

# At the intersection of work and family, how do we define our identities?

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Jamie Ladge has spent her career studying how working professionals view their identities in the office and at home—and how these identities often intersect.

Now, in recently published research involving two separate projects, Ladge explores these dynamics in ways that shed new light on how different groups of working professionals view and manage their identities.

In one paper, published in the journal *Academy of Management Review*, Ladge and her research partner from the University of Georgia delve into what they view as a common struggle among [working parents](#): effectively portraying themselves as both devoted professionals and good parents. What often results is what the researchers introduce as the "work-family image."

"We're constantly trying to be all things to all people, depending on who the audience is," said Ladge, who is an associate professor of management and organizational development in the D'Amore-McKim School of Business at Northeastern and the mother of three boys. "As professionals we have a professional image, and as parents we have a parenting image. But we oftentimes struggle to disentangle the two."

Working parents, Ladge said, strive to manage this dualistic image amid a barrage of expectations in their professional and personal lives. These expectations and social norms can differ between men and women. Her

paper cites such examples as a working mother who feels pressure to pick up her child early from preschool to project an image of being a good mother to the other mothers in the child's school, or a man highlighting his role as a father to show colleagues he has a lighter side.

"It's usually based on this desired image of how people want to be viewed and how they think they are being viewed," Ladge said of the work-family image. When work-family norms create impossible standards to live up to, it can lead to discrepancies between how working parents want to be perceived and how they feel they are perceived. In turn, the researchers argued, parents may adapt their identities in ways they'd prefer not to.

Organizations and managers, Ladge said, can help by showing a commitment to employees' caregiving needs and making cultural shifts to counter [unrealistic expectations](#). Such outdated expectations, she added, are increasingly fading away as the millennial generation, which craves flexibility, enters the workforce. "I often say millennials want what most people have always wanted, but they're the ones vocalizing it," she said. "Hopefully there's strength in numbers that will drive this change."

In past research, Ladge has explored why some new mothers opt-out of the workforce while others don't. In another study, she found that the more time fathers spend with their children on a typical day, the greater job satisfaction and less conflict between work and family they experience. She has also examined the added layer of work-family conflict for employees with lesbian, gay, and bisexual families—research for which she was named a finalist for the 2018 Rosabeth Moss Kanter Award for Excellence in Work-Family Research.

"I've always been interested in identity," Ladge said.

Ladge is also working on a forthcoming research paper with Northeastern colleague Marla Baskerville Watkins, the highlights of which were recently published in *Harvard Business Review*. The research is based on individual interviews with 59 black female executives in senior-level positions in U.S. companies. Their findings "indicate that one main driver of their success was their ability to navigate the challenge of intersectional invisibility"—in other words, being overlooked, disregarded, or forgotten because they are members of two underrepresented groups: women and minorities.

The researchers cited past studies suggesting women and minorities are often tested in leadership roles by being disproportionately given risky assignments—the so-called "glass cliff." But one of their findings is that the women view these situations as strategic opportunities to improve their status and visibility in the workplace.

Ladge described this project as "one of the most fascinating" she's ever done. "Finishing up that paper will probably be the highlight of my career, because I've learned so much from that work," she said.

**More information:** Jamie Ladge et al. When expectations become reality: Work–family image management and identity adaptation, *Academy of Management Review* (2018). [DOI: 10.5465/amr.2016.0438](https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2016.0438)

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