

ASYMMETRIC MORAL RECONSTRUCTION: ASPIRATIONAL IDENTITIES AND THE UNEVEN RECONSTRUCTION OF WORK AND CARE

Talia Shiff

ABSTRACT

How do people negotiate competing moral ideals when they collide? Drawing on 40 interviews with senior software engineers who are mothers, this article examines how women engage and transform the tension between two powerful cultural schemas: the ideal worker and the ideal mother. I identify a patterned asymmetry in how these ideals are renegotiated. Women frequently blur the boundary of motherhood, redefining devotion to children as compatible with—and even enacted through—paid work. By contrast, efforts to revise the ideal worker tend to expand acceptable practices—such as flexible schedules or remote work—without redefining devotion itself. Commitment remains anchored in productivity and the prioritization of work. To explain this variation, I develop a framework of prospective boundary work. The framework distinguishes between enabling relational schemas and derivative narratives, and specifies how the location of interpretive authority and the structure of discursive fields shape the depth and direction of cultural transformation. These findings refine sociological accounts of cultural change and illuminate the moral mechanisms through which gender inequality at work is sustained—even amid apparent flexibility and reform.

INTRODUCTION

“[I] knew from quite early on that I would have to choose between being the mom I aspired and developing a career...”

— Rowan, software engineer, 2025

“Motherhood isn’t measured by the amount of time you spend, but by the quality of that time—by showing your children that you’re there for them in the moments that matter. I’m a devoted mother, and I have a career.”

— Sara, software engineer, 2025

When dominant moral ideals no longer resolve lived tensions, how do people revise them—and why are some ideals more open to redefinition than others? This article addresses that question through the case of working mothers in the high-tech software industry, a professional field

organized around long hours, productivity metrics, and implicit expectations of uninterrupted commitment. For these women, two powerful cultural schemas collide: the ideal worker and the ideal mother. Each is structured around total devotion. Each demands prioritization. And each is widely understood as incompatible with the other.

Research on work and family has long documented the strain produced by these competing ideals (Gerson 2017; Blair-Loy 2004; Epstein 2000; Parcel 1999; Garey 1999; Hochschild 1997). The ideal worker has historically presumed total dedication to paid work—signaled through long hours, uninterrupted career trajectories, and the prioritization of organizational demands over family obligations. The ideal mother, by contrast, has traditionally presumed intensive, child-centered devotion to the private sphere. Taken together, these schemas construct a zero-sum moral economy: excelling in one domain risks moral failure in the other. Internalized as standards of worth, they shape aspirations, self-evaluations, and institutional judgments alike.

A large and robust body of scholarship identifies these competing schemas as central drivers of persistent gender inequality. Even in the presence of formal legal protections, the moral authority of these ideals generates psychological strain, constrains career trajectories, and sustains the motherhood penalty (Benard and Paik 2007). At the same time, scholars have shown that women do not simply endure these constraints. They actively negotiate, reinterpret, and contest them, crafting hybrid arrangements in an effort to better reconcile career and family (Blair-Loy et al. 2015; Cha 2013; Garey 1999). Yet a crucial puzzle remains underexplored. When women attempt to rework these ideals, their efforts are not symmetrical: while the criteria defining the ideal mother appear more amenable to reinterpretation, those defining the ideal worker remain far more resistant to change.

Drawing on 30 interviews with senior software engineers who are mothers, I show that women frequently construct alternatives to the ideal mother schema that blur what was once a sharp boundary between work and family. In doing so, they reinterpret devotion to children as something that can be achieved through paid employment—by providing financial security, modeling gender equality, and cultivating professional fulfillment that enhances family life. By contrast, attempts to rework the ideal worker schema tend to shift, but not blur, the boundary between domains. Flexible schedules, hybrid work, work–life balance programs, and remote arrangements expand who can qualify as an ideal worker. Women—and mothers in particular—are increasingly included, but only insofar as they continue to demonstrate strong commitment to productivity and sustained availability to the workplace. Crucially, investment in family life—devoting time to children or other caregiving responsibilities—is not recognized as a legitimate expression of professional commitment. Mothers can be seen as ideal workers only to the extent that their devotion to family does not interfere with their devotion to work. As a result, ideal work remains anchored in a clear boundary between professional commitment and private family life. While motherhood can be reimagined through work, work itself cannot be reimagined through motherhood.

Existing scholarship richly documents women’s negotiations of work and family but offers limited analytical tools for explaining this asymmetry. Why are individuals able to craft alternative repertoires that fundamentally reconfigure one moral schema while leaving another structurally intact? Why are the defining criteria of some schemas amenable to reinterpretation and blurring, while others can only be broadened without altering their core logic? This empirical pattern points to a broader sociological problem: how do we explain variation in the imaginative reconstruction of established schemas? When moral frameworks generate strain, actors attempt

to revise them—but the scope of revision varies. In some cases, foundational distinctions are reworked; in others, they are merely adjusted or repositioned.

Explaining this variation requires examining the moral and institutional conditions that shape which schemas can be reinterpreted—and how far that reinterpretation can extend. To do so, I develop a framework for analyzing how individuals imagine and reconstruct their aspirational identities—the image of the person one seeks to become. Rather than asking whether actors reinterpret existing roles, I focus on the scope of that reinterpretation: when does it reach the core criteria that define an identity, and when does it remain limited to adjustments in how those criteria are enacted? I argue that identity-defining schemas are organized around a foundational moral relation—such as devotion, expressed as a mother’s commitment to her children or a worker’s commitment to the workplace—which establishes the basic criteria for legitimate membership. While actors rarely reject this underlying relation, they often contest how it should be interpreted and enacted. The key variation, therefore, lies in the depth of this reworking: whether reinterpretation reshapes the meaning of devotion itself or simply broadens the range of practices through which it can be expressed.

This variation, I suggest, is shaped by two conditions. First, the location of interpretive authority—whether actors can plausibly claim authority over what it means to be devoted, or whether they must defer to external institutional evaluation. Second, the structure of the surrounding discursive field—specifically, whether it provides multiple culturally available ways of enacting devotion that can be recombined and recognized as legitimate. Together, these factors shape whether identity-centered boundary work takes the form of blurring—redefining the core criteria of an identity—or shifting—broadening its practical expression without directly altering its underlying logic.

Through the case of working mothers in an elite, male-dominated occupational field, this article makes two contributions. Empirically, it demonstrates patterned variation in how women engage in prospective identity work and negotiate perceived gender inequality, showing that reinterpretation operates differently across domains. Theoretically, it explains why some aspirational identities are more amenable to transformation than others, linking identity change to the distribution of interpretive authority and the structure of available cultural repertoires. By situating work–family conflict within a broader theory of moral identity reconfiguration, the article contributes both to scholarship on gender inequality and to sociological debates about the limits of cultural change.

The next section reviews research on work-family negotiation and sociological theories of how new values and identities are formed. I then develop the theoretical framework in greater detail before turning to the empirical analysis of prospective identity-based boundary work among working mothers. The article concludes by discussing the broader applicability of the framework beyond this case.

THEORETICAL DISCUSSION

The Ideal Worker and Ideal Mother as Institutionalized Moral Schemas

A substantial body of scholarship demonstrates that the ideal worker and ideal mother operate not merely as cultural expectations but as institutionalized moral schemas that organize work and family life (Acker 1990; Garey 1999; Williams 2001; Blair-Loy 2004). These schemas are built into workplace structures, occupational hierarchies, and temporal regimes, shaping what counts as legitimate devotion, competence, and worth. They function both as normative ideals and as sorting mechanisms that structure evaluation and reproduce inequality (Almeling 2007).

Organizations have historically been constructed around the implicit image of an ideal worker unencumbered by caregiving responsibilities—an image aligned with the white, heterosexual male breadwinner (Acker 1990; Williams 2001). This image is reproduced through hiring, promotion, and everyday assumptions about commitment and competence (Britton 2000; Tienari, Quack, & Theobald 2002). Williams and colleagues (2013) describe this orientation as a work-devotion schema: a moral and cognitive belief that paid work should occupy the central focus of adult life, with competing commitments minimized to avoid stigma. In contemporary professional contexts, status is signaled less by leisure than by visible intensity and sustained engagement (Williams 2010). Devotion is demonstrated through availability, responsiveness, and prioritization of organizational goals, establishing a powerful evaluative standard against which workers are judged.

This evaluative standard operates differently across gender. Being a “good worker” has historically been culturally compatible with being a “good father,” it has been widely understood as incompatible with being a “good mother” (Williams et al. 2013). Men’s extended work commitment is still often interpreted as ambition and dedication (Berdahl and Moon 2013; Rudman and Mescher 2013), whereas mothers who make caregiving visible—by taking leave or using flexibility policies—are frequently viewed as less reliable and less promotable (Stone and Hernandez 2013). The issue, then, is not only differential treatment but the incorporation of gendered assumptions into the very criteria used to assess commitment and competence.

These gendered expectations are rooted in a parallel cultural schema of the “ideal mother.” This model has historically centered on child-focused, time-intensive, and expert-guided nurturing (Hays 1996; Epstein 2000; Christopher 2012; Collins 2019). Sustained by institutional separations between the “public sphere of work” and “the private sphere of family,”

it casts the family as an affective refuge from market rationality. Within this framework, maternal devotion is defined through physical presence, emotional attentiveness, and the prioritization of children's needs. As Garey (1999) observes, even the term *working mother* fuses culturally antithetical identities—public/private, provider/homemaker—implicitly framing work and motherhood as competing, zero-sum commitments.

These arrangements structure lived experience by casting work and motherhood as competing, zero-sum commitments. Organizational ethnographies show how working mothers navigate this tension between intensive caregiving norms and the time demands of work devotion. The consequences are well documented: psychological strain, anticipatory accommodation, stalled advancement, and the persistence of a motherhood penalty (Hunt and Hunt 1982; Machung 1985; Garey 1999; Schieman, Milkie, and Glavin 2009; Blair-Loy 2010; Hochschild and Machung 2012). Women often respond by stepping off advancement tracks, delaying childbirth, reducing working hours, or exiting demanding fields. These tensions are further intensified by broader institutional shifts. As public provision of care has declined, responsibility has been increasingly offloaded onto families and markets. Care is thus privatized and commodified, requiring individuals—particularly women—to absorb the resulting gaps (Orloff 1993, 1996; O'Connor, Orloff, and Shaver 1999). This reorganization is also stratified along lines of race and class: women of color are disproportionately positioned to provide both familial and market-based care under precarious conditions (Glenn 1992; Romero and Perez 2016).

Importantly, these dynamics persist despite reform efforts. Initiatives such as results-only work environments, hybrid arrangements, and flexible scheduling policies have not fundamentally altered the underlying evaluative standards. Instead, they often reproduce existing

inequalities, as physical and temporal availability continue to signal seriousness, commitment, and belonging (Lawrence and Corwin 2003; Albiston 2005; Kelly et al. 2010; Williams et al. 2013; Williams et al. 2016; England 2016). Career interruptions remain heavily penalized, particularly among high-skilled professional women, and the ideal worker continues to be defined by uninterrupted productivity and constant availability. These tensions are especially pronounced in male-dominated fields such as high-tech, where norms of visibility, self-promotion, and extended working hours remain deeply entrenched (Fernandez and Campero 2017; Mickey 2019; Segovia-Pérez et al. 2020).

Taken together, this literature suggests that the schemas of ideal work and ideal motherhood operate not as separate domains but as interlocking moral frameworks that structure how workers are evaluated, how careers unfold, and how inequality is reproduced within contemporary organizations. It also demonstrates that women actively negotiate these regimes. Some accommodate the conflict by reducing their devotion to paid work—opting for part-time roles, stepping off advancement tracks, declining promotions, exiting paid employment, or delaying childbirth (Hunt & Hunt 1982; Hays 1996; Garey 1999; Collins 2019). Although often framed as matters of individual preference, such strategies reflect structured responses to expectations of uninterrupted devotion in both spheres. They carry economic and symbolic penalties that ultimately reinforce gender stratification.

Others seek to redefine, rather than reject, intensive motherhood. Some reinterpret its moral core—devotion, responsibility, care—in ways that render employment compatible with maternal virtue (Montanye & Livingston 2024; Muller & Chang 2024; de Laat 2023; Gerson 2009, 2002; Lambert 2008). Maternal commitment may be reframed in terms of symbolic presence or quality of interaction rather than sheer time investment (Garey 1999; Lawrence &

Corwin 2003). Still others redefine paid work itself as an expression of mothering—by emphasizing its role in providing financial stability, modeling gender equality, or fostering children’s independence (Collins 2019). In these cases, devotion to children is enacted partly through commitment to work, blurring the boundary between public and private spheres.

Work ideals have also evolved. Hybrid arrangements, remote work, and flexible schedules have broadened both who counts as a legitimate worker and how commitment may be enacted (Kelly et al. 2010; Matos & Galinsky 2014; de Laat 2023; Muller & Chang 2024). Whereas the ideal worker was once closely aligned with the white, heteronormative male, it now encompasses a wider range of groups, including mothers. Yet these reforms tend to operate within durable evaluative frameworks. Flexibility is often conditional on maintaining high levels of productivity and responsiveness, with work frequently extending into evenings and weekends (Williams et al. 2016; Chung 2022). Emerging “inclusive worker” norms may acknowledge plural commitments, but they continue to privilege output and availability (Gerson 2023; Muller and Chang 2024). Thus, while the image of the ideal worker has diversified, its moral core remains anchored in the prioritization of paid labor. Caregiving is not recognized as an intrinsic expression of work devotion. In this sense, although the boundary between work and family may shift in form, its underlying evaluative logic endures. Accordingly, while alternatives to ideal motherhood often blur the boundary between public and private by redefining what counts as maternal devotion, alternatives to ideal work tend to expand who qualifies and how commitment is performed without directly redefining devotion itself. Existing scholarship documents women’s strategies of negotiation, but has paid less attention to this asymmetry.

Why can individuals reconfigure motherhood in boundary-blurring ways, yet fail to legitimate comparable redefinitions of work? Why do some schemas become permeable while

others remain structurally intact? The asymmetry between the redefinition of motherhood and the relative stability of work devotion suggests that the issue is not simply constraint versus agency, but how moral schemas are constituted, stabilized, and rendered legitimate. To explain why some dominant ideals are imaginatively reworked while others endure, we must move beyond the work–family domain and engage broader sociological theories of how new values and schemas are formed, activated, and institutionalized.

Imagining Alternatives: Narrative Identity, Boundary Work, and Projective Agency

A central concern of sociological theorizing on identity work and cultural change is how actors craft new aspirational identities when inherited schemas no longer provide a livable account of who they are or ought to be. Despite their theoretical differences, distinct traditions converge on a core insight: identity change is a socially organized process in which actors draw on available cultural materials, confront institutional constraints, and test emerging narratives in interaction. Individuals internalize established moral codes and use them to construct shared moral boundaries—that is, the meanings they attach to being a moral actor (Stets and Carter 2012). When these moral codes align with everyday experience, actors experience a sense of coherence or “oneness” between self and world. However, when dominant schemas generate strain—because roles, institutional promises, or moral expectations become misaligned—this coherence breaks down. Under such conditions, actors engage in prospective identity work: they attempt to reimagine who they want to become and to assemble narrative forms capable of sustaining that aspiration in the present.

Narrative approaches specify how this process unfolds. Identities are not fixed attributes but ongoing narrative accomplishments (Somers 1994; Polletta 1998). Actors organize their lives

through temporally extended, relational stories that link events, obligations, and moral evaluations. Identity change thus occurs when these narrative structures are reorganized—often in response to shifts in “relational settings,” that is, the patterned connections between institutions, public narratives, and social practices (Almeling 2023; Somers 1994). When such shifts render existing stories unable to integrate new experiences, identity crises emerge. Recomposition takes the form of narrative repair, as actors revise the stories that connect “who I am” to “what I should do,” recalibrating the evaluative criteria through which experiences are interpreted.

At the same time, narrative theory emphasizes that such reconstruction is not unconstrained. Narratives must conform to culturally available plots in order to be intelligible, and institutional contexts regulate who can speak, how stories may be told, and what counts as a credible account (Polletta 1998; Ewick and Silbey 1995; Conley and O’Barr 1990). Narrative power is uneven: some stories gain traction because they resonate with dominant values, circulate through institutional routines, and align with background assumptions that structure common sense (Polletta 2006; Almeling 2023). Others fail to stabilize and thus cannot sustain viable identities. In this sense, narrative theory explains not only how actors imagine alternatives, but also why some narratives become livable identities while others do not.

This constraint is further reinforced by the path-dependent nature of identity-based narrative change. Scholarship on collective memory shows that narrative reconstruction depends on the survival and continued relevance of existing symbolic forms (Jansen 2007; Armstrong and Cragg 2006). Actors operate within structured mnemonic fields shaped by prior meanings and reputational trajectories. As a result, prospective identity work is historically conditioned: actors

can only recombine what remains available and recognizable. Within these constraints, narratives often reproduce hegemony. The stories individuals tell about themselves—and about who they aspire to become—are shaped by taken-for-granted orders of meaning that structure what is thinkable and legitimate (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991). At the same time, narrative approaches to identity change show that stories can become subversive when actors make visible the link between personal experience and broader structural conditions—replotting individual events as rooted in systemic arrangements (Polletta 1998; Smith 1987; Ewick and Silbey 2003). Yet such subversive narrative work is neither automatic nor equally available. It tends to emerge under specific conditions: social marginality, heightened awareness of hegemonic rules, and institutional contexts that enable shared storytelling and collective reinterpretation (Freeman 1979; Polletta 1998).

Cultural sociology complements these insights by theorizing the materials of imagination. Swidler's (1986, 2001) "toolkit" model conceptualizes culture as a repertoire of scripts, habits, and stories that actors draw upon selectively. From this perspective, imagining alternative identities is a process of recombination rather than invention. DiMaggio (1997) further shows that multiple schemata are cognitively available but unevenly activated, making identity work both flexible and patterned. Together, these approaches clarify that what actors can imagine depends on the availability and legitimacy of cultural materials.

Pragmatist theories, institutionalists, and law and society scholarship extend this argument by showing that identity work is shaped through enactment. Because rules and ideals are implemented in situated contexts, actors experiment with different ways of inhabiting roles, generating variation that can gradually reshape meaning (Clemens 1997; Silbey 2005; Albiston

2005; Binder 2007). This dynamic becomes especially pronounced in unsettled periods—moments of crisis, contradiction, or moral rupture—when habitual scripts break down and reflexivity increases (Bourdieu 1990; Beck, Lash, and Wynne 1992; Giddens 1990; Lizardo and Strand 2017; Swidler 1986). It is under these conditions that individuals begin to interrogate and reconstruct the meta-narratives that organize their identities (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991). As established frameworks lose their grip, actors recombine cultural elements, switch frames, and “braid” repertoires to construct aspirational identities under uncertainty (Tilly 1992; Skrbis and Woodward 2007; Haak and Wilterdink 2009; Polletta 2008; Oleschuk et al. 2019; Zilberstein et al. 2023).

Such aspirational identities are not static ideals but orientations that organize present conduct (Mische 2022; Frye 2012, 2017; Joas and Beckert 2001; Mische 2009, 2022). Change unfolds through attempted realization: actors experiment with means, revise ends in the process, and reconstruct habits through ongoing engagement with the world (Dewey 1922; Joas 1996; Emirbayer and Mische 1998). The capacity to imagine alternatives—“projective creativity”—becomes especially consequential when existing narratives can no longer accommodate lived experience. Crucially, however, this capacity is socially stratified: access to viable futures depends on actors’ resources and positions, which shape what can be plausibly imagined and pursued (Atkinson 2013; Weinberger et al. 2017; Baillergeau and Duyvendak 2019; Mahadeo 2019).

Finally, affective processes structure the durability of these imagined identities (Hochschild 1983; Lopez 2006; Leidner 1993). Experiences of misalignment generate distress that motivates reinterpretation, while alignment produces emotional resonance that stabilizes

identities (Hochschild 1983; Collins 2004). Narratives thus not only organize experience but sustain commitment to particular futures by linking emotion, moral evaluation, and action (Somers 1994; Polletta 2009).

Taken together, these literatures offer powerful accounts of how actors construct alternative identities under conditions of strain. They show that prospective identity work is narratively organized, culturally resourced, institutionally constrained, and pragmatically enacted. Yet they are less explicit about variation in the depth of transformation. While we understand how actors generate alternative narratives, we know less about why some aspirational identities become reconstructable at their core—amenable to redefining their underlying criteria—while others remain anchored in durable evaluative logics despite similar conditions of disruption and reflexivity. In other words, existing theories explain how identity change becomes possible, and identify the general conditions that shape and constrain reconstruction, but they stop short of explaining why the same actors reinterpret some schemas in ways that reach their defining criteria of worth and devotion, while in other cases reinterpretation remains limited to expanding acceptable practices. Addressing this gap requires shifting the analytical focus from the *possibility* of identity change to its *scope*: what elements of a schema can travel, where reinterpretation is blocked, and why.

A FRAMEWORK FOR PROSPECTIVE BOUNDARY FORMATION: ENABLING SCHEMAS, AUTHORITY, AND DISCURSIVE FIELDS

Aspirational identities are not abstract attributes but relational narrative configurations. Following Somers (1994), individuals make sense of themselves through narrativity: meaning emerges temporally and relationally, as actors situate present commitments within projected

trajectories. We do not act simply as “mothers,” “workers,” or “citizens,” but through stories that link relationships, obligations, and moral purposes across time. To aspire to be an “ideal mother” or an “ideal worker” is therefore to inhabit a relational narrative structured by patterned social relations embedded within institutional fields. Explaining variation in aspirational identities requires identifying the relational schema that organizes each domain.

At the most fundamental level lies what I term the *enabling relational schema*: the founding moral relation that defines legitimate membership within a given domain. This schema operates as a meta-narrative (Somers 1994) or cultural enabler (Abend 2014), denoting a hegemonic order of practices, relations, and meanings that come to be taken for granted (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991). Precisely because it operates at this tacit level, it sets the parameters of intelligibility: it defines what counts as a recognizable identity within the domain. The enabling schema thus establishes the primary symbolic boundary by specifying the moral relation—devotion, loyalty, authenticity, sacrifice—that distinguishes ideal from non-ideal members.

By contrast, *derivative* (secondary) narratives give content to this relation by specifying how it is enacted in practice. They define what devotion or commitment looks like—through time investment, presence, productivity, or sacrifice. Where these meanings are contested, we enter the terrain of ideology—the part of the meaning system that does not “go without saying” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991). Prospective identity work typically operates at this level. Actors rarely reject the enabling relation itself—few dispute that mothers should be devoted or that workers should be committed—but instead challenge how devotion is defined, measured, and demonstrated. Crucially, not all enabling schemas afford the same scope for such

reinterpretation. I argue that variation in the depth of transformation depends on two interrelated mechanisms: the location of interpretive authority and the structure of the discursive field.

Authority over Meaning: Authenticity, Recognition, and Redefinition

The first mechanism concerns where authority to define the enabling relation resides. Enabling schemas differ in whether the defining relation is framed as self-authored or externally validated. This distinction has profound implications for prospective identity work. In domains such as motherhood, devotion is culturally framed as authentic, embodied, and internal. Even when specific norms—such as intensive mothering—are recognized as socially constructed, maternal devotion itself is imagined as emanating from within (Damaske 2013). This framing grants actors moral standing. When devotion is construed as self-owned, individuals can plausibly claim authority over its meaning. A mother can argue that her paid employment expresses care for her children and that conventional indicators—such as time spent at home—misrecognize the substance of devotion. Reinterpretation can thus be framed as a more faithful realization of the enabling relation rather than a rejection of it.

Importantly, authenticity does not imply interpretive freedom. Blurring the defining criteria of a shared identity still requires collective recognition (Zolberg and Long 1999; Wimmer 2008). Claims that fail to resonate within shared moral vocabularies will not stabilize. What authenticity provides is not automatic legitimacy but diffused authority. In the case of motherhood, no single institution monopolizes the definition of devotion. Feminist movements, religious communities, therapeutic discourses, parenting networks, and policy regimes all participate in defining good mothering. This plurality of interpretive sites creates space for contestation and reinterpretation.

The contrast with work clarifies the mechanism. The enabling relation of the ideal worker is also one of devotion—this time to the organization or profession. However, unlike maternal devotion, work devotion is framed as measurable and externally validated. It is anchored in productivity metrics, performance evaluations, and employer recognition. Here, interpretive authority is centralized. A worker who claims that caregiving expresses devotion to work challenges not only prevailing practices but the institutional authority that defines commitment itself. Because legitimacy resides in external evaluation rather than internal authenticity, reinterpretation lacks the same moral grounding.

This distinction parallels Brubaker's (2016) analysis of gender and race. Gender identity, increasingly framed as an inner truth, permits claims of authentic self-realization. Race, anchored in collective history and structural positioning, does not provide an equivalent schema of inner authority. Transracial claims are therefore interpreted as trespass rather than redefinition. The difference lies not in actors' creativity but in where authority over meaning is culturally located. Where devotion is framed as self-authored, actors can more plausibly contest its criteria. Where it is externally authorized, reinterpretation is structurally constrained. Yet constraint at the level of meaning does not foreclose change at the level of practice. In line with pragmatist theory, actors often respond to problematic situations by experimenting with new means rather than redefining ends (Dewey 1922; Joas 1996). Hybrid schedules, remote work, and job-sharing arrangements exemplify this dynamic. Through repeated enactment (Feldman and Pentland 2003), new practices may broaden what counts as compatible with devotion without altering the underlying evaluative logic. In such domains, change tends toward boundary shifting rather than boundary blurring.

Discursive Fields and Derivative Plurality: The Conditions for Braiding

The second mechanism concerns the structure of the discursive field—the range and organization of derivative narratives available for recombination. Actors do not construct aspirational identities *ex nihilo*; they draw on available narrative materials within historically structured fields (Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz 1991; Jansen 2007). These fields vary in whether they contain multiple, competing derivative narratives or are organized around a singular evaluative logic.

The parenting field has historically encompassed at least two distinct narratives of devotion: intensive mothering and provider-based fatherhood. While both are anchored in a relation of care for children, they differ in how devotion is enacted—through time-intensive presence or through provision and public achievement (Brumley 2018). Because these narratives coexist, actors can braid elements across them (Zilberstein, Lamont, and Sanchez 2023). Women can reinterpret paid employment through the provider logic, reframing work as a form of care. The presence of multiple derivative narratives makes such recombination culturally legible. Plural interpretive authorities further amplify this process: feminist discourse, therapeutic frameworks, and policy regimes all contribute to redefining what counts as good mothering (Foster 2016; de Laat 2003; Kelly et al. 2010).

By contrast, the discursive field of work has been historically dominated by a relatively unified narrative: devotion defined through time-based productivity and prioritization of organizational goals. Although practices have diversified, deeply institutionalized alternative narratives of work devotion remain limited. Without such alternatives, actors lack culturally resonant materials to redefine the core criteria of commitment. As boundary scholarship suggests, fields characterized by plural authorities and competing narratives enable more

extensive reconfiguration, whereas those organized around centralized authority constrain change to incremental adaptation (Wimmer 2008).

Explaining Variation in Prospective Boundary Work

These mechanisms—interpretive authority and discursive plurality—are analytically distinct but empirically intertwined. The location of authority shapes whether actors can credibly contest the meaning of devotion, while the structure of the discursive field determines whether alternative narratives are available for recombination and recognition. Where authority is diffuse and narratives are plural, boundary blurring becomes possible at the derivative level; where authority is centralized and narratives are limited, change takes the form of practice-based expansion rather than substantive redefinition. This framework helps explain why some aspirational identities are reconstructed at their core, while others evolve primarily through incremental adjustments. More broadly, it suggests that variation in identity transformation must be understood in relation to the moral and institutional organization of the fields in which identities are embedded.

In the following section, I examine how working mothers in elite high-tech firms navigate the tension between ideal motherhood and ideal work. By tracing their efforts at reinterpretation, accommodation, and resistance, I show how prospective boundary work unfolds in practice—and how the location of interpretive authority and the structure of the discursive field shape the forms that such reconstruction can take.

[Figure 1 here]

METHODS AND DATA

This article develops a theoretical framework for understanding how individuals imagine and construct alternatives to dominant moral schemas when those schemas no longer align with lived experience. A qualitative case study is particularly well suited to this aim. Rather than testing hypotheses about frequency or distribution, the project seeks to generate conceptual insight into the mechanisms that shape prospective boundary formation. The case of professional software engineers who are mothers provides a strategically illuminating site for such inquiry.

The high-tech industry is male-dominated and characterized by high pay, long work hours, and demanding productivity expectations. These conditions render especially visible the tension between ideal motherhood and ideal work. Because professional software engineering valorizes extended availability and measurable output, the clash between gendered schemas of devotion becomes acute rather than latent. The field thus provides a revealing context in which to examine how actors respond to sustained moral contradiction.

The empirical analysis draws on 56 semi-structured interviews, each averaging approximately ninety minutes, with women software engineers employed in the high-tech industry. Of these, 30 had at least one child during their professional careers. The analysis focuses on these 30 mothers, all of whom described experiencing tension between their roles as mothers and professionals.

This study does not aim to generalize to all working mothers or even to all women in technology. The respondents worked in high-status firms that afforded relatively high salaries, some degree of flexibility, and partial autonomy over scheduling. All participants were white. The sample is therefore not representative of the broader population of working mothers, whose experiences vary substantially by race, class, and occupation. Rather than seeking representativeness, I leverage this case to advance theoretical understanding of how actors

engage in prospective boundary work when faced with a gap between institutionalized ideals and daily practice (see Collins, Neely, and Khan 2024). The homogeneity of the sample allows clearer analytic focus on variation in interpretive strategies rather than on cross-cutting structural inequalities.

Participants were recruited through a call for interviews posted in a Facebook group belonging to an online community of senior women software engineers and data scientists. The community includes over 4,000 active members and runs more than twenty professional programs. Its stated mission is to address what members describe as the “exodus” of women from science and technology fields due to hostile work cultures and punishing schedules. The call yielded sixty interviews.

[Table 1 here]

Interviews are well suited to examining how individuals interpret and narrate moral dilemmas. They allow respondents to articulate the narratives through which they make sense of their decisions, aspirations, and constraints (Somers 1996; Pugh 2013). The aim of this study is not to establish objective conditions but to analyze how working mothers define and respond to what they experience as moral contradiction. As Small (2009) and Lamont and Swidler (2014) note, interviews provide access to evaluative frameworks that are rarely visible through observation alone. Even if respondents selectively emphasized or rationalized aspects of their experiences, such selectivity is analytically meaningful: the study is concerned precisely with how actors construct coherence and justify boundary work.

All interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and conducted using an adaptive semi-structured format. Questions probed respondents’ definitions of ideal motherhood and ideal

work, their perceptions of others' expectations, and moments of perceived mismatch between practice and aspiration. Following Lamont's (2009) approach to identifying evaluative criteria, I asked respondents to describe how they judged themselves and how they believed others judged them.

Coding proceeded inductively and iteratively. In initial rounds, I flagged all references to perceived clashes between maternal and professional identities. These segments became the focal point for analyzing how respondents experienced moral strain. In subsequent rounds, I developed more targeted codes capturing: (1) definitions of ideal motherhood and ideal work; (2) constructions of tension between them; (3) strategies of resolution; and (4) articulations of moral and aspirational goals. Comparative analysis across cases enabled identification of patterned variation in identity-based boundary strategies.

Although I attend to contextual factors such as respondents' educational background and career trajectories, the purpose of this study is not to systematically analyze how race, social class, or other social positions mediate experiences of gender inequality. Instead, the aim is to illuminate a process that remains undertheorized: how actors craft new identity narratives when dominant frameworks fail to resolve lived tensions. By examining one organizational field in depth, this study develops a framework that can inform future research on prospective identity work across varied institutional contexts. It thereby opens space for subsequent inquiry into how race, class, and other axes of inequality shape both the experience of identity rupture and the capacity for reconfiguration.

LIVING BETWEEN COMPETING MORAL SCHEMA

The software engineers I interviewed understood themselves as members of a highly skilled professional community defined by formal education, specialized expertise, and demonstrable technical achievement. All held at least a bachelor's degree in engineering, computer science, or a related field, and many had completed advanced degrees. Entry into elite high-tech firms was described as hard-won, requiring years of study, competitive internships, rigorous technical interviews, and continuous skill acquisition. Their accounts emphasized merit, problem-solving capacity, and the ability to deliver complex systems at scale.

Importantly, they did not view their current roles as endpoints but as stages within an ongoing trajectory. Respondents articulated clear aspirations for advancement—whether toward leadership roles or deeper technical mastery as senior engineers, architects, or domain specialists. Even those who expressed ambivalence about managerial paths emphasized a desire to refine their expertise, expand their scope of responsibility, and remain at the forefront of innovation. In their narratives, professional growth was not simply a matter of upward mobility but of maintaining competence, relevance, and meaningful contribution within a fast-moving, status-conscious field.

Yet alongside these aspirations ran a persistent and deeply felt tension. Across interviews, respondents described a growing disjuncture between what their careers demanded—and what they understood ideal work to require—and their lived experience of motherhood. Nearly all referred, explicitly or implicitly, to a “motherhood penalty.” After maternity leave, many encountered slower salary growth, diminished advancement prospects, and subtle shifts in how their commitment was perceived. Several described managers who assumed that once they had children, work would no longer be their primary priority. These dynamics were intensified by the

male-dominated character of software engineering. Most respondents worked in teams and organizations where men constituted the clear majority, and where advancement was widely understood to require unambiguous prioritization of work. As Raya recalled, after inviting her boss to her wedding, she overheard him express concern that she would soon have children—a remark that revealed how quickly professional promise could be recast as impending liability. Grace described leaving a client meeting early to relieve her babysitter and encountering visible anger from her manager, despite assuring him that she would continue working from home later that evening. In such moments, the boundary between professional dedication and maternal responsibility became both visible and fraught. The empirical question, therefore, is not whether tension existed—this was nearly universal—but how women responded to this clash between two hegemonic definitions of devotion. Among respondents with children, I identify two primary strategies, consistent with patterns noted in prior research.

Choosing and Drawing Bright Boundaries

A substantial group of respondents resolved the tension between work and motherhood by drawing a sharp boundary between the two spheres. For these women, the disjuncture was experienced as a structural incompatibility between two moralized schemas, each organized around a distinct conception of devotion. When discussing work, respondents consistently described a dominant understanding of commitment that extended beyond formal requirements. As Yollanda explained, “It’s never written anywhere, but everyone knows that if you want to prove yourself professionally, you have to put in the extra hours.” Sarah echoed this, noting that although no one officially tracked time, meeting productivity benchmarks and tight deadlines

effectively required extended availability. To signal seriousness was to demonstrate that work came first.

Commitment was evaluated not only through output but also through presence. Raya recalled that before motherhood, her willingness to work twelve-hour days signaled her dedication and earned her managers' respect: "To be an ideal worker, you have to show motivation, devotion, commitment. And that requires long hours." Rachel similarly described how employees were technically permitted to leave early, yet those who did so "paid a price." Her mentor told her explicitly: "You can leave early, but know that it will harm you." The consequences were rarely formal sanctions. Instead, they took the form of exclusion from informal spaces where opportunities were shaped and distributed. Mary, for example, described missing late-afternoon cafeteria conversations where "real work talk" occurred: "At five-thirty they go to the cafeteria and have these informal conversations... and I wasn't present." These absences, she believed, directly affected promotions and project assignments. As Mika observed, "An ideal worker is someone without kids. Because then they can really commit."

Motherhood, in turn, was understood as an equally demanding form of devotion. For these women, being devoted to their children required substantial time presence; seeing their children only at bedtime was not enough. Yollanda drew a sharp distinction between biological motherhood and "actually being there" for one's children, defining the latter through sustained presence. Yelena described how, after her daughter was born, she realized that her prior work schedule would not allow her to be the kind of mother she wanted to be: "I wanted to spend more time at home with my daughter. When she was about a month old, I suddenly realized how quickly time passes. I understood that I would probably extend my leave by another six months.

After that, I realized that if I go back to the same job I would see her only at bed time and I wanted to stay with her. So I ended up resigning.”

Most of these women did not leave the workforce entirely. However, they concluded that full devotion to both domains was not possible. Respondents described a persistent sense of inadequacy—professionally when leaving early, maternally when staying late. Ruth recalled returning from maternity leave to “a hard period” marked by exhaustion and the feeling of falling behind at work while also not being fully present for her children. Violet similarly described a “new reality” in which neither role felt fully attainable. Both domains were understood as governed by the same underlying logic: devotion demonstrated through prioritization and sustained presence. Within this framework, full commitment to one sphere necessarily came at the expense of the other. To resolve this tension, respondents described a moral reordering that followed the birth of their children. Before motherhood, career advancement—leadership tracks, promotions, and professional growth—was pursued without hesitation. After becoming mothers, however, priorities shifted. As Yollanda explained, high-level positions were “problematic by definition for moms—not because someone prevents you from doing the job, but because you don’t want to devote such long hours to work at the expense of your kids.”

These women explicitly described choosing motherhood over career advancement. They reduced hours, declined promotions, moved into less demanding roles, or avoided management tracks altogether. Several worked 80 percent positions and strategically passed up opportunities in order to leave work earlier. Rowan reflected that her career trajectory had been shaped by her desire to be present for her children: “I did not work full time because that is what I thought I had

to do in order to be a good mom.” Others described choosing positions that were less intellectually stimulating but allowed them to complete their work earlier and return home.

Importantly, respondents were fully aware of the professional costs of these decisions. Mary explained: “I was ready to pay a price for being a mother. I invested a lot in my career and in getting the position that I got, but when I had kids I realized this is more important and that I can’t have both. So I started working part time, in a different position—but I’m fine with this because I know what is more important for me.” The language of “price” recurred across interviews. These women understood that stepping back from maximal commitment would likely result in stalled advancement and diminished visibility. Central to their reasoning was the belief that devotion is indivisible. As Rowan put it: “You cannot succeed in everything. If you fully commit yourself to one role you are surely to drop the ball on the other. But that’s fine. It’s okay not to be perfect and the best in everything.”

Hybrid work arrangements did not fundamentally disrupt this logic. Although many firms formally offered flexible scheduling and the option to work from home, these arrangements coexisted with demanding deadlines and high expectations. Sofia described initially welcoming remote work, only to find that it intensified rather than alleviated the tension: “You were always at work. And then you are not really with your kids and you are not really at work.” Flexibility blurred physical location, but it did not alter the evaluative standard. Extended availability remained the measure of commitment, making simultaneous fulfillment appear illusory.

Crucially, these respondents did not challenge the location of interpretive authority in either domain. They did not claim the right to redefine what counted as work devotion, nor did they detach maternal devotion from time presence. Respondents who prioritized motherhood

were aware that this stance was often viewed unfavorably by career-oriented colleagues. Yet they framed it as a deliberate moral decision rather than a constraint. In their accounts, both ideal motherhood and ideal work were fundamentally incompatible in practice. Rather than redefining devotion, they accepted its prevailing meaning and chose which sphere to prioritize. The result was neither boundary blurring nor boundary shifting, but boundary alignment and reaffirmation.

Refusing to Choose

A second group of respondents rejected the premise that career and motherhood are inherently incompatible. Like the first group, they described guilt, exhaustion, and managerial suspicion regarding their dual commitment. Unlike them, however, they did not attempt to resolve this tension through prioritization. Instead, they engaged in sustained interpretive work to redefine what devotion meant in each domain. They critiqued prevailing expectations of motherhood as outdated and sought to render the two schemas compatible—not by abandoning one, but by reworking their content. In theoretical terms, these women preserved the relational logic of devotion in both spheres while contesting how devotion is measured. Crucially, however, the scope of reinterpretation diverged sharply across motherhood and work.

Blurring Motherhood: Redefining Devotion as Quality, Provision, and Example

In their accounts of motherhood, these women consistently affirmed that being a “good mother” entails unconditional care and responsibility. What they challenged was not the expectation of devotion itself, but its equation with constant physical presence. Rather than measuring good motherhood through time spent at home, they reframed it in terms of emotional presence, reliability, and meaningful engagement. As Raya put it, “For me an ideal mom is one

who, when she's with her kids, is truly with them—it's not the quantity but the quality." Shari similarly emphasized that "a present parent is not someone who is there all the time in terms of hours, but someone who is there for the important things." Natalie went further, explicitly rejecting traditional ideals grounded in total presence and control: "I don't think there's any substitute for personal example... I'm very against shielding children from everything... I don't believe in creating this bubble where everything is perfect." Nora extended this logic by emphasizing balance and situational judgment: "Sometimes you don't see your home for a week and a half because of work, and sometimes you stay home because your kid had surgery."

In these accounts, devotion shifts from uninterrupted co-presence to affective intensity and symbolic significance. Being "there" comes to mean emotional availability in consequential moments, the cultivation of trust, and the modeling of values. This reinterpretation does not deny the material demands of long work hours. Most respondents reported working ten-hour days and relying on paid caregivers or extended family. As Grace noted matter-of-factly, "Both my husband and I were at work until late hours. We had lots of paid help." Yet they did not frame this arrangement as incompatible with motherly devotion. Instead, they incorporated professional commitment into their understanding of what it means to be a good mother.

Many went further, redefining paid work itself as an expression of maternal devotion. Employment was framed as a means of providing financial security, modeling gender equality, and demonstrating independence and self-fulfillment. Several explicitly described themselves as feminists seeking to embody these values in their daily lives. In this sense, professional achievement was cast as a "gift" to their children—a lesson in possibility and aspiration. As Iris explained, being a good mother was not simply about maximizing time at home, but also about

leading by example: “to show your kids that you are professionally fulfilled, that you are achieving your dreams.” Tamara similarly emphasized the importance of visibility: “It’s important to me—maybe because my mother didn’t have a career—that my daughter grows up seeing a mother who works... I want her to have that kind of model.” May articulated the tension more directly: “I’m aware that I work nine or ten hours a day, and I would prefer to be with them more. But I also tell myself that I’m giving them an example of a mother who enjoys her work, who loves what she does.” Through this reinterpretation, work is no longer positioned in opposition to motherhood but incorporated into it. Devotion to children becomes compatible with professional engagement, and the boundary between public labor and private care is reconfigured at the level of meaning.

Crucially, these women claimed authority over what maternal devotion requires. They rejected external attempts to impose a single standard of “true” motherhood, instead asserting that care can be expressed in multiple legitimate ways. Because maternal devotion is culturally framed as authentic and interior, they were able to claim interpretive authority over its meaning. Ann introduced this as a generational shift, contrasting her understanding with that of her mother: “It was weird for my mom that I was not at home and that I am working all the time. We hold different understandings of what mothering entails.” Iris extended this insight by explicitly pluralizing motherhood: “Everyone has her own way. For me it is combining—being able to combine my career with being a mom who is not involved in everything but in the important things. For others it means different things.” Dora moved from difference to process, describing how this authority develops over time: “In the past year or two I feel like I’ve really developed my own approach to motherhood. I don’t feel like I need validation from others anymore... At the beginning, you constantly look at others... but over time I’ve learned to stop comparing.”

Megan echoed this point, emphasizing that what counts as an “ideal parent” varies across individuals. Finally, Emily drew out the emotional implication of this reinterpretation by rejecting guilt as a defining feature of motherhood: “For me, successful motherhood means not living with guilt... whether you brought the watermelon or the plastic cups... that’s not what matters... If I can be at peace with my choices... then I’m giving my children the best chance to grow up well.”

These reinterpretations drew on alternative narratives already circulating within the parenting field. Respondents incorporated elements of the father-as-provider model—where devotion is expressed through economic provision—and feminist frames emphasizing autonomy and role modeling. The coexistence of these narratives made such recombination culturally intelligible. Authenticity provided moral standing; derivative plurality provided the resources for stabilization. In this domain, boundary blurring was not only possible but viable.

Shifting Work: Expanding Practices Without Redefining Devotion

By contrast, when these same women discussed ideal work, reinterpretation took a markedly different form. Like motherhood, work was understood as demanding devotion. Yet unlike their reworking of maternal devotion, respondents did not fundamentally renegotiate what counted as professional commitment. The prevailing standard—devotion demonstrated through productivity, responsiveness, and sustained time investment—remained largely intact.

Rather than redefining devotion, respondents sought to broaden the range of practices through which it could be demonstrated. They advocated hybrid arrangements, flexible schedules, and nonconsecutive hours, often criticizing rigid nine-to-five expectations as outdated

and as a key mechanism of inequality. Many described leaving the office early to pick up their children and emphasized that flexibility did not signal diminished commitment. For example, Helen described being permitted to work from home two days a week, which enabled her to pick up her children from school and daycare. Tamara similarly noted that flexible arrangements made it possible to maintain a healthier work–life balance. May emphasized that no one formally tracked hours in her workplace—employees could begin and end their workday according to their needs.

Yet this flexibility did not reduce overall work demands. Without exception, respondents described returning to work after their children went to sleep, often working late into the night. As Tamara and May noted, leaving work early typically meant completing tasks in the evening. Veronika described this pattern as routine: “I had days when I would leave early, but like everyone in high-tech, I connected back to work after the kids went to sleep.” Sally similarly observed that although long hours were not formally required, producing high-quality work often necessitated evening labor. Shari captured this dynamic succinctly: “No one expects you to work nine to five, but everyone works around the clock because the work needs to get done.”

Even in organizations described as supportive, expectations of productivity remained unchanged. Heidi characterized her company as offering “excellent work-life balance” in the sense that employees could block time to pick up their children, but immediately qualified that work still had to “get done—and get done efficiently.” Advancement, respondents repeatedly emphasized, required going beyond formal expectations. As Grace stated bluntly, “You always have to put in the extra time.” Thus, even as many insisted that work–family balance was achievable through flexible and hybrid arrangements, their accounts revealed extended and

fragmented workdays that often left them seeing their children less than they would have preferred. Flexibility expanded how devotion could be enacted, but it did not displace the underlying expectation of sustained productivity and prioritization of work.

In discussing work, respondents implicitly treated devotion as externally evaluated. Authority over what counts as commitment resided with managers, employers, and organizational performance metrics. Although many described efforts to “educate” supervisors and advocate for flexibility, they did not seek to redefine devotion apart from productivity and responsiveness to organizational demands. Instead, their aim was to demonstrate that motherhood does not undermine commitment—and that leaving early to pick up children need not reduce output.

As a result, even as practices diversified through remote work, hybrid models, and flexible scheduling, the evaluative core remained intact. Devotion continued to be measured through results and sustained responsiveness. The category of the ideal worker expanded to accommodate parents and new temporal arrangements, but the moral hierarchy structuring the boundary did not shift. In boundary terms, this pattern reflects boundary shifting rather than boundary blurring. The contrast with motherhood is striking: while respondents redefined devotion and blurred the boundary between public and private in their maternal narratives, in their professional lives they expanded acceptable practices without altering what devotion fundamentally meant.

Their moral evaluations further underscore this asymmetry. Several respondents expressed disdain for women who reduced their labor force participation or exited demanding roles. One distinguished herself from “the women who at 3 p.m. fill the elevators to pick up their

kids,” insisting, “I was different because I never aspired to stop working.” Here, continued career engagement signaled seriousness and ambition, while withdrawal was framed as a personal shortcoming rather than a response to structural constraints. Even as respondents acknowledged the strain of combining work and motherhood, they resisted interpreting this tension as evidence of institutional incompatibility.

This stance, however, came at a cost. Many described working extremely long hours, feeling chronically exhausted, and routinely subordinating domestic life to workplace demands. Reframing employment as compatible with maternal devotion did not reduce overwork; it rendered it morally coherent. When respondents spoke about the workplace itself, caregiving remained external to its organizing logic. Family responsibilities were treated as private obligations that should not disrupt collective workflows. Iris, for instance, noted that team meetings were often scheduled in the late afternoon—the only time she could reliably be with her children. Although alternative scheduling might have accommodated her needs, she hesitated to press for change, explaining, “It’s not their fault I decided to be a mom.” Her remark captures a broader pattern: while motherhood could be reinterpreted through the lens of work, the structure of work itself remained largely unquestioned. Importantly, this strategy was shaped by class position. Respondents occupied relatively privileged roles that afforded schedule autonomy and access to paid support. As prior research suggests (Garey 1999; Lambert 2008), flexibility enables reinterpretation primarily where actors have some control over their time. In more precarious contexts, it may instead intensify instability without enabling meaningful reconfiguration.

Accordingly, women who refused to choose between domains reaffirmed devotion in both, but engaged its meaning differently. In motherhood—where devotion is framed as authentic and supported by plural narratives—they claimed interpretive authority and blurred the boundary between public and private. In work—where evaluation is external and institutionally enforced—they adapted practices while leaving core criteria intact. This asymmetry reflects not differences in ambition or effort, but the unequal distribution of interpretive authority across institutional domains.

The Irony of Boundary Work: Subversion and Naturalization

The asymmetry in prospective boundary work extended beyond identity narratives to women's explanations of gender inequality itself. The two groups not only responded differently to the tension between motherhood and work; they also located the source of inequality in different domains. Women who drew bright boundaries—prioritizing motherhood over career advancement—tended to frame inequality in structural terms. They spoke explicitly of the “price” they paid and attributed that cost to the organization of work itself. For them, the problem was not women's ambition or confidence, but a workplace structured around long hours, constant availability, and the prioritization of work over family. As long as professional commitment was measured through extended temporal investment and visible prioritization of the office, mothers would remain disadvantaged.

Their critique was thus directed not at individual women but at the evaluative criteria governing work. While they did not attempt to redefine work devotion, they exposed its taken-for-granted assumptions. In Ewick and Silbey's (1995) terms, their subversiveness lay less in articulating an alternative schema than in rendering visible the narrative connections that

ordinarily “go without saying”—namely, that time-based productivity is treated as neutral despite its gendered consequences. By insisting on the incompatibility between caregiving and prevailing standards of professional devotion, they illuminated the structural basis of inequality.

Women who refused to choose—those who blurred the boundary of motherhood—offered a different diagnosis. Having reinterpreted maternal devotion in ways that made career commitment morally compatible, they were less likely to attribute inequality to the organization of work itself. Instead, they located it in the private sphere and in individual dispositions. Several emphasized socialization and self-confidence. Rida explained: “I think the most important thing to do to ensure gender equality is to make sure that girls... internalize that they are just as good as boys. We need self-confident women who know they can do anything.” Naomi similarly argued: “The biggest cause of gender inequality is that women do not know how to push themselves like men do. They don’t know how to demand a higher salary.” Others pointed to unequal divisions of household labor. Veronika insisted: “Taking your kids out of school once a week is not enough. He should invest the same amount of time in his family as in his work.” According to Shari: “Equal rights, equal responsibilities... we are two caretakers, two breadwinners.”

The contrast reveals an unexpected irony. One might assume that those who blur boundaries are the more transformative actors. Yet the empirical evidence suggests a more complex relationship between identity-based boundary work and structural critique. Women who drew bright boundaries between motherly devotion and commitment to work did not alter the criteria of devotion in either domain. They accepted that ideal motherhood required time presence in the private sphere and that ideal work required maximal commitment in the public

sphere. By refusing to reconcile the two, however, they made the rigidity of this distinction visible. Their insistence on incompatibility foregrounded the gendered consequences of existing standards. In this sense, boundary alignment carried subversive force: it clarified the hegemonic architecture of work rather than absorbing it.

By contrast, women who refused to choose reconfigured motherhood while leaving the evaluative core of work largely intact. They expanded acceptable practices—hybrid schedules, remote work, flexible hours—but continued to treat productivity and extended availability as the defining measures of professional devotion. Their ability to “make it work” by intensifying effort—logging in after bedtime, extending the workday into the night—rendered existing standards more ambiguous. When explaining inequality, they were less likely to critique the structure of work itself and more likely to attribute disparities to socialization or household arrangements. In doing so, the evaluative core of work remained naturalized.

The result is a complex and non-linear relationship between identity-based boundary work and social change. Boundary blurring does not necessarily destabilize hegemonic structures; it may instead accommodate tension in ways that preserve the enabling schema’s evaluative core. Conversely, maintaining bright boundaries may expose the exclusionary logic embedded within those criteria. The broader implication is that different forms of boundary work—blurring, shifting, and alignment—carry distinct consequences for how hegemonic standards are reproduced, contested, or rendered visible. The transformative potential of boundary work is therefore contingent: efforts to reconcile moral tension may either illuminate the architecture of inequality—or normalize it.

DISCUSSION: BOUNDARY WORK, AUTHORITY, AND THE UNEVEN TERRAIN OF TRANSFORMATION

This article set out to explain a puzzle at the intersection of gender, work, and identity: why do some aspirational identities become reconstructable at their core, while others remain anchored in durable evaluative logics—even when individuals face the same structural constraints and engage in similar efforts at reinterpretation? Drawing on interviews with senior women software engineers, the analysis shows that women do not respond uniformly to the tension between ideal work and ideal motherhood. Rather, they pursue distinct forms of prospective boundary work. Some draw sharp boundaries and resolve the tension through prioritization, treating the two domains as fundamentally incompatible. Others refuse to choose and instead engage in sustained reinterpretation, seeking to render motherhood and career mutually intelligible.

Crucially, however, this reinterpetive effort is not symmetrical across domains. In their maternal narratives, respondents frequently redefined the meaning of devotion itself—shifting it from time-intensive presence to emotional engagement, provision, and role modeling. In doing so, they blurred the boundary between public and private spheres at the level of meaning. By contrast, in their professional narratives, reinterpretation remained more limited. Respondents expanded acceptable practices—through hybrid work, flexible schedules, and non-linear workdays—but did not fundamentally redefine what counts as work devotion. Productivity, responsiveness, and sustained availability remained the core evaluative criteria. The result is a patterned asymmetry: motherhood is reimagined at the level of defining criteria, whereas work is adapted at the level of practice.

The central contribution of this article is to specify the mechanisms that produce this asymmetry. Existing scholarship offers rich accounts of identity change, showing how actors draw on cultural repertoires, narratively repair disrupted identities, and experiment with new practices under conditions of strain. Yet it pays less attention to variation in the *depth* of reinterpretation. While we understand how alternative identities become possible, we know less about why some are more amenable to transformation than others. By introducing the concepts of enabling and derivative schemas, interpretive authority, and discursive field structure, this article provides a more precise account of these dynamics. It shows that identity-defining schemas differ not only in content but in how authority over meaning is organized and in whether multiple narratives are available for recombination. These features shape the scope of prospective boundary work.

This framework helps explain a key empirical finding: the same individuals, operating under similar structural conditions and drawing on overlapping cultural repertoires, reconstruct different identities in qualitatively distinct ways. The difference lies not in motivation or creativity, but in the conditions under which reinterpretation unfolds. Where interpretive authority is diffuse and multiple narratives coexist—as in the case of motherhood—actors can claim authority over meaning and recombine narratives to redefine core criteria. Where authority is centralized and evaluative standards are externally enforced—as in the case of work—reinterpretation is constrained, and change tends to occur through expansion rather than transformation.

A second contribution of this analysis is to refine our understanding of the relationship between identity-based boundary work and structural change. Existing scholarship often treats

boundary blurring as inherently transformative. The findings here complicate this assumption. The analysis shows that even when actors successfully reconfigure derivative narratives—expanding practices or integrating domains—this does not necessarily undermine the underlying evaluative logic of the enabling schema. In the case of work, respondents were able to broaden how devotion is enacted without altering what counts as devotion. Hybrid arrangements, flexible schedules, and remote work practices allowed women to remain in the labor force and accommodate caregiving responsibilities, but they did not displace the centrality of productivity and availability as measures of worth.

Moreover, the comparison between the two groups reveals an additional irony. Women who blurred boundaries in the domain of motherhood often naturalized the evaluative core of work, locating inequality in individual dispositions or household arrangements rather than in institutional structures. Conversely, women who drew bright boundaries—refusing to reconcile the two domains—were more likely to expose the structural basis of inequality by highlighting the incompatibility of prevailing standards. In this sense, boundary blurring does not necessarily produce critique, and boundary maintenance does not necessarily preclude it. This suggests that the relationship between prospective identity-based boundary work and social change is more contingent than commonly assumed. The capacity to blur boundaries at the level of meaning depends on the distribution of interpretive authority and the structure of available narratives. Where these conditions are absent, reinterpretation may stabilize existing arrangements rather than transform them.

The high-tech setting sharpens these dynamics in distinctive ways. Unlike many professional contexts, elite software engineering is organized around rapid innovation cycles,

team-based production, and quantifiable output. Performance is continuously monitored through metrics—code contributions, delivery timelines, and system reliability—and advancement depends on visible contribution to collective goals. At the same time, the industry promotes narratives of meritocracy, autonomy, and flexibility. This combination—intensive, metricized evaluation alongside a discourse of openness—creates a paradoxical institutional environment. Practices can diversify without altering the underlying criteria of evaluation. Flexibility is tolerated, even celebrated, but only insofar as productivity remains uninterrupted. As a result, reinterpretation of work devotion is structurally constrained: not because actors lack imagination, but because interpretive authority is anchored in externally measurable outcomes that are institutionally enforced and widely taken as objective.

The mechanisms identified in this case extend beyond the domain of work–family conflict. Consider, for example, citizenship. In political contexts where citizenship is framed as civic commitment—grounded in constitutional principles, participation, and shared democratic ideals—interpretive authority is relatively diffuse. Courts, social movements, political actors, media institutions, and civil society organizations all participate in defining who counts as a legitimate member. Under these conditions, multiple narratives of belonging can coexist: citizenship may be enacted through voting, protest, military service, or community engagement. This plurality enables reinterpretation of what membership entails, allowing actors to contest and reframe the criteria of belonging itself.

By contrast, in contexts where citizenship is anchored in ancestry or ethnonational descent, interpretive authority is far more concentrated. Membership is defined through genealogical claims, historical continuity, or ethnocultural authenticity (see Jansen 2007). While

legal reforms may expand inclusion—granting rights to new populations—the underlying evaluative logic remains intact. Inclusion proceeds through boundary shifting rather than boundary blurring: new members are incorporated into existing criteria rather than redefining those criteria. Here, reinterpretation is constrained not by lack of contestation, but by the institutional anchoring of meaning in historically sedimented definitions of belonging.

A similar pattern appears in the domain of religion. In many contemporary settings, religion is increasingly framed as interior belief rather than strictly institutional adherence. The proliferation of denominations, spiritual movements, and individualized practices enables hybridization and reinterpretation: “spiritual but not religious” identities, interfaith affiliations, and personalized theological bricolage. In such contexts, interpretive authority is dispersed, and multiple derivative narratives coexist, making boundary blurring possible. By contrast, identities anchored in centralized credentialing or formal certification—such as medical licensure, legal practice, or even certain religious traditions with strong hierarchical authority—remain tightly regulated. Practices may diversify at the margins, but membership criteria and core standards are institutionally guarded. Here, reinterpretation operates through accommodation rather than transformation.

Across these domains, the critical variation is not whether actors experience tension or imagine alternatives—these conditions are widespread—but how prospective identity boundary work is structured. Where devotion or belonging is framed as self-authored and where multiple legitimate narratives circulate, actors can plausibly contest the criteria that define membership. By contrast, where belonging is externally certified and authority over meaning is centralized,

reinterpretation is constrained to the level of practice. Actors may adapt how they enact roles, but the underlying evaluative standards remain intact.

The case of motherhood and work thus illustrates a broader sociological pattern. Aspirational identities embedded in dispersed interpretive authority and plural discursive fields are more amenable to deep reconfiguration. Identities anchored in centralized institutional validation tend to evolve through incremental expansion of who qualifies under existing criteria. The contribution of this framework lies in specifying the mechanisms that produce this variation. Cultural change is not simply a function of creativity, agency, or structural constraint. It depends on how institutional domains allocate authority over meaning and on the availability of alternative narratives that can be recombined and collectively recognized. By identifying the conditions under which reinterpretation becomes culturally viable, this framework offers a generalizable account of when identity-based boundaries are likely to be reimagined at their core—and when they are likely to persist through adaptation rather than transformation.

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Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Interviewees

Demographic Characteristics of Interviewees	
Age Group:	
30-34	6
35-39	10
40-44	8
45+	6
Marital Status:	
Single	1
Married	28
Divorced	1
Number of Children:	
1	5
2	13
3+	12
N	30

Figure 1. Prospective Identity-Based Boundary Work

Stage	Description
Identity Strain	Disruption between lived experience and existing schema
↓	
Prospective Identity Work	Reimagining the aspirational self
↓	
Reinterpretation of Derivative Narratives	How devotion is defined and enacted
↓	
Structuring Conditions	Interpretive Authority: Distributed vs. Centralized Discursive Field: Plural vs. Limited
↓	
Type of Identity-Based Boundary Work	Boundary Blurring (Distributed + Plural): Redefinition of core criteria of devotion Boundary Shifting (Centralized + Limited): Expansion of practices; criteria remain intact
↓	
Scope of Transformation	Core redefinition vs. incremental adaptation