

Nathan, A. (2010). Work-family life balance for early career psychologists: Discovering points of contact through development of fluid identity. *The Maryland Psychologist*, 55(6), 10.

This paper presents the idea that development of a fluid identity can contribute to an enriching and productive work-family life balance with particular relevance to early career psychologists. Challenges to work-family life balance include an American culture that has become increasingly productivity oriented and the influence of the *24/7 service economy* where communications technology blurs boundaries between work and family time and space (Presser, 2003). The current economic crisis can create increased pressures to allocate more time to work. Early career psychologists in particular can experience added pressure to prove their competence and productive capacity in the face of high student loan debt, a highly competitive market place, and the financial burdens related to raising a family (American Psychological Association [APA], Board of Professional Affairs' Advisory Committee on Colleague Assistance, 2006). This pressure to produce can add to the challenge of professional identity formation and reduce the amount of time allotted for reflection and exploration. Family life also suffers as the ability to live in accordance with one's value system can seem like an unaffordable luxury. Attempts to create boundaries between work and family life can be frustrating and unsatisfying without a useful sense of how one's values and identity fit within each realm. A potential solution to this problem can arise via discovery of points of contact between work and family life that can lead to the development of a fluid identity.

This paper will first describe ways in which challenges to professional identity development influence work-family life balance for early career psychologists. Next the concepts of fluid identity and points of contact will be defined. A brief clinical example that depicts the potential overlap between professional and family life is presented in order to

demonstrate these concepts. Finally, practical suggestions are offered for the development of a fluid identity.

One of the challenges to professional identity development faced by early career psychologists is the struggle to integrate personal and professional values. Worldview and value system influences how we define psychological reality, distinguish between health and pathology, determine appropriate modes of intervention, and view our role and boundaries in relation to patients (Nathan, 2009). Development of a professional identity that fits within one's personal worldview and value system requires space for reflection and exploration that can easily collapse under the pressure to perform and produce. In addition, many early career psychologists are newly married or new parents in which case a sense of family identity is also in the process of development. Clinical psychology may be chosen as a profession based upon humanistic values including the desire to nurture others, the belief in the growth potential within intimate human relationships, and the importance of self-reflection and creative self-expression (Orlinsky & Ronnestad, 2005). Productivity pressures can make these values seem like flights of fancy, unrealistic goals that are continually compromised.

Guidelines have been developed to raise psychologist awareness of the vulnerability to distress embedded within our work, to create boundaries between work and family, and to enhance self-care behaviors (APA Practice Organization, 2009). These guidelines are helpful in developing ways to structure our time in a more efficient and healthful manner. However, emotional experience and identity is not so easily structured and this is why attempts to create rigid work-family boundaries can fail. It is not uncommon for a psychotherapist to find herself identifying with her patient's work-family life struggles in a way that can be confusing for the psychotherapist in the context of work-family life boundaries that are too rigid. In the converse a

patient's emotional suffering can be difficult to let go and linger into our family life. Again boundaries that are too rigid can leave us feeling guilty, resentful, and incompetent.

Development of a fluid identity can contribute to the resolution of these problems. Fluid identity means that it is possible to have experiences and intentions that partially overlap across roles and contexts. Boundaries can be flexibly created via the formulation of particular modes of expressing experience and intention that are appropriate to the particular role and context. Points of contact refer to the experiences, intentions, and values that naturally occur across work and family contexts. For instance, the experience and intention to nurture can be similar with our patients and our family while the ways in which we express nurturance within the two settings remain distinct.

Holly is a young female patient in long-term psychodynamic psychotherapy with me. She was raised in family with a great deal of shame and unsuccessful efforts to achieve status through conformity to superficial gender roles. Much to her detriment Holly sought to be a model of a self-sacrificing female figure dedicated to making others feel good about their selves. In one session a long silence came over us as we were attempting to process her struggle to allow herself to relax her relentless self-monitoring and her words "to just be". I was struggling with a similar issue in my family life as I felt work pressures were compromising my emotional availability to my then 21-month-old daughter. There was a toy in the corner of the office that caught Holly's eye. Suddenly her face brightened. When I inquired she told me that the toy reminded her of one she played with as a child. I was reminded of the look of joy on my daughter's face when she plays. I realized at that moment how much Holly longed to play and how much her shame and relentless focus upon proving her worth to others obstructed her ability to play. By allowing space for an experience in my family life to enter into my professional life I

was able to empathize with Holly's struggles more fully. This turned out to be a crucial change point in our work that led to increased playfulness within the therapy relationship that Holly began to integrate into her outside life. In addition, I found myself more aware of moments in my family life in which I was unnecessarily creating a sense of work pressure. Allowing myself and my daughter more playtime actually reduced the time I needed to get work tasks done and enhanced my creative expression within my work.

In conclusion, the development of fluid identity can create opportunities for flexible responding within clinical relationships and family life. Implementation of self-care and time allocation strategies can be done in a way that feels in sync with our value systems and that allows us to be more fully present across work and family contexts. We can increase our recognition of time allocation choice points where productivity demands don't make sense. On a macro level psychologists can utilize their knowledge, skills, and personal life lessons to influence cultural change toward a more fluid work-family life balance.

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