Who Am I Right Now?

Negotiating Familial and Professional Roles

LEAH D. TOTTEN

Identity management
I
Me
Role negotiation
Boundary work
Gender stereotypes

It was August, muggy and hot. I was logging sixty-hour weeks at work because I had two due dates to contend with: completion of a huge research project, and my second child’s imminent birth. I was tired, and the heat was getting to me, and, yes, I was very pregnant. My stomach was about to be awarded its own zip code due to being so large. Despite the pregnancy, heat, and work pressure, I was managing to meet my responsibilities both in the office and at home.

On this particular day, I was returning from a meeting when I heard my name called out by Jonathon, the president of the small nonprofit think tank where I was communication director. He and I had worked together for five years, and our current project was the most important one in the organization’s history. “How’s the deadline looking?” he asked.

“We’re in good shape. Now that we’ve figured out that data problem, we’re back on schedule for releasing the report to the media in a week,” I told him.

“Okay,” he said, not making eye contact, which was unusual for him. “Just let me know when you . . . .” He stopped in midsentence and took a deep breath; I realized his gaze was fixed on my stomach.
“You are just too pregnant. You really should go home.”

I kept a poker face instead of dropping my jaw—I could hardly believe he had said that.

“I’m fine,” I said, but he looked doubtful. What I really wanted to say was, “You are not my mother, I’m an adult, I’ve done this before, I wouldn’t be in this job if I weren’t intelligent enough to make decisions about when I should and should not work. Could you deal with me as a coworker and not a walking womb, and PLEASE stop looking at my stomach like that!”

However, I didn’t think pitching a fit was going to help the situation—then he’d see me as the *hysterical* pregnant woman.” Jonathon,” I said,” “I just had a doctor’s appointment yesterday, and she said it’s fine for me to keep working. The baby’s nowhere near due—I’ve got a month at least. And we’ll meet our deadline, as long as I finish this manuscript and nothing unexpected happens.”

“You should go home,” he repeated. “Look how pregnant you are. You must be tired, and you shouldn’t be here!” He still had difficulty looking me in the eye; he had seemed uncomfortable with my pregnant body for months now, but it had never caused him to stop a work conversation in midsentence and suggest I go home.

Jonathon was single with no children, in his middle forties. He was an only child and had no nieces or nephews. He adored children, but this was not the first time he had expressed discomfort with my growing body. I wanted to say something that would acknowledge his concern while not accepting his perception of me as a pregnant woman who shouldn’t be working.

I smiled and nodded before saying, “I know you’re concerned. I’m making a point of taking regular breaks, staying off my feet, and getting enough rest. I’m taking advantage of the flextime policy on days when I’m tired. This is my second child, and I promise that I won’t endanger myself or the baby.”

He looked wary, but I continued. “So, I’ll finish editing the report tomorrow, and I’ll e-mail it to you for your final review before we send it to the press. Will that give you enough time to finish it by the end of the week?”

“All right, all right,” he said with a sigh. “Let’s meet Friday morning to go over everything.”

“How about Friday lunch?” I asked. “I have to go to a meeting with my daughter’s teacher that morning. Besides, if we meet for lunch, you’ll have a few more hours for your review.”

He agreed and asked how my daughter, Laney, was handling the idea of a new baby in the house.

“She’s been practicing using the baby stroller by strapping her cat into it and wheeling it around the house, and it’s so cute!” I said. “I’m excited that we’ll have time home together during my maternity leave. But I’d better get back to these edits, or I’ll be late picking her up at school. Friday lunch it is.”

We thanked each other and headed our separate ways. I returned to my office and a blinking voice-mail light. It was a message from my husband, Louis, who was branch manager for a small consumer research business, a start-up with six branches across the country, which meant long hours and
coordinating long-distance with the owner, who lived half-way across the country. We traded messages but never got each other on the phone. It turned out Louis had been having a conversation with his boss as well.

"Why do you need a whole two weeks off? She’s the one having the baby," said Louis’ boss, Mike. "This business won’t run itself."

"I want to be there for Leah and the baby in the hospital. It’s not like a nurse will be sitting with them twenty-four hours a day, and I want to be home with my new child and to take care of the house and our daughter so Leah can rest," said Louis.

"A whole two weeks, though? You don’t have to be with your family all the time. Doesn’t she have girlfriends to help out or her mother or someone?" asked Mike. Unlike my boss, Mike was married and had a grown child. And, unlike Louis, Mike thought having and raising children was women’s work and definitely not something men should spend much time on.

"Yes, we’ll have some help—her parents will be here part of the time but not all of it. "Louis was thankful this conversation was happening on the phone so that Mike couldn’t see how furious he was with Mike’s attitudes and disregard for our family.

"So what’s the problem? They’ll be there to help out, and you can come in to work."

"Mike, first of all, my point is, I want to be home with my wife and family. Leah may be the one carrying the baby, but it’s my child too. And, second, we need a plan in case something really does go wrong and I have to be home. We can make this work without disrupting the office—it’s not like we’ll have to shut down and lose business," said Louis.

"We’ve only just started to get enough business to break even, and we can’t afford to send in help from another office. Any little glitch can set us back right now."

"I’m giving you advance notice so we can figure out how to keep the office running smoothly," Louis said. "If you don’t want to send in somebody from another office to help out here, then how about I train my two best people on opening and closing procedures?"

"But what if something goes wrong? And what about payroll?" asked Mike.

"I’m not going to disappear—I’ll be available by phone a lot of the time, or my employees can call the Washington office manager if they can’t get in touch with me. He’s already said he’d be happy to help out," Louis said. "As for payroll, I’ll be able to do that unless it’s due when we’re in the hospital. Can we fax all the records up to the payroll manager in the home office and have her do it if I can’t?"

"Okay, but you have to make all the arrangements. And you better make sure nothing goes wrong while you’re not in the office—we can’t afford for things to fall apart."

At home that evening, Louis and I had dinner with Laney, then he helped her with her bath while I dealt with the mail and took Rollie the Wonder Dog
out for a short walk. Next, we had family bedtime stories (presence mandatory for all) and tucked Laney in for the night. Then, at last, Louis and I had “adult time” to catch up on the day.

“You look exhausted,” said Louis, “Don’t worry about the dishes—I’ll get those later. Come sit down and rest.”

“Thanks, hon, I am tired. You’re so sweet to me,” I said as I settled onto the couch. “So what did Mike say? Your voice-mail messages didn’t sound too happy.”

“Oh, it was just insane,” Louis said as he sat down with me. He recounted their conversation and then said, “I felt like I’d been thrown back into the fifties or something. He just couldn’t comprehend that I want and need to be with you and the baby for two whole weeks. It was like I was threatening to burn down the office and run away with the petty cash.”

“So what did you say?” I asked.

“Well, I realized it didn’t matter what I said about you and the baby needing me, or me wanting and needing to be with you, because he just didn’t get it. So I stopped trying to explain it. All he cared about was the business, so I just dealt with that. And it’s not that I don’t care about the business—I may have been there only six months, but I’ve worked hard to build it. And I had to bite my tongue the whole time. If I told him what I was really thinking, I’d be out of a job.”

I nodded as I listened. The baby started to kick, and I placed Louis’ hand where he could feel it too. We were quiet for a moment, taking comfort in the haven of our relationship.

“Oh, honey,” I said. “I’m so sorry. It sounds like you were wasting your breath on him. I know we’re the most important thing in the world to you, but you don’t have to drive yourself crazy trying to convince him that he should understand it. I don’t think he can. He expects you to be all business, all the time, and that’s just not how our life works.”

“I know, and it’s going to take even more time to get two of my folks trained to handle some things while I’m gone. I’ll just have to spend more time away from home for the next few weeks, but that’s the only way I can make it work,” he said. “So what about you? Your voice mails said Jonathon was trying to send you home.”

I rolled my eyes and nodded. “Yeah, your boss is trying to keep you from leaving the office, mine is trying to get me out of his sight. Well, that’s kind of wrong—he doesn’t really seem able to look me in the eyes anymore, but I think he just doesn’t want to be confronted with my huge belly either.” We both laughed, and then I recounted my conversation with Jonathon.

Louis said, “Can you imagine the look on his face if you had just said, ‘Sure! I’d be happy to go home. Here are all the files so you can finish the project!’ But you’d never bail out on this, and he knows it—the project is too important to you.”

I shook my head and smiled at the thought of Jonathon sputtering and nervously retracting his offer if I’d actually taken him up on it. “It just irks me, you know? He’s gone from treating me like a competent, sensible colleague to treating me like I’m just a pregnant body!”
Louis sighed. "Remember how different it was with Laney? Everybody at your company was thrilled to pieces because there hadn’t been a baby around in so long, and my company threw us a baby shower and sent flowers to us at the hospital and that great gift basket full of food."

"Yes," I answered, "It was really nice to have all of our colleagues as excited as we were. It made everything a lot easier. The cultures of those offices were so different from the places we work now. And while your boss is another story, I know Jonathon only wants the best for me and doesn’t realize how much his comments bother me. But I can’t stand it when he talks to me like I’m just a pregnant body as opposed to a person who happens to be pregnant!"

Louis smiled. "Let’s just remember what’s important here. They are annoying, but family is our priority. We’ll keep figuring out how to make it work. So, you just rest that pregnant body of yours, and I’ll finish up the kitchen, OK?"

**REFLECTIONS ON THE DIALOGUE**

Now and then all of us ponder the question, "Who am I?" According to communication scholars, however, the more accurate question is, "Who am I right now?" As these three conversations illustrate, our past experiences, the situations we’re in, and the people with whom we are talking have a great deal of influence on who we are at that moment, including what we say and how we say it.

**Identity Management**

So why did Louis and I not tell our bosses what we were really thinking, and why did we tell each other every little detail of our thoughts and feelings? Why don’t we always say exactly what we’re thinking? Why do we behave in different ways with different people and in different situations?

A primary reason we communicate differently in different situations and with different people is that we are engaging in the process of identity management, which is the communicative process of influencing how others perceive us (Adler, Rosenfeld, & Proctor, 2004). In the conversations that you have just read, Louis and I took on different roles to manage our identities in different situations, and we also accepted or resisted being put in certain roles by the people with whom we were interacting.

As we mature, we develop the ability to analyze our actions and those of others and to adjust accordingly. We can act, and we can watch ourselves as we do it. Mead called these two integrated parts of ourselves the **I** and the **Me**. The **I** is the less restricted, more creative part of us. The **Me** is the part that imposes an understanding of social norms and values to keep the **I** within the social rules and boundaries (Mead, 1934).

The **Me**, then, is the part of us that is aware of others, including their expectations, values, and behaviors. The **I** is the part of us that works to honor our personal goals, values, and beliefs. When Jonathon communicated in ways that made me uncomfortable—unable to make eye contact, telling me I must be..."
tired and should go home because I was “too pregnant,” staring at my stomach—the I part of me wanted to assert my individuality and tell him off. The Me part of me, however, knew that telling off my boss was bad for my bank account and in this particular situation would only prove that I was no longer capable of working because, in addition to being very pregnant, I would be perceived as hysterical. So my I and my Me worked together to craft a message that achieved what I needed to happen in this particular situation, and did so in a way that would not compromise my values and beliefs.

However, when Louis told me I was tired and should relax, I readily agreed and was happy to be coddled. What was different? Obviously, he’s my husband, but I also knew that Louis didn’t view my being tired or very pregnant as a hindrance or a weakness. My Me didn’t have to keep my I in check in the conversation with Louis because I didn’t have to be guarded about my words and actions. I had learned through previous interactions with Louis and Jonathon what behaviors were acceptable and appropriate.

Another way to think about how we manage identities is to realize that we all have a perceived self and presenting selves. The perceived self is our personal view of who we really are, and we don’t choose to share it with everyone. The I part of us is particularly pronounced in our perceived self. In addition, all of us have multiple presenting selves, which are the roles we project to others (Goffman, 1959). The Me part of us exercises substantial control over our presenting selves to make them socially acceptable in specific contexts and relationships.

My conversation with Jonathon illustrates these ideas. Even though I perceived myself as a very pregnant mother-to-be, too tired to be as effective at work as I usually am, and nervous about the impending project deadline, I did not want to present myself that way to Jonathan. Despite my pregnancy, I perceived myself as entirely competent to do my job. I presented myself to Jonathon as “able employee”—“We’re in good shape,” “We’ll meet our deadline.” Jonathon nearly accepted my bid as able employee, but then he rejected it and again attempted to put me in the role of “pregnant body”—“Just let me know when you . . . . You are just too pregnant.” I resisted the roles he tried to assign to me by assuring him that my health was fine, consistently presenting myself as the able employee, and refocusing the conversation on work.

Role negotiation occurs when we encounter a conflict between how others perceive us and how we want them to perceive us in a given situation, or between the various roles in our life. For example, Louis presented himself to his boss as both “responsible employee” and “caring husband and parent.” He explained what was best for his family and also stated his desire to keep the office running smoothly in his absence. Mike, however, tried to put Louis in the role of “uncommitted employee”—“This business won’t run itself,” and “You don’t have to be with your family the whole time.” When Mike refused to accept Louis’ presenting self, Louis had to drop the role of “caring husband and parent” and deal strictly with business so that he would have an opportunity to be a caring parent in reality. Louis recognized that when he presented himself as “caring husband and parent,” Mike not only rejected it but also was frustrated by it. Louis understood that to achieve his objective in the conversation, he had to stop presenting that particular self.
PART THREE EVERYDAY COMMUNICATION IN WORKPLACE RELATIONSHIPS

Boundary Work

So how do we do it? How do we achieve our objectives both at home and at work? How do we navigate these two parts of our life that so often conflict? Jorgensen (1995) describes the process of managing the interrelationship of work and life as **boundary work**. Boundaries are the limits we set on how much we allow our work to influence the rest of our life and how much we allow the rest of our life to influence our work. How much we integrate or separate our job and our personal life differs among people and contexts. For example, my brother works from home, so his job is highly integrated into his personal life. But the company he works for is very formal, so he discusses little of his personal life with his business colleagues. A friend of mine is in exactly the opposite situation—once she leaves her corporate office, she's done with work for the day and doesn't discuss it unless pressed. However, several of her coworkers have become close personal friends, and she shares her personal life freely at her company, which is very relaxed and family-friendly.

When Louis and I discussed the conversations we'd had with our bosses, we were doing more than recounting our days at work. We were collaborating to do boundary work. We were affirming our values—“Family is our priority,” “I know we're the most important thing in the world to you”—to help us figure out where the boundaries should be. We were also supporting each others’ boundary work with our respective bosses. Louis’ conversation with his boss involved more than defining his own presenting self; it also involved defining ourselves as a couple and defining our family. The conversation between Louis and me reflected how we were working together and helping each other resist outsiders’ definitions of us individually and collectively as well as their definitions of what our boundaries should have been.

In affirming the boundaries we jointly want, Louis and I were also acknowledging our interdependence, shared history, present reality, and our expectations of a shared future (Galvin & Brommel, 2000). We affirmed our chosen boundaries through communication: “We'll get through this together,” “Remember, with Laney, how different it was?” “I'd be out of a job,” “Family is our priority,” “We'll keep figuring out how to make it work.”

Gender Stereotypes

The roles Louis and I took on in these conversations, whether by personal choice or in response to others’ perceptions of us, are influenced by our own and others’ views of gender. Gender is the meanings that society assigns to biological sex—what a society thinks is appropriate for males and females (Wood, 2005). Gender roles, then, are how people expect us to present ourselves given what they believe is acceptable or appropriate for our biological sex.

In our conversations with our bosses, Louis and I both resisted our bosses’ respective **gender stereotypes** (see Chapter 14), which are broad generalizations about women and men. For example, Jonathon's communication reflected his stereotype that pregnant women should not work.

Gender stereotyping is often thought of as something that affects only women, but as Louis’ experience shows, men have to confront gender-based stereotypes as
well. Mike communicated that men should be, first and foremost, workers and breadwinners and not active participants in the birth and care of newborn children. In Mike’s stereotypes of gender roles, taking care of babies is a job for mothers, their girlfriends, and their mothers. Mike’s perspective is that momma belongs at home, and daddy belongs in the office, bringing home the paycheck.

Our bosses’ notions about gender roles were very different from mine and Louis’. Our relationship is an equal partnership based on our individual and collective values and beliefs about the equality of women and men. We both work because we find it personally fulfilling, and we share in family responsibilities for the same reason, as our conversation showed. Our bosses’ views of us and a good family life were very different from our own views of who we are and how our family should work. Their views of how society works and how individuals should behave were influenced by their particular experiences and positions in society, just as ours were (Harding, 1991). The kinds of conflict illustrated in our conversations with our bosses make sense in light of the clash between their understandings of gender and family and ours.

CONCLUSION

The dialogues in this chapter illustrate the complexities of navigating familial and professional roles, something that anyone who works and is part of a family has to do on an ongoing basis. Everyday communication in the workplace and at home reflects and shapes our identities, how we manage our familial and professional responsibilities, and how we express our feelings, positive and negative. Analyzing these dialogues helps us understand why we communicate the way we do in different contexts and how we establish and manage boundaries between home and work. Analyzing the dialogues in this chapter also helps us see why the question is not so much,”Who am I?” but rather,”Who am I right now?”

REFERENCES


