demands of a situation (Michie, 2002). In correlation with work and attempt to have work-life balance, stress can be described as a result where an employee unable to fulfill the demand from both work and home-life with their limited resource in the form of energy and time.

3) Telecommuting sandwich couples during pandemic

The pandemic is forcing the government to close down any non-essentials organization in order to promote people to stay at home. With people stay at home, the business activity therefore should be continued by the white collars at home. With sandwich couples' all family members staying at home, they have to perform multiple roles at the same time, every day until the pandemic is over. It is proven by research results cited in this paper that telecommuting will open wide access for stress to occur if the employee cannot perform appropriate stress management by managing their multiple roles at home properly. Stress management can be performed effectively if an employee can define from which aspect the stressors will occur.

4) Evaluating possible stressors

With various benefits telecommuting can provide either for an individual employee or for the organization, there are disadvantages that rarely people determine as a threat to their stress level. Harpaz (2002) in his study determine that possible sense of isolation, shady boundaries between work and home can become potential stressor during telecommuting. While for the organizations, telecommuting during the pandemic for all of their white-collar employees will require them to apply a new set of rules to regulate new working method at home, more technical and soft skill training, and additional new telecommuting infrastructure, and last but important, building system to bound employee's commitment in performing work-task. Khalifa & Davison (2000) more likely to view telecommuting disadvantage at how it will give a massive increasing cost impact as a result of how the system changes to accommodate work with telecommuting, and not limited to, supervising the employee. As employees that getting used to working at the office, telecommuting will require them to have better agility in adaptation.

Self-isolation by staying at home almost all the time can lead to social frustration as a result of minimum interaction with subordinates and work peers, and not only frustration, it can also lead to the occurrence of feelings of professional isolation (Bailey & Kurland, 1999). With telecommuting at home with so much accessibility, the sandwich generation might find themselves working longer hours with further straining family relationships. Thus, by telecommuting at home and eliminating work commuting, will blur the distinctions between work life and family life, which is a disadvantage for the couples. Based on the research literature mentioned above, it is clear that shady boundaries or blur distinctions between work and home life is a potential stressor for sandwich couples facing in their telecommuting during the pandemic.

5) How should sandwich couples managing stress

Individual stress management mentioned by Michie (2002) in her research has proven to help to reduce the risk of health associated with stress and thus can be utilized as the base to create ways for sandwich couple in managing stress in doing telecommuting during pandemic isolation. Individual stress management involves prevent stress through becoming aware of potential stressors, develop self-assessment to interrupt behavior patterns when the stress reaction is just beginning, analyzing the situation and develop an action plan to minimize stressors, and learning any skills related to relaxation. Managing individual stress will create a family-friendly atmosphere and relaxed time pressure which are fundamentals to achieving the dual objective of work-home life balance (Mennino et al, 2005).

Following a research byAhrentzen (1990), in focusing on clearing shady boundaries between

work and home-life, a teleworker should perform a particular adjustment to minimize or avoid role conflict at home through maintaining a separate workspace and restricting access to the workspace. Deciding which space or rooms in the house that will be used as a temporary workspace and announced it to all family members for their awareness will build a special boundary. Their aging parents and children will know whenever the sandwich couple entering the room or that space for work, they should not disturb the couple with unnecessary activity. The special space also helps the couple to focus on work, creating an environment, and feeling similar to when they are at the real office workplace. And whenever leaving the special rooms, they should leave all work-related inside, thus giving their mind and body to adapt and focus on house-life.

When the house becomes the only place where the sandwich couple held their work and home-life activity, there is no way for them to only focus on work the whole day, neither for home-life. The children no longer to be able to study at school, their aging parents will keep at home, their maid no longer able to come to help them with household activity due to social distancing regulation, all of the situations will require the couple to manage 3 home-life aspects to be taken care of. Both Ahrentzen (1990) and Kossek et al (2006) agrees that there should be integration strategy and rescheduling activities to keep enable the couple managing the house and create boundaries between home-life and work. Sandwich couple should discuss and decide who will be taking care of the household, who will help the children studying, and who will be taking care of their parents, and most importantly, at what time. Shifting systems also will help them decide who will enter the working room for work, and at the same time their spouse will be outside the room to handle the house-life. Sandwiched couples should educate themselves

about the importance of spousal role quality (Neal & Hammer, 2006). Although the working time span will be longer with this method, it will help the couple focused on one thing rather than stressing out handling both work and home-life at the same time, and this way also will help them to make sure everything is taken care of. The couple also can ensure their children's activity well managed, from studying, doing homework, and napping by utilizing mobile scheduling applications and other technologies for parents and children that can easily get on the internet (Lee et al, 2007).

B. *Virtual Face-to-Face Interview with Asian Sandwich Generation*

The next supporting methodology to finding out how Asian sandwich generation managing stress in telecommuting during the Covid-19 pandemic is to have face-to-face interviews. Through previous research employee database screening of a non-government FMCG industry in Jakarta, Indonesia. 32 sandwich couples accepted to fulfill the interview invitation. However, due to the social distancing program, this research couldn't proceed with direct face-to-face interview, therefore a virtual meeting media program utilized as a substitute. The interview was held during the period 4 May to 17 May 2020, with a 1-hour interview time for each couple.

The interview subject filtered from the database are white collars with a working spouse, having at least 1 child, and currently taking care of aging parent/parents. Their spouse is not necessarily having to work for the same company and their child/children have to be a student. From this source information, the subject then contacted via emails and phones for their availability and eagerness to share their experience as telecommuting sandwich parents during Covid-19 pandemic isolation. Since the method is qualitative to get any possible different outcomes from the subject, there are no SPSS nor answer scoring from utilized to analyze the answer to the questions. All

of the subject interviewed with below listed question:

1. *How long have you been self-isolating and teleworking at home?*
2. *With whom you are currently living, and how is their health status?*
3. *How much average time you spend your day for work?*
4. *Are you experience stress in telecommuting during the pandemic?*
5. *How you identify the stressors?*
6. *How do you manage to create boundaries between work and home-life activity?*
7. *After stressors identified and reduced its risk, are you still experience stress?*

The answers to the above questions from all subjects then summarized by the author to get a comprehensive evaluation of how the subject managing stress in doing telecommuting during the Covid-19 pandemic.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The key points both Ahrentzen (1990) and Kossek et al (2006) delivered in their research that boundary between work and home-life is the one that everyone in their telecommuting activity should focus on in managing stress. Sandwich couples should define boundaries based on space and time. Space boundary to differ which place is for work and which are for non-work, and whenever entering this place, the couples should focus more on works. Time boundaries should be set to differ when they should be able to handle the household activity and when they have to do work tasks and attend virtual meetings. With clearing boundaries in space and time, the sandwich generation could be able to allocate their energy and time resources to fulfill the demand from work and home-life, thus resulting to reduced stress as resource and demand can be managed in balance.

Virtual face-to-face interviews with the Asian sandwich generation have a bit different result in comparison with the literature review, in terms of space boundaries. All of them have been doing telecommuting during the pandemic for at least 9 weeks since the regulation from the government takes place. And since that time, they keep telecommuting 5 days a week and taking care of their children and parents at the same time. All of their organization require them to work 8 hours a day, but in fact it takes longer around 9-10 hours on average, and it was stressful conditions since they are not getting used to telecommuting for a longer period. They find it hard to adapt to the situation in the first week, and on the second until the third week they can identify the controllable stressors to focus with. Indonesian sandwich generations in this subject are coming from middle-up economic class, but most of them living in a house with not so many rooms inside. Most of the time they work in the living room, where all home activity centralized. This leads to difficulties setting space as boundaries between work and home-life. Children and parents still have access to influence their working space whenever possible.

However, there is a red string that connects the literature review with the interview results, the time boundary. Sandwich generation allocate their time in the morning to finish all their household activity. Cleaning, washing, cooking, helping their children study, all were done in the morning. In regards to their parents, none of the couples having parents with special needed, most of their aging parents still have physical ability to do what they need on their own and sometimes helping them with the household activity or taking care of the children. Therefore, the sandwich generation has time to focus on work and meetings from noon until evening, with minimum disturbance from their children for the rest of the day. Shifting strategy also applied in the noon and evening, where husband and wife take turns to take care of the house.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

Both literature review and interview results conclude that creating a time boundary is the most effective way to manage controllable stressors, while not all sandwich generation is able to create space boundaries due to limited rooms available in

the house. However, the risk of stress still occurs as an impact of uncontrollable stressors. Isolation, high workload, economic situation, and the pandemic itself, creates nuisance in their inner peace, which leads to stress. It is recommended for further research to adopt a quantitative method in evaluating stress management of sandwich generation in telecommuting during the Covid-19 pandemic to get a more comprehensive and stronger result.

REFERENCES

[1] Ahrentzen, S. B. (1990). Managing conflict by managing boundaries: How professional homeworkers cope with multiple roles at home. *Environment and Behavior*, *22*(6), 723-752.

[2] Alimohamadi, Y., Taghdir, M., &Sepandi, M. (2020). The estimate of the basic reproduction number for novel coronavirus disease (covid-19): A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Journal of Preventive Medicine and Public Health*.

[3] Bailey, N. B. K. D. E., & Kurland, N. B. (1999). The advantages and challenges of working here, there, anywhere, and anytime. *Organizational dynamics*, *28*(2), 53-68.

[4] Byron, K. (2005). A meta-analytic review of work–family conflict and its antecedents. *Journal of vocational behavior*, *67*(2), 169-198.

[5] Guest, D. E. (2002). Perspectives on the study of work-life balance. *Social Science Information*, *41*(2), 255-279.

[6] Harpaz, I. (2002). Advantages and disadvantages of telecommuting for the individual, organization and society. *Work Study*.

[7] Khalifa, M., & Davison, R. (2000). Exploring the telecommuting paradox. *Communications of the ACM*, *43*(3), 29-31.

[8] Kossek, E. E., Lautsch, B. A., & Eaton, S. C. (2006). Telecommuting, control, and boundary management: Correlates of policy use and practice, job control, and work–family effectiveness. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, *68*(2), 347-367.

[9] Lee, M. K., Davidoff, S., Zimmerman, J., & Dey, A. K. (2007, August). Smart bag: managing home and raising children. In *Proceedings of the 2007 conference on Designing pleasurable products and interfaces* (pp. 434-437).

[10] Mariani, M. (2000). Telecommuters. *Occupational Outlook Quarterly*, *44*(3), 10-17.

[11] Mennino, S. F. , Rubin, B. A. , &Brayfield, A. (2005). Home-to-job and job-tohomespillover: The impact of company policies and workplace culture. *The Sociological Quarterly, 46(1), 107– 135.*

[12] Michie, S. (2002). Causes and management of stress at work. *Occupational and environmental medicine*, *59*(1), 67-72.

[13] Mobily, K., & Teague, M. (2012). The leisure journey for sandwich generation caregivers. *Therapeutic Recreation Journal*, *46*(1), 42-59.

[14] Neal, M. B.,& Hammer, L. B. (2006). Working couples caring for children and aging parents: Effects on work and well-being. *Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.*

[15] Septian, S., Setyo R., (2020). Evaluating Stress Impact of Working from Home during Covid-19 Pandemic Self quarantine Period in Indonesia

[16] Radhakrishnan, S., &Mallammal, M. (2018). Gandhian Way of Managing Stress with Work Load and Facilities. *Asian Journal of Management*, *9*(3), 1065-1066.

[17] Setyo, R., Ariyanto, E., &Lukertina, L. (2019). Work Life Balance and its Influence on Employee Engagement "Y" Generation in Courier Service Industry. *International Review of Management and Marketing*, *9*(6), 25-31.

[18] Setiyani, A., Djumarno, D., Setyo, R., &Nawangsari, L. (2019). The Effect of Work Environment on Flexible Working Hours, Employee Engagement and Employee Motivation. *International Review of Management and Marketing*, *9*(3), 112.

[19] Seaward, B. L. (2017). *Managing stress*. Jones & Bartlett Learning.

[20]   Tremblay, D. G. (2002). Balancing work and family with telework? Organizational issues and challenges for women and managers. *Women in Management Review*.

[21]   Valcour, P. M. ,& Hunter, L. W. (2005). Technology, organizations, and work-life integration. In. E. E. Kossek& S. J. Lambert (Eds.), Work and life integration: Organizational, cultural, and individual perspectives (pp. 61–84). *Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates*.

[22]   Wang, C., Pan, R., Wan, X., Tan, Y., Xu, L., Ho, C. S., & Ho, R. C. (2020). Immediate psychological responses and associated factors during the initial stage of the 2019 coronavirus disease (COVID-19) epidemic among the general population in China. *International journal of environmental research and public health*, *17*(5), 1729.

[23]   Wang, J. L. , Lesage, A. , Schmitz, N. , & Drapeau, A. (2008). The relationships between work stress and mental disorders in men and women: Crosssectional findings from a populations-based study. *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health, 62(1), 42–47.*