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# Embracing, Passing, Revealing, and the Ideal Worker Image: How People Navigate Expected and Experienced Professional Identities

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This paper examines how people navigate organizational pressures to embrace a professional identity that—like the ideal worker image—centers on devotion to work. My field study of a consulting firm demonstrated that although some people easily embrace this expected identity, for others, it conflicts with their experienced professional identity. I found that people cope with this conflict by straying from the expected identity while passing as having embraced it or revealing their deviance. Analyzing 115 interviews, performance evaluations, and turnover data, I trace how and why people manage their deviance differently across audiences within the organization, show the interdependence of these efforts, and illuminate consequences for how they are perceived and evaluated. In the firm I studied, although both men and women strayed, men were more likely than women to pass. Together, these findings highlight the importance of deviance and its management to people’s professional identities, offer new insights regarding the ideal worker image’s relationship to gender inequality, and enrich theory on passing and revealing.

*Keywords:* ideal worker; identity; gender; professions; passing; revealing; identity management

*History:* Published online in *Articles in Advance* April 20, 2015.

## Introduction

People today are expected to be wholly devoted to work, such that they attend to their jobs ahead of all else, including family (Blair-Loy 2003), personal needs (Kreiner et al. 2006), and even their health (Michel 2011). These expectations are personified in the ideal worker image: a definition of the most desirable worker as one who is totally committed to, and always available for, his or her work (Acker 1990). Embracing this image is richly rewarded, particularly for people in professional and managerial jobs; in many such workplaces, advancement and prizes accrue to those perceived to best embody this image (Bailyn 2006). Although scholars have focused on the difficulties that women in such jobs experience with these expectations (e.g., Blair-Loy 2003, Stone 2007), research increasingly suggests that their male colleagues may also find these expectations challenging (Galinsky et al. 2009, Humberd et al. 2014). Thus, many people may encounter a conflict between employer expectations that they be ideal workers and the sort of workers that they believe and prefer themselves to be.

Yet we understand little about how people navigate such tensions over their work selves. Work/nonwork scholars have examined how people negotiate boundaries between work demands and other parts of social life (e.g., Kreiner et al. 2009, Rothbard et al. 2005, Trefalt 2013) but have attended less to how people negotiate the nature of the work identity itself. Research

on people’s work identities has focused on elucidating either how organizations control members’ identities (e.g., Alvesson and Kärreman 2007, Anteby 2008a, Van Maanen and Schein 1979) or on how people move toward particular identities (e.g., Ibarra 1999, Ladge et al. 2012, Wrzesniewski and Dutton 2001), but these streams of work have not been integrated (Alvesson and Willmott 2002, Anteby 2013).

This paper addresses this puzzle by closely examining how people working at a demanding professional service firm navigate tensions between organizational expectations that they be ideal workers—which I conceptualize as an *expected professional identity*—and the sort of workers they believe and prefer themselves to be—their *experienced professional identities*. I find that people cope with conflict between these two identities by straying from the expected identity and seeking to remain true to their experienced identities. Although deviant behavior, or behavior that strays from the norms of a social group (Warren 2003), is a well-known feature of organizational life (Bennett and Robinson 2003), how people manage professional identities that stray from those expected by the organization has received little attention. I draw on Goffman’s (1963) concepts of passing and revealing, typically used to explain how people manage discredited social identities (Clair et al. 2005, Jones and King 2014, Ragins 2008), to develop a theory about how men and women navigate organizational audiences

in ways that disclose or that mask their deviance, and I explore how they are consequently perceived and treated.

## Theoretical Background

### Professional Identity and the Ideal Worker Image

Identity, and its significance for people's work experiences, is a central concern of contemporary organizational scholarship (Ashforth et al. 2008, Ramarajan 2014, Roberts and Dutton 2009). This study focuses on professional identity (Ibarra 1999, Pratt et al. 2006). Professional identities are role identities, or the "goals, values, beliefs, norms, interaction styles and time horizons that are typically associated with a role" (Ashforth 2001, p. 6). Like most social roles, professional roles are subject to external expectations of incumbents' identities; I focus here on organizational, or employer, expectations and refer to these as *expected professional identities*. People, however, have their own preferences about their identities, and these do not always match those expected of them. I use the term *experienced professional identities* to describe people's beliefs and preferences regarding who they are as professionals. As people form their identities in relation to their past, future, alternative, and possible selves (Ibarra 1999, Markus and Nurius 1986, Obodaru 2012), their statements about their experienced identities may include allusions to these other selves.

Many organizations expect professionals to assume an identity that centers on the ideal worker image, such that they are fully committed to and totally available for their work, with no external commitments that limit this devotion (Acker 1990, Bailyn 2006, Williams et al. 2013). Although professional identities also include profession-specific content, this image is central to many professions' expected identities, such as those of leveraged buyout investors (Turco 2010), academics (Cech and Blair-Loy 2014, Manchester et al. 2013), and executives and managers (Blair-Loy 2003). For example, surgeons, who spend years honing technical skills, are expected to embrace a professional identity that includes always placing "their patients first, over and above any personal commitments" (Kellogg 2011, p. 51). In such jobs, pressures to be ideal workers are often embedded in the very design of work, which routinely spills into evenings and weekends (Moen et al. 2013, Perlow 1998).

This image, and its attendant expectations of devotion, is viewed as a key driver of workplace gender inequality (Bailyn 2006, Correll et al. 2014, Williams 2000), and perhaps consequently, scholars have mostly examined how women, particularly mothers, navigate expectations that they devote themselves to work (e.g., Blair-Loy 2003, Christopher 2012, Webber and Williams 2008). Little work has considered men's experiences in this regard, echoing more general tendencies to frame work-family conflict as a woman's problem (for a review, see Leslie and Manchester 2011). Yet as a core element of

an expected professional identity, this image necessarily shapes all workers' experiences, including men's. Moreover, studies increasingly suggest that men also find demands for work devotion challenging (Galinsky et al. 2009, Humberd et al. 2014), suggesting that difficulties with expectations that one assume the identity of an ideal worker are not necessarily restricted to women.

Unfortunately, we understand little about how people navigate such conflicts over their work identities. Organizational scholarship on identity has been largely divided between studies of how organizations control members' identities and identifications (see, e.g., Kunda 1992, Pratt 2000) and studies of how people construct their identities (Ibarra and Barbulescu 2010, Lepisto et al. 2015, Maitlis 2009). Although people are known to construct their identities in relation to attributes of the job and organization (Ely 1995, Ely and Meyerson 2010, Ely and Padavic 2007, Petriglieri and Petriglieri 2010), explicit studies of how organizations' efforts to impose particular identities intersect with members' attempts to construct particular identities remain rare (Alvesson and Willmott 2002; Anteby 2008a, b). Indeed, Anteby (2013) recently noted that "much more research is needed on the combined dynamics of identity desire and imposition" (p. 1285).

Yet although people apply for jobs in part based on assumptions about incumbents' identities (Barbulescu and Bidwell 2013), many workers are ambivalent about the identities their organization expects them to take on (Collinson 2003, Gagnon and Collinson 2014, Ramarajan and Reid 2013), suggesting that conflict between expected and experienced identities may be relatively common. The limited work that does consider how people resist expected identities tends not to consider how this ambivalence is received by audiences (e.g., Ashcraft 2005), or it focuses on deviance that is recognized (Jackall 1988, Kunda 1992). However, deviance from expected identities may also go unrecognized: people's identities do not necessarily match how others perceive them (Gecas 1982). To develop theory about the ways that people may manage incongruence between expected and experienced professional identities, and how this shapes how they are perceived, I turned to Goffman's (1963) concepts of "passing" and "revealing."

### Identity Management Strategies: Passing and Revealing

Passing and revealing are ways that people control others' beliefs about who they are. The need to pass or to reveal arises when a person does not belong to a group of people to whom social rewards accrue (Goffman 1963). Some characteristics that disqualify one from membership in a favored group are clearly visible (e.g., skin color) and are managed through methods that "cover"

or reduce the salience of the characteristic (Phillips et al. 2009, Rosette and Dumas 2007, Yoshino 2007). Other characteristics, however, are invisible (e.g., sexual preference), and people may choose how to manage them (Clair et al. 2005, Ragins 2008). That is, people may either misrepresent themselves as members of the favored group—thus, passing—or disclose that they are nonmembers—thus revealing. Passing can be intentional, as when a person lies about his or her identity, or accidental, as when others make incorrect assumptions; revealing also occurs across a continuum of intentionality.

Passing and revealing, and disclosure issues more generally, are typically associated with low-status social identity groups subject to intense discrimination, such as racial minorities (Goffman 2014) and the chronically ill (Beatty and Joffe 2006). However, scholars have long recognized that people in professional jobs seek to manage external perceptions. For example, impression management research examines how people use tactics (e.g., flattery, ingratiation) to encourage others to like and respect them (Wayne and Ferris 1990); image management research considers how people project images based on desired and authentic selves (Roberts 2005); and research on facades of conformity traces how people may pretend to share organizational values (Hewlin 2003). Passing and revealing differ importantly from these other types of perception management, however, in that passing and revealing are motivated by a need to manage perceptions of one's membership in an externally defined, favored identity group. This is a qualitatively different task than being liked, constructing a personally desired and authentic image, or being seen to hold organizational values. Although passing and revealing share these other concepts' emphases on self-presentation, they offer an inherently different approach to understanding people's self-presentations in work contexts (see DeJordy 2008).

Scholars have considered how people use passing and revealing to manage stigmatized social identities (Clair et al. 2005, Creed and Scully 2000, Ragins 2008, Ragins et al. 2006); still, important questions remain. Although people may combine passing and revealing in the workplace—passing to some, revealing to others—*how* they do so is not well understood; most scholarship on these practices examines nonwork contexts, focuses on dyadic relationships, or defines people as “in” or “out” (for a review, see Jones and King 2014). Moreover, although it has been theorized that people manage their identities differently across audiences (Ollier-Malaterre et al. 2013, Ragins 2008), how they combine these efforts across multiple audiences in one setting has not been studied. Finally, passing and revealing have not been used to understand how people manage deviance from expected work-related identities. Yet these may present unique challenges. For example, professional identities are constructed through engagement in job

tasks (Becker and Carper 1956, Pratt et al. 2006); managing deviance from a professional identity may therefore require manipulating aspects of work alongside the primarily information management tools typically used to manage stigmatized social identities (Clair et al. 2005, DeJordy 2008). By studying how people in an organizational setting use passing and revealing to manage deviance from an expected professional identity, this study presents an opportunity to advance theory about these identity management practices.

## Method

I explored these issues through a field study of a consulting firm. The study draws principally on semistructured interview data. Interviews offer insight into people's interior experiences and are therefore especially useful for studying identity questions (Lamont and Swidler 2014). I link the findings from the interview data to performance data, turnover data, and participants' stories about each other. Archival data (e.g., human resources (HR) documents) provided contextual information about the firm and industry.

## Research Setting

I conducted this study at AGM (a pseudonym), a global consulting firm with a strong U.S. presence. Like many such firms, AGM offered advisory services in multiple areas, such as strategy, marketing, and finance and used small teams to complete projects over a period of weeks to months. Consulting is a notoriously demanding profession: consultants must typically be available for overnight travel to client sites and often work evenings and weekends on short notice. Within AGM, consultants advanced through several levels: associate, junior manager, senior manager, partner, and senior partner.

This setting provided certain advantages for investigating how people navigate tensions between expected and experienced professional identities. First, identity expectations in professional jobs are often strong, and AGM's status as one of the more demanding consulting firms within the industry qualified it as an “extreme” case (Eisenhardt 1989), where pressures to be an ideal worker might be especially acute and hence particularly visible (Pratt et al. 2006). Second, as AGM hired from elite colleges and MBA programs through a complex interview process, its hires were fairly homogeneous in terms of intellect, education level, and social skills. Participants were therefore all likely to be capable of doing the work; this helped to focus the analysis on how they coped with the firm's identity expectations.

## Data Collection

*Participants.* I conducted 115 interviews with people associated with AGM. The core data for this study came



from interviews with consultants. To construct this sample, an HR manager identified a random sample of consultants, who then received an email from two senior partners that described my study and assured them that participation would be voluntary and confidential. Via email, I then invited people to participate in the study, which I described as focused on people's professional identities and personal lives. The response rate was 70%, which compares well with other studies of professionals (e.g., Roth 2006). Five who initially volunteered were ultimately unable to participate because of client conflicts; we rescheduled these interviews three to five times before the people withdrew from the study. Through this process, I interviewed 70 consultants. I added to this sample by accessing transcripts of 18 interviews conducted by other researchers as part of a study of AGM's culture; these covered topics pertinent to this study (discussed below). This sample included several of AGM's senior partners and senior leaders in the internal HR department. I met about half of these people during meetings at AGM and interviewed two of them during my own data collection. Because of cross-national differences in norms regarding the relationship between work and nonwork (Uhlmann et al. 2013), I excluded four people employed by non-North American offices. With these duplications and exclusions, the total number of consultants analyzed here is 82.

All consultants held undergraduate or advanced degrees (e.g., MBA, Ph.D., LL.B.) from elite schools (e.g., Williams, Harvard, Stanford). Twenty-two percent were

women, similar to the proportional representation of women at AGM at the time (in 2009, 24%) and similar to or higher than that at competitor firms. Thirteen percent were visible racial minorities (e.g., African American, Southeast Asian). Although AGM did not officially track race and ethnicity, my interviews with people at AGM and other firms suggest that this sample is generally proportionate to its representation in the population.

As the study progressed, I expanded my sampling to include interviews with 27 other people whose experiences might inform the research. These included six employees in nonconsulting roles, six consultants who had left AGM prior to my study, eight people who worked at competitor firms, and seven of the consultants' spouses. These people were contacted through either random sampling from lists provided by AGM or personal contacts. Table 1 describes participant characteristics.

*Interviews.* The interview guide included structured questions, which enabled comparisons across people, as well as unstructured questions, which permitted open-ended reflection. In the interviews with consultants, I began by asking about people's work histories (e.g., months between promotions), job tasks, work hours, and travel. I then asked about their future goals, the importance of work to their sense of self, recent team projects, and colleagues whom they viewed as successful. Later, I asked about gender dynamics and their non-work lives. By grounding the interview in the details of people's work, I hoped to limit opportunities for them to misrepresent their experiences. Interviews with other

**Table 1 Participant Characteristics**

| Primary identity management strategy: <sup>a</sup> | Total (N)        | Expected vs. experienced identity |             |          |
|--|------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------|----------|
|  |                  | Congruent                         | Conflicting |          |
|  |                  |                                   | Embracing   | Passing  |
| Consultants  | 82               | 35 (43%)                          | 22 (27%)    | 25 (30%) |
| Men  | 64               | 27 (42%)                          | 20 (31%)    | 17 (27%) |
| Women  | 18               | 8 (44%)                           | 2 (11%)     | 8 (44%)  |
| White  | 71               | 29 (41%)                          | 19 (27%)    | 23 (32%) |
| Visible minority                                   | 11               | 6 (55%)                           | 2 (18%)     | 3 (27%)  |
| Associate  | 12               | 7 (58%)                           | 1 (8%)      | 4 (33%)  |
| Junior manager                                     | 26               | 8 (31%)                           | 7 (27%)     | 11 (42%) |
| Senior manager                                     | 22               | 8 (36%)                           | 7 (32%)     | 7 (32%)  |
| Partner  | 13               | 7 (54%)                           | 4 (31%)     | 2 (15%)  |
| Senior partner                                     | 9                | 5 (56%)                           | 3 (33%)     | 1 (11%)  |
| Additional participants                            | 31               |                                   |             |          |
| Nonconsulting employees                            | 6                |                                   |             |          |
| Former AGM consultants                             | 6                |                                   |             |          |
| Consultants from competitor firms                  | 8                |                                   |             |          |
| Consultants' spouses                               | 7                |                                   |             |          |
| Non-North American AGM consultants                 | 4                |                                   |             |          |
| Total participants                                 | 113 <sup>b</sup> |                                   |             |          |

<sup>a</sup>"Primary identity management strategy" refers to the strategy people employed in their interactions with senior members of the firm.

<sup>b</sup>Represents 115 interviews in total: 2 participants were interviewed twice.

participants followed similar guides tailored to their particular experiences (e.g., I asked former consultants why they had left). The interviews conducted as part of the study of AGM's culture included similar questions about work histories and experiences and perceptions of AGM's success metrics.

I used several strategies to encourage people to feel comfortable with me and to be open and honest about their experiences. I introduced myself in terms of my business school credentials (many consultants had MBAs) and my experience as a consultant at a smaller firm, hoping that these shared characteristics would help make them comfortable speaking with me. I saved potentially threatening questions (e.g., about gender dynamics) for the end of the interview. Although some may have remained reticent, I was often surprised by the raw nature of people's disclosures (e.g., alcoholism), and I seldom needed to prompt people to keep speaking. Many thanked me for the interview and referred to it as "therapeutic."

Interviews lasted between 45 and 150 minutes; most took about 75 minutes. I suggested off-site locations such as coffee shops but found most people preferred meeting in their office or a conference room. Following interviews, I wrote field notes, including observations on clothing, office décor, interruptions permitted by the participant (e.g., telephone calls), and what I observed in the firm's public spaces. Half the interviews were rescheduled at least once because of changes in participants' schedules. Nearly all were conducted in person; a few were conducted by telephone to accommodate participants' travel. These interviews did not differ noticeably from those conducted face-to-face. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. About one year after the initial interviews, I reached out to participants to request access to their performance data and to learn about their recent work experiences. Nearly all agreed to release their performance data. At this point, I also tracked turnover in my sample.

**Performance Data.** I accessed quantitative ratings of consultants' performance for the year preceding the interviews (2009) and for the year of the interviews (2010). As I detail in the findings section, consultants were rated on several dimensions following each project, and these ratings were compiled into one annual rating at the end of each calendar year. The 2009 performance ratings cover 54 of the 60 non-partner consultants in the study (some were unreachable, one refused). Because of departures during 2010 and one promotion to partner, the 2010 data include 43 participants.

**Archival Data.** I also accessed internal HR documents that described hiring and evaluation practices, newspaper articles about AGM, and reviews of AGM on career websites. These data helped me to better understand AGM and its position in the industry.

## Data Analysis

I began data analysis by developing preliminary codes based on my research questions, which I used along with inductive coding techniques to analyze the interview data and field notes (Charmaz 2006). These codes focused on several themes. First, to understand the sort of worker that consultants believed AGM favored, I coded for experiences, behaviors, and characteristics that they associated with success at AGM. Once I had stabilized a description of AGM's expected professional identity and how it was communicated, I examined consultants' responses to this expectation. This process revealed that some easily embraced the expected identity, but it also uncovered widespread conflict between this expected identity and people's experienced professional identities. I deduced that people managed this conflict through passing and revealing. I coded the tools that they used in these efforts and their target audiences.

To examine external perceptions, I combined three data sources. First, I used the performance data, which, given the ambiguity of competence and importance of image in professional service work, corresponds well to AGM's perceptions of how well consultants fit its expected professional identity. To assess the significance of differences in different groups' performance ratings, I employed two simple nonparametric tests designed for ordinal data: a Kruskal–Wallis test, which compares the means of multiple groups, and a Mann–Whitney test, which compares the two groups' means (Agresti and Finlay 1997). Second, I quantified the average number of months people reported between promotions. I used these data to rate each person's career progress at AGM as slow, average, or fast. Finally, I examined the transcripts to identify instances where consultants described colleagues' work habits. I identified 78 such accounts of 47 people (some were mentioned several times). Of these, I had interviewed 32. Table 2 reports these accounts. Coding these accounts for consistency with the person's own account revealed that people who had worked directly with the focal individual tended to view their work habits in ways consistent with the person's own account, but that people whose experiences were less direct held less consistent views. I also used several other analyses to triangulate my results, reported

**Table 2** Mentions of Colleagues' Work Practices

| Account   | Total |
|---|-------|
| Stories about named colleagues                    | 78    |
| Colleagues named in stories <sup>a</sup>          | 47    |
| Number of named colleagues I interviewed          | 32    |
| Number who embraced                               | 12    |
| Number who passed                                 | 13    |
| Number who revealed                               | 7     |
| Number of identity management strategies verified | 32    |

<sup>a</sup>Each person was mentioned between 1 and 11 times.

in the online appendix (available as supplemental material at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1287/orsc.2015.0975>).

I now report the findings that emerged from this analysis. I begin by describing AGM's expected professional identity, how it was imposed, and its fit with people's experienced identities. I then explain how people strayed in ways that fostered passing or revealing. I close with a discussion of the study's contributions to theories of people's management of their professional identities, the ideal worker image, and passing and revealing in organizations.

## Expected and Experienced Professional Identities

Consultants believed that AGM expected them, like ideal workers, to be fully devoted to work: primarily committed to and available for their work at all times and in all places. Although people sometimes associated other attributes with success (e.g., courage, charisma), mention of these attributes was sporadic relative to the near-constant emphasis on commitment and availability that permeated accounts of life at AGM. Tellingly, nearly all senior partners and leaders of AGM's HR group cited commitment and availability as attributes that distinguished successful from unsuccessful consultants. This analysis therefore focuses on AGM's identity expectations regarding commitment and availability. Table 3 reports codes and supplementary data.<sup>1</sup>

### Expected Identity: Committed and Available

Consultants believed that success at AGM required being committed, passionate, and dedicated, such that their work occupied a central place in their lives. "Star" consultants would "give everything they have to the company." Commitment involved loyalty: despite the industry's high turnover, good consultants sought to remain at AGM. Commitment also meant placing work ahead of other life demands. Curtis (Partner, M), for example, had spent Thanksgiving "running a project remotely from the outside deck of [my in-laws'] condominium in Florida." Despite his wife's fury, he believed being a consultant required this commitment:

I will sometimes have to get calls on Sunday nights. Sometimes, I have to do calls on Saturday mornings. So that the weekend is not sacrosanct... If the client needs me, I will generally take [the call]. And you know when the client needs me to be somewhere, I just have to be there. In the consulting—in the professional services industry, generally—you don't really have the latitude of saying "I can't really be there." And if you can't be there, it's probably because you've got another client meeting at the same time. You know it's tough to say I can't be there because my—my son had a Cub Scout meeting.

The personal sacrifices such commitment entailed were justified by the intense "love" that successful consultants were expected to feel for their work. Suzanne

(Junior manager, F) told me that to succeed, "You have to really love client service. I really love my clients. I wake up in the morning and wonder whether my clients are awake, whether they've emailed me, whether I need to do something for them."

Successful consultants were also believed to be fully available for work. Although availability was associated with commitment, the two were not the same: commitment involved dedicating oneself to work ahead of other demands and responsibilities, but availability corresponded to work hours and willingness to travel. People were expected to "work all night, if needed, to get things done" and travelled at "the drop of a hat." The need to be fully available, along with the need to be primarily committed to work, characterized Amos's (Junior manager, M) description of his colleagues:

You know AGM people, we're on our BlackBerries. We're thinking about our work 24/7. I mean, maybe you tune out for a little while here and there, but AGM people work all the time, all the time. I mean, you wake up at night, you're dreaming about it. The first thing you do is you pick up your BlackBerry, you're on it through the morning. You get to the office, you're working through the day, you sit at your desk, you know, you're cancelling plans.

Thus, consultants believed that "AGM people" were primarily committed to and fully available for work.

To assess the extent to which consultants' views about the identity of a successful consultant were shared by those who evaluated them, I compared the perceptions of people in client service-based consulting roles (associate through partner) to those of people who led the firm and who controlled recruiting and evaluation (senior partners and leaders of the HR department). Nearly all shared the consultants' beliefs regarding the importance of commitment and availability. For example, Sharon (Partner (HR), F) said,

The culture at AGM is "give, give, give." The guy you saw leaving my office is leaving AGM, and he came to talk to me and said, "This place is crazy. It's like you're supposed to love this place and give your soul... And when you leave, the norm is to write an email to everyone saying, 'Thank you AGM for all you have given me.'" But no one thanks you. So it's like the message is, we will only love you if you "give, give, give."

These shared beliefs between consultants and those who evaluated them confirms this identity's position as a category that distinguished between favored and unfavored consultants (Goffman 1963).

### Mechanisms of Identity Control: Structure of Work and Performance Evaluations

AGM pressured people to adopt this identity through the structure of work and the performance evaluation

**Table 3 Supporting Evidence for Expected vs. Experienced Professional Identities**

| Codes   | Illustrative quotes   |
|---|---|
| <i>Primarily committed to work:</i> Belief that the firm expects consultants to love, be passionate about, and “committed” to work; to be devoted to a career within AGM; and to place work ahead of other parts of life.                       | <p><b>Key attributes of expected professional identity</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Our partners tend to make people feel bad for leaving, as if it’s a betrayal. It’s a divorce, it’s not just leaving. AGM folks are very loyal....The culture is that we are a family.” (Senior manager (HR), F)</li> <li>• “I frame it in the following way. What do I want people to worry about when they wake up first thing in the morning? So business development people, I want them to worry about business development....As long as women are more frequently, sometimes by default, the project manager in the home, it is hard for them to spend the necessary time, energy, and effort to be viewed here as a senior leader.” (Partner, M)</li> <li>• “Our email program has a time client built into it. So you can actually see in your email box who’s online and who’s not. And there’s an implicit culture in AGM that if you don’t see somebody on at the same time at a certain hour of the night, you’re wondering what the heck they are doing.” (Junior manager, M)</li> <li>• “We recruit ambitious, type A people who want to look like they’re contributing all the time. They want to be on the email rounds late at night with everyone else.” (Senior manager, F)</li> </ul>  |
| <i>Fully available for work:</i> Belief that the firm expects consultants to work long hours, evenings, and weekends on demand; to be available for extensive travel at short notice; and to be “reliable” in responding to the firm’s demands. | <p><b>Organizational mechanisms of identity control</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “His teams are completely swamped, and they’re fighting fires all the time, and it’s not because they really need to be fighting fires, but I feel like the structure that’s in place that has grown over time has created this reactive type environment....” (Associate, M)</li> <li>• “We wasted a lot of time during the day waiting and waiting [to hear from the partner], or coming up with some version of something that we believed to be helpful and then very often being redirected or guided elsewhere, which would then mean starting over for scratch. And it meant a lot of very late nights, a lot of weekend work, a lot of last-minute work.” (Junior manager, F)</li> <li>• “To succeed at AGM, I think you have to actually do well within this culture. And if you look at, well, all the things you’ve seen on our performance evaluation forms....” (Senior manager, M)</li> <li>• “I found [an associate] to be a little bit on the lazy side, and also, I don’t think he was willing to make the commitment that AGM expects of people, the time commitment....” (Junior manager, M)</li> </ul>   |
| <i>Structure of work:</i> Statements describing the structure of work as haphazard and time-intensive, in ways that require that people be primarily committed to and fully available for their work.   | <p><b>Key attributes of experienced professional identity</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “So, I might be able to slide by without working on a Saturday but usually I can’t slide with missing Sunday....You’re generally taking on calls while you’re taking the kids to soccer or what have you. There’s always a possibility of pushing back on those demands. Part of it is I choose not, either consciously or subconsciously. The answer to your question, is there an easy way to do it? No. I don’t think so. Maybe that’s how I’m wired. I like being involved.” (Partner, M)</li> <li>• “According to my friends and family I have zero work–life balance, but I really just want to do client service all the time.” (Junior manager, F)</li> <li>• “I’ve been put on this earth and I will look back on my death bed and say, did I do what I was hoping to do through my family and my kids?...So that’s life-giving; that’s energy-giving for me. That’s what I care most about. My work is also important to me...but if push comes to shove, if I felt like they weren’t given what they needed, I’d push work away.” (Senior partner, M)</li> <li>• “I feel like an accidental tourist....When I’m most low, an imposter. This is not what I intended. This is not what I set out to do....I have been ambivalent about my profession since the get-go because the lifestyle costs are quite high...the time away, and the stresses it puts, you know, just on my marriage, the intimate relationship with my wife.” (Partner, M)</li> <li>• “Well, I generally don’t like my team to be working harder than I am. And I would rather take my own time and do it in than kill one of my team’s weekends; that ends up coming back on me, but [that’s] by choice.” (Junior manager, M)</li> <li>• “I feel like the more senior you are, the more sacrifices you then make in your life. I personally don’t think that I would want to raise a child working 90 hours a week. I’m willing to put in 60, knowing myself and how like I get passionate about something, I’ll probably put in the hours....But I don’t want to be raising a family, you know, while traveling or working 15-hour days.” (Associate, M)</li> </ul> |
| <i>Performance evaluations:</i> Statements that connect good evaluations, promotions, and career prospects within the firm to one’s embrace of the expected identity.   |   |
| <i>Primarily committed to work:</i> Statements that suggest the person is primarily committed to his or her work.   |   |
| <i>Not primarily committed to work:</i> Statements that suggest the person is not primarily committed to his or her work.   |   |
| <i>Fully available for work:</i> Statements that suggest that the participant is fully available for his or her work.   |   |
| <i>Not fully available for work:</i> Statements that suggest that the participant is not fully available for his or her work.   |   |

system. Together, these mechanisms encouraged consultants to adopt the expected identity by constructing work demands that seemed to require conforming to this identity while rewarding those who seemed to conform and penalizing those who did not.

Expectations regarding consultants’ identities were embedded in AGM’s haphazard work structure: crisis situations wherein teams worked late into the night were common, and partners often promised clients new work midproject. Clients often expected travel at short

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Table 3 (cont'd)

| Codes  | Illustrative quotes   |
|--|---|
| <i>Experienced identity centers on peripheral identity attributes:</i><br>Statements that suggest the participant's experienced professional identity centers on attributes other than primary commitment to and full availability for work. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Helping:</i> "I feel, you know, gut level, that my role as a father and a husband is more important than my role as a professional. But the way I conceive of myself as a professional goes beyond, you know, making money and building a business. It's actually about helping people and bringing innovation to society's problems. So there's a higher purpose to being a professional." (Senior manager, M)</li> <li>• <i>Problem solving:</i> "We are problem solvers, so we're intellectually curious, right?... That is why we are consultants. And you just have to have that innate intellectual curiosity to be able to do well here. I feel we're a high-performing organization. I think to perform well here, there needs to be a high level of energy. But I don't want to confuse that with willingness to work 20 hours a day...." (Junior manager, M)</li> </ul> |

notice: two people arrived for our interview uncertain whether they would travel that day, and several rescheduled interviews because of unanticipated client travel. Kristi's (Junior manager, F) comments about a recent project illustrate the demands that ensued:

On a recent technology project, the partners were very busy. They would get a document at 10 A.M. and not look at it until 10 P.M. Then, at 11 P.M., I'd have to work on it and get the team online to do the work so they could turn it around for the next day. I ended up working more with the team on the nuts and bolts than I was supposed to. But it was all so last minute.

To satisfy these work demands, one had to be committed to and available for work. Indeed, partners acknowledged that the structure of work demanded a certain sort of person: "Occasionally my teams have to work overnight, you know, around the clock... Some people thrive on 'It's a gold medal game,' and others don't. And I think this job requires that you thrive on 'It's a gold medal game.' You know, it uses every bit of you" (Partner, M).

Performance evaluations served as a second mechanism of identity control. Assessing competence and work quality is difficult in professional service work, and firms consequently may evaluate people based on perceptions of their identities (Alvesson 2001, Rivera 2012). Each year, partners and HR leaders sorted consultants into four performance tiers based on their project performance and "extracurricular" firm service (e.g., recruiting).<sup>2</sup> The highest tier (4) was denoted AGM's "stars." Many acknowledged this evaluation system's subjectivity; an HR document described it as a "highly individualized... highly subjective process." AGM officially assessed performance along multiple dimensions, including relational and analytic skills, but members of its HR department stressed the importance of availability and commitment and described these attributes in terms of an expected identity. Keith (Partner (HR), M), the leader of the HR department, described successful consultants in the following terms:

Consulting is a profession where we hold beliefs regarding what it takes to be a good consultant... Look at

Melissa. We hire her because she's willing to be over-responsible, highly committed, and we fall into the trap of thinking everyone is always available all the time... I have person A and person B. Re person B, they don't seem that passionate, responsible, committed, [willing to] go the extra mile; if I ask them to do something, they huff around and it feels like work to get it done. Person A, I ask to do something, it gets done immediately; if I have a problem I can call them, and the next day they've taken a crack at it and with a smile on their face. We will use that in appraisal and recruiting.

It is notable that Keith's description of "what it takes to be good consultant" centered on commitment and availability—"highly committed" and "always available all the time"—not expert knowledge and skills.

Because of its effects on apportioning bonuses, recommending promotions, and counseling people out of the firm, the evaluation system, together with the structure of work, was key to how the firm controlled who succeeded and who failed. These control mechanisms loomed large in consultants' minds; they drew on their beliefs about what AGM rewarded, as well as the structure of their work, to argue that one had to conform to the expected identity to succeed, as illustrated in the following quotations:

To be viewed as successful, you have to take conference calls at 9 P.M. on Sunday evenings. You have to answer your BlackBerry or your emails the second you receive them. You have to put everything on the line for the client and for the partners. And sort of hand over the keys and head down, elbows out. (Junior manager, F)

The system is incentivized to reward people for a certain set of behaviors... Surprise: the people who have a new family, a new kid, and want to spend time with them may have less time to devote to their job and may not rise as fast as the people who are more single-mindedly devoted to advancing. (Junior manager, M)

Thus, taken together, the structure of work and the performance evaluation system pressured consultants to adopt the expected professional identity.

### Congruence or Conflict with People’s Experienced Professional Identities

Nearly all consultants were aware of this expected professional identity, but whether they embraced or strayed from it varied according to its fit with their experienced professional identities: the professionals they believed and preferred themselves to be. I first briefly describe those whose experienced identities were congruent, then turn to those whose identities were conflicting.

Many people’s experienced professional identities were congruent with the expected professional identity, and they easily embraced this identity (35 consultants, 43% of the sample). They were primarily committed to their work, speaking frequently of their “passion” for their work and “what we’re trying to do in the world.” Many described being offered good jobs elsewhere but choosing to stay at AGM. Indeed, one year following the interviews, only three of these consultants had left, one of whom was sponsored for an MBA and later rehired into a higher position. They were also fully available: most regularly worked late nights and weekends, more than 70 hours a week, and willingly traveled at a client’s “whim.” Dave (Senior manager, M) told me, “You know what? At the end of the day, I want to work hard. I like working hard. I want to be successful. I want to make a lot of money. It’s important to me. I rationalize it as, you know, trying to provide for my family. So I don’t mind so much if I’m at work at 9 P.M.”

Most people ( $N = 47$ ; 57% of the sample), however, encountered conflict between the expected professional identity and their experienced professional identities. As noted, scholars typically identify the ideal worker image as chiefly problematic for women, especially mothers, but at AGM, conflict with the expected professional identity was not restricted to these groups. Rather, as shown in Table 4, most people reported conflict with this expected identity.

These people were unwilling to make work their primary life commitment, unwilling to make themselves fully available for their work, or both. Further, their experienced identities centered primarily on attributes that AGM treated as peripheral, which they often directly compared to those attributes considered core to the

expected identity. For example, Michael (Junior manager, M) described himself in the following way:

I’ve made sure I’m the problem solver. Everything, I mean, even my hobbies usually involve some sort of problem solving. I mean, I enjoy the intellectual part of the job, I enjoy the challenges.... But you know, a lot of times our partners can be focused on really needing to delight the client, and so we can never say no to them....

These people’s experienced identities thus conflicted with AGM’s expected professional identity. Such a conflict is illustrated in Thomas’s (Senior manager, M) musings about his future at AGM:

I am kind of at a crossroads about how much I want to push for partner. I kind of want to do it on my terms, as opposed to assume I have to be like some of the other partners.... There’s definitely the road warrior model, the guy who’s always on the road, who’s always walking the halls with clients, he’s sending emails on Saturday and Sunday, you know, and he’s sending out requests at 6 P.M. expecting something the next day. And I don’t want that.... I might be more of an outlier than a mainstream consultant.

Thus, because of his unwillingness to be a “road warrior,” Thomas viewed himself as an “outlier” and was uncertain about his next career steps.

The pressures that organizations’ demands for devotion place on people’s nonwork lives are well established (e.g., Kreiner et al. 2009, Perlow 1998), and indeed, many viewed embracing the expected identity as detrimental to their ability to engage meaningfully in their nonwork lives. However, the data from AGM also show that people’s nonwork lives provoked conflict over their professional identities. To illustrate, Cliff (Junior manager, M) told me,

[I’m] someone that doesn’t work as hard as I should, is a little quicker to say “this is good enough” and pass it along than my peers are.... I think that might, if I don’t change it soon, [affect] my ability to be really, really successful here.... The decision for me is, [do] I get into bed and watch some TV with my fiancée, or sit down and have dinner with her as opposed to wolfing it down and going back to work? I always choose not to work. I think that it makes me a little less likely to be CEO [chief executive officer] of this place one day.

Thus, by not working constantly and maintaining nonwork commitments, Cliff perceived himself as not fitting the identity expected of him (“a little quicker to... pass it along than my peers”) and believed this might limit his success at the firm (“less likely to be CEO”).

### Straying: Passing and Revealing

People coped with this conflict by straying from the expected identity. They did so by altering the structure of their work—a key means of identity control in this

**Table 4** Congruence or Conflict with the Expected Professional Identity

|             | Total (N) | Congruence | Conflict |
|-------------|-----------|------------|----------|
| Men         | 64        | 27 (42%)   | 37 (58%) |
| Women       | 18        | 8 (44%)    | 10 (56%) |
| Parents     | 41        | 17 (41%)   | 24 (59%) |
| Non-parents | 41        | 18 (44%)   | 23 (56%) |
| Married     | 55        | 21 (38%)   | 34 (62%) |
| Single      | 27        | 14 (52%)   | 13 (48%) |
| Total       | 82        | 35 (43%)   | 47 (57%) |

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setting. By altering aspects of their work (e.g., client types, client location), people constructed opportunities to remain true to their experienced professional identities. Unlike those who embraced, these people reported working about 60 hours per week or less, having predictable work schedules, and having regular engagement in other aspects of life. For example, Colin (Partner, M) told me, “I work until 5:30 or 6. I go home. I have dinner with my family. I put the kids to bed. Then I’ll probably work an hour or two after that if I need to, or if I want to.” Most limited weekend work to exceptional circumstances; several minimized travel, and for these people, work did not normally trump other life commitments. Thus, they were both less committed to their work, and less available for it, than the expected identity demanded.

Although some who altered their jobs were penalized, others seemed to pass as having embraced the expected identity. My data show that these differences in how people were perceived and treated originated from information they shared as a result of how they altered their work—personally or asking for help—as well as the information they shared with others. I now elaborate on how the use of different tools enabled people to stray while passing or revealing. Table 5 presents supplementary data.

### Tools for Straying

*Personally Cultivating Necessary Work Conditions: Passing.* Some people personally altered the structure of their work in ways that constructed space to enact their experienced selves, thereby straying from the expected identity. People described cultivating local, repeat, or nonprofit clients who required less time and commitment than more typical clients. Some found ways to work on internal firm projects, which reduced travel time and also had more predictable demands. Others worked from home, reducing travel time and creating space for other aspects of life. These efforts bear resemblance to “job crafting”: altering the aspects of one’s job in ways that reshape work identities (Wrzesniewski and Dutton 2001). However, my findings go further, showing that these efforts to alter the structure of work also permitted people to avoid disclosing their desire to stray from the expected identity and allowed them to pass as having embraced it.

For example, Lloyd (Senior manager, M) viewed himself as an “odd duck” and did not embrace the work devotion he saw in his colleagues (“I’m going to misquote *The Matrix* here, but I feel like the problem is choice... the perception of autonomous choice is what makes it palatable. People are more willing to work harder because its perceived to be their choice...”). Lloyd strayed from the expected identity: “I skied five days last week. I took calls in the morning and in the evening but I was able to be there for my son when

he needed me to be, and I was able to ski five days in a row.” He clarified that these were work days, not vacation days: “No, no one knows where I am... Those boundaries are only practical with my local client base... Especially because we’re mobile, there are no boundaries.” Thus, by using local clients and telecommuting, Lloyd altered the structure of his work in ways that allowed him to stray from the expected professional identity. His statement that “no one knows where I am” indicates that he believed others were unaware of his deceit. Indeed, despite his deviance, senior colleagues viewed him as an incumbent of the expected identity. Cameron (Partner, M), for example, labeled Lloyd a “rising star” who worked “much harder than” he did. This assessment—in combination with Lloyd’s star performance rating of 4 and his promotion to partner that year—suggests he had successfully passed in the eyes of senior members of the firm.

*Asking for Help in Restructuring Work: Revealing.* By contrast, those who requested AGM’s help to restructure their work, through informal alterations such as local clients or more formal accommodations such as parental leave, thereby revealed their deviance and were penalized. Doug (Junior manager, M) recounted how he had lost a promotion because, following months in the Middle East, he had requested a U.S.-based project:

I told the firm, you know, I don’t think I can go back to the Middle East again. And if that means I’m going to have to look for something else, I’m going to look for something else. And that was kind of what resulted in the nonpromotion, because they said, “Well, you’ll probably get it if you stay out there.”... Because I’m a brown guy it’s easy to think that the Middle East is no big hurdle for me... They said, “Well, its easier for you, you know. You don’t drink already.” They don’t drink in the country I was working in. I said, “Listen, drinking and not drinking is not the hardest thing... It’s about being away from your family for that long. Right?”

Doug’s story later arose during an interview I conducted with Barry (Senior manager, M), who had also worked in the Middle East. Barry told me, “Doug’s wife didn’t want him to do it, but he did it anyway and that was a much different experience for him... He stayed for about five months and then came back and refused to go back again.” Barry identified working in the Middle East as an opportunity that had signaled his personal commitment to AGM and had enabled a recent promotion. Thus, the man who went to the Middle East happily was promoted; the man who publicly cut his stay short because of his nonwork commitments, thereby revealing his deviance, was denied a promotion.

Accessing formal accommodations also revealed deviance. For example, Michael told me,

When my daughter was born, one of the things I wanted to do was take off three months and do the full FMLA<sup>3</sup>

**Table 5 Supporting Evidence for Straying While Passing and Revealing**

| Codes   | Illustrative quotes  |
|---|--|
| <i>Manner in which people altered their work:</i> Describes how the individual altered his or her work structure.   | <p><b>Tools for straying: Altering structure of work and information control</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• (Altering the structure of one's own work) "Travel comes out of your personal time, always. You are never going to say, no, I am going to work less because I need to be on a three-hour plane ride. You are never going to say, I am going to take the 3 o'clock flight. You are going to take the 7 o'clock flight in the evening. So I think work then gets in the way of your personal life, and that's why I work for pharma, for example, because they are all right in New Jersey and I take a car." (Junior manager, M)</li> <li>• (Requesting help to alter structure of work) "A friend of mine was really, really strong at AGM; she was doing really well....Once she had her baby, she didn't really want to travel, and the firm didn't really help her to find local projects. And eventually, it was a somewhat mutual but mostly AGM decision for her to leave because she wasn't willing to travel and so couldn't contribute to the firm." (Junior manager, F)</li> <li>• (Using formal accommodations) "It's not widely known at the firm, but it's known by enough people, I actually plan on leaving AGM and am just taking my time figuring out, now that I've had all these experiences, what I actually want to be when I grow up....I've just taken about two months off, and now I'm working 50% and doing more internal operations, focused activities.... The whole reason was the travel. Well, finding the job less fulfilling and also finding the travel untenable." (Junior manager, M)</li> </ul> |
| <i>Management of personal information:</i> Evidence of hiding or sharing information about one's deviance from the expected professional identity.  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• (Hiding deviance) "On balance, yes, the hours would be shorter, but I have no idea how it would be visible to anyone who's not on one of these teams....Actually [my hours] have been more regular recently than they have been historically, I probably work about 55–60 hours a week.... It's much less than I used to work. Don't tell anybody." (Senior manager, M)</li> <li>• (Sharing deviance) "I'm always curious about the kind of person who, when they get into these tough situations, they're willing to kind of do anything, whatever is required to deliver. That's not me. I actually literally said, 'I'm off this case and I want you to give me time to explore....' When I got my year-end feedback, they basically said, 'This wasn't a banner year for you....'" (Junior manager, M)</li> </ul>   |
| <i>Audience status: Pass to high-status audiences:</i> Person describes aiming to pass to high-status audiences within the firm or to clients.  | <p><b>Contextual factors shaping passing and revealing</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "I was interviewing with Jon to be his assistant, it was five years ago, and I was trying to explain to him that I couldn't always stay til 7 P.M., because I had to get home to pick up my kids. Many of the partners require assistants to work late...when I first joined I used to work all night all the time with the consultants. Anyway, he said, 'I don't usually require that, I'm out of here by 5, 5:30'...he was very disciplined, very organized. He had four kids and was very involved with them. He kind of laughed and said, 'If [the managing partners] found out how little I worked....' He's still here, now one of the top guys." (Administrator, F)</li> </ul>   |
| <i>Relationships: Reveal to close colleagues:</i> Person describes episode of revealing deviance to a close colleague or personal mentor within the firm that led to informal alterations in the structure of work. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "The person I was managing was spending her anniversary weekend away with her boyfriend. And we had a ton of work to do. The partner I was working with said, 'Listen, we're all working weekends here. It's too bad but we are all getting the holiday break coming up and everyone needs to pull their load here.' And my response was—not to him but to her—I was pretty transparent, I said, 'You know, listen. There's a lot of work to be done here. I want to do everything I can to make sure you have as much of a weekend and a chance to enjoy your anniversary as possible. Let me know when you think you might have time.' I ended up working Saturday, you know, all day Saturday and a good part of Sunday, but she was able to sort of pick things up on the tail end of that. It's important to me that the other people on my team have a life and are happy. Because frankly, unhappy people are less productive...." (Junior manager, M)</li> </ul>  |
| <i>Perceived access to formal accommodations:</i> Formal accommodations are treated as mostly available to mothers but are not perceived as an option for other people.   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "I took a two-week paternity leave. And the idea of a guy taking paternity leave was just [makes face] for my managers. Guys just don't do that....They teased me....Then one of the partners said to me, 'You have a choice to make: Are you going to be a professional or are you going to just be an average person in your field? If you are going to be a professional then that means....nothing can be as important to you as your work.' " (Firm alumnus, M)</li> </ul>   |
| <i>Extremity of conflict: Reveal to high-status audiences:</i> Person describes episode of revealing deviance to high-status audience in order to alter the structure of work.                                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "I do the best that I can do, but I'm also very willing to push back. Definitely more so than other people. I've been given feedback like, 'You need to push back less.'...If you asked people how hard I work, they would say not that hard, which isn't a good thing necessarily....[But] I rarely push back with a client. It's normally the person above me or the people above me [who are] creating work. If I feel like we don't need to do what they're creating, I would say that....I know what my priorities are, I don't like being here in the office. I don't like working weekends.... Some people would say, 'I would never want to push back or give the impression that I don't want to finish something as quickly as possible.' But I would say, look, can we do this tomorrow...." (Junior manager, M)</li> </ul>  |

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Table 5 (cont'd)

| Codes  | Illustrative quotes  |
|--|--|
| <i>Labeling effects of high-status audiences' perceptions:</i> Being perceived as successful by a high-status audience shapes how one is perceived by other audiences within the firm. | <p><b>Factors shaping spread of perceptions across audiences</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Jack’s being really good at getting good interactions with some of the more senior partners and sort of building a name for yourself of, I’m someone who’s reliable, I’m someone who has a strong reputation for being productive on cases, for working well with clients. . . . For me, that’s also been something where I had one or two projects where I was on a large account and so I got known by a partner, one of the talkative partners who says, ‘Oh, he’s great at this!’” (Junior manager, M)</li> </ul>   |
| <i>Need to continue negotiating accommodations:</i> Accommodations accessed through revealing to high-status audiences require continued negotiations and draw attention to deviance.  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I report directly to the CEO and SVP [senior vice president] of strategy of a huge company. And he is the kind of person that—I mean I respect him, he’s a very smart guy—he just isn’t going to dole out kudos much and he’s going to grind people pretty hard. So that has made for a very intense pace. . . . so I’ve had probably five or six discussions and meetings with kind of the top people at AGM [about how to handle the client]. . . . And so, a lot of people have asked me how I’m doing. . . . With my manager, we’ve had a number of conversations about [how to manage this client]. . . . I had a couple of people reach out to me as a result of that.” (Junior manager, M)</li> </ul> |

and be a stay-at-home dad. . . . I felt like this was the only time in my career I would be able to do this. . . . But the original reaction I actually got inside of AGM was, “Oh no, you can’t take three months off.”

He settled for six weeks of unpaid leave and worked 80-hour weeks, travelling weekly, for the rest of the year. Yet he found that “people still talked like I was out three months.” At his annual review he was told that AGM could not properly evaluate him because the six weeks he had taken off meant he “had this big donut hole in [his] year.” That year, his performance rating fell from a 3 to a 2, and he did not receive a hoped-for promotion. Thus, Michael’s deviance was both recognized and penalized. In a subsequent conversation, he reflected, “No one questioned my commitment until I had a family.”

*Hiding or Sharing Personal Information: Passing and Revealing.* The personal information that people hid or shared, such as details about how one worked or about how one felt about one’s work, also affected whether they passed or revealed. Some deliberately misrepresented themselves as having embraced the expected identity. For example, one afternoon, Venkat (Junior manager, M) told me, “Everyone inflates their hours. I would guess I work 50–60 hours a week but would tell others 60. . . . Right now it’s about 40, on this particular client.” The next morning, I met Robert (Junior manager, M), who had recently begun working with Venkat. Robert, reflecting on his own work ethic, commented, “I could work every night, every weekend, way overdeliver, make new work for myself, [but] I’m more laid-back than other people on projects. . . . Last week when I worked with Venkat, he was a thousand times better than me.” He later confirmed that he meant Venkat worked longer hours, suggesting that Venkat had successfully passed to him as fully available.

Others, however, revealed their deviance by telling colleagues about their struggles with AGM’s identity expectations. Philippa (Junior manager, F), who found

AGM’s work structure “difficult for someone like me who’s very operational, very structured, [who likes to] have a good plan about where we’re going and have flexibility,” said that she had disclosed her deviance to colleagues. “I have been very, very open about the fact that I’m unsatisfied. . . .”

As these examples show, how people altered the structure of their work, in tandem with how they controlled their personal information, enabled them to stray from the expected identity while also shaping whether they passed or revealed in their interactions with others. People did not, however, pass or reveal exclusively. Next, I expand on how people combined these efforts across different audiences at the firm.

### Integrated Identity Management: Combining Passing and Revealing Across Audiences

People managed their identities differently in their interactions with audiences based on four factors: the status of the audience, the closeness of the relationship, perceived access to the firm’s formal accommodations, and the extremity of the conflict that people experienced. These efforts at passing and revealing were interdependent: in the examples I present, people are often revealing to some audiences while simultaneously passing to others. In addition, the perceptions of targeted audiences could spill over to shape other audiences’ perceptions through three avenues: labeling, construction of opportunities for passing, and a need to continually negotiate accommodations.

### Situational Factors Shaping Passing and Revealing Across Audiences

*Audience Status.* Consultants typically sought to pass with high-status audiences who had clear power over their chances at the firm, consistent with theoretical ideas about how status distance shapes people’s management

of stigmatized identities (Phillips et al. 2009). Junior consultants typically focused on passing to high-status audiences within AGM (e.g., partners); more senior consultants, who needed strong client relationships and high sales to these clients, focused their efforts on clients. For example, Veronica (Senior manager, F), who worked only an 80% schedule and had thus revealed her deviance within AGM, still attempted to pass to clients as an always available consultant. She explained to me, “I have full-time daycare. . . . [I use my day off] to accommodate client things so that it’s not really visible to the clients that I work a reduced schedule.”

*Closeness of Relationship.* People sometimes revealed their deviance to close friends. These were typically people at the same hierarchical level in the organization. For example, Chris (Junior manager, M), describing a recent night with two colleagues, told me, “The three of us had like five pitchers and talked for four hours, just running around in a circle, questioning why we can’t imagine doing this demanding of a job for long.” People also disclosed to close personal mentors. Although mentors typically occupied higher-status positions, their history of providing professional guidance and the friendship that often (but not always) developed in these relationships seemed to encourage people to reveal their deviance to them. Revealing to these close colleagues seemed to function as a release valve for the tensions that people experienced with straying from the expected identity: being known as their true selves by at least some colleagues may have enabled them to continue passing to others. However, this was not the only consequence of revealing: studies of work/nonwork boundary management have shown the importance of relationships to one’s ability to alter work boundaries (Trefalt 2013, Trefalt and Heaphy 2014). My data similarly show that revealing one’s deviance to close colleagues and mentors sometimes led to informal fixes to the structure of work that in turn facilitated straying. Amos, describing a mentor who had become “a buddy of mine,” said, “When I had trouble, when I raised my hand and said ‘This is BS,’ at that time I was underresourced and I was working insane hours. I was hitting obstacles. He’d say, ‘Alright, let me take care of that.’ I’d get a call two hours later, done, gone, everything.” Thus, for Amos, like others, revealing to a close mentor permitted immediate alterations to the structure of work.

*Perceived Access to Formal Accommodations.* People varied in whether they believed they were entitled to formal accommodations (e.g., parental leave, part-time schedule), and these beliefs shaped how readily they sought these options. AGM targeted its accommodations to mothers, and mothers who encountered difficulties with the expected identity tended to gravitate toward requesting formal accommodations. Although some needs, such as maternity leaves, could only be

solved formally, other, more chronic issues with the expected identity could possibly be handled through informal accommodations (e.g., personally cultivating nonprofit clients). Mothers tended simply to seek the organization’s help ahead of exploring other, informal means of restructuring their work. For example, Veronica told me,

I have two kids, so I took two pretty long leaves . . . . And then from then on, I’ve been working an 80% schedule pretty much consistently . . . . And certainly my preference after having my kids was just to be able not to travel. So it’s mostly worked out . . . . My preference is accommodated by AGM so far . . . . It’s kind of a combination of serendipity and my preference slash AGM being willing to accommodate that preference . . . . Theoretically, [I] would become a partner in four years . . . . I’m assuming it would be a little longer trajectory because I only work four days a week.

Although AGM “accommodated” Veronica’s preferences through an 80% schedule and little travel, as her comments regarding her trajectory suggest, use of these tools clearly revealed her deviance. Like Veronica, other mothers gravitated toward official alterations to their schedule. Other people at AGM, however, faced resistance if they requested formal accommodations, or they believed these accommodations were simply not available to them. For example, although AGM was legally required to offer parental leave to fathers, Doug told me that after his son was born, “I was off for a week. There’s no paternity leave policy here. But you kind of go to your current case manager and say, Look, I’m going to be off this week. And, they’re like, okay. Just pick up the mobile if you get a call from my cell.”

*Situation-Specific Conflict.* Although accommodations and formal alterations of work were typically viewed as accessible to mothers but difficult for others to obtain at AGM, people other than mothers did sometimes seek the firm’s help in restructuring their work. I found that people typically did so in order to solve situation-specific problems that resulted from sudden collisions between work demands (e.g., working on an excessively demanding project) and events in their personal lives (e.g., illness of a family member). In such situations, people sought formal accommodations or other sanctioned modifications of work practices (e.g., local client assignments), or they simply told senior colleagues about their problems. Kate (Junior manager, F), following an illness brought on by work stress, began openly questioning and resisting pressures to always “overdeliver.” In doing so, she outed herself to the partners managing the project:

One of the partners called me a whiner. He said, “Why are you always whining about this and that?” And I said, “Ok, I don’t really understand why you’re making us do all this work. The case is already going well. Yeah, we

could do all this additional work to overdeliver, but at what cost, right?" . . . Literally three people left the case, and two of them have left AGM since. So, not good.

In addition to being labeled a “whiner,” Kate was poorly evaluated for her work on this case—each an indication that she had revealed her deviance.

### Spread of Perceptions Across Audiences

Thus, people managed their deviance differently across audiences, passing to some, revealing to others. These efforts to pass or to reveal in relation to specific audiences often spilled over to shape other audiences’ perceptions.

*Passing to High-Status Audiences Facilitates Passing More Broadly.* Passing to high-status audiences seemed to facilitate passing to equal- or lower-status colleagues as well. For example, Alex (Junior manager, M) worked fewer than 60 hours a week and never travelled overnight, which he managed by focusing on repeat clients and a local industry:

I’ve managed to be the junior manager for several cases on one account, which is great. . . . The account happens to be in Connecticut. So I manage it so I go there for day trips, but I almost never spend the night away from home. . . . I try to head out by 5 o’clock, get home at 5:30, have dinner, [and] play with my daughter. . . . [On weekends,] I try to limit it to, you know, two hours at most, really just catching up on emails.

Alex targeted his efforts to pass at clients: “I know what clients are expecting. So I deliver above that, but I deliver only above that to impress them, not to know that I did . . . everything I could for a particular case.” Although Alex thus targeted his efforts at clients, he also passed more generally within AGM: equal-status colleagues viewed him as a star, he received a star performance rating (4) that year, and he had been promoted relatively quickly. Such spillovers in perceptions likely occurred in part because the largely invisible ways that people altered their work to pass to high-status audiences also avoided revealing their deviance more generally. In addition, however, being labeled a star performer by particular, high-status audiences seemed to create a powerful halo effect, such that other audiences also assumed the person was a star. For example, Bill (Senior manager, M) told me,

My ability here to ascend this hierarchy rapidly is partly about my own abilities and so forth, but it’s also partly about the connection that exists between me and my kind of advocates, and the chief advocate is the guy who runs my group. So is he going to value me in the same way as another person who has been flagged by the firm as a star? Probably not.

Once one had been labeled a star, this label was, as one person told me, sticky. Indeed, perceptions that

someone had embraced the expected identity could persist even when evidence was presented of the person’s deviance. Caroline (Partner, F) said,

The women say they look up and see women like me and don’t want to live my life—they think I work more than I do. If I am client-facing and commercially successful, I must be working all the time. And then they get emails from me at 8 at night and Sunday 5 A.M. What they don’t know is that I have taken a half a day off to go on my son’s field trip, so I do the work when I fit it in. I try to tell them, but still feel there are misperceptions.

Thus, although Caroline tried to unravel junior colleagues’ assumptions, “misperceptions” persisted. Indeed, junior consultants’ assumptions about their managers’ work habits often seemed more grounded in their managers’ reputations than in their actual behavior. For example, Jimmy (Associate, M) assumed that his manager, who was known as a star, worked in ways consistent with the expected identity: “I don’t know [how much she worked] because she was never in the office. But it was my impression, I’m sure this is right, that she was working a lot.” When pressed, however, he was able to offer no evidence of her work hours aside from this “impression.” Thus, the strength of consultants’ assumptions that success required embracing the expected identity, passing to the firm’s senior partners, and being marked by them as successful enabled passing to the broader audience of the firm.

*Revealing to Close Colleagues Facilitates Passing More Broadly.* People’s choices to reveal to close colleagues tended to result in informal fixes to their work structure that, because of their informality, enabled them to stray from the expected identity while passing to the broader audience in AGM, including high-status audiences. Some, like Wesley (Partner, M), were aware of this spillover effect:

We kind of have a shared agreement as to what work–life balance is on our team. We basically work really closely with each other to make sure that we can all do that. A lot of us have young kids, and we’ve designed it so we can do that. . . . We’ve really designed the whole business [unit] around having intellectual freedom, making a lot of money, [and] having work–life balance. It’s pretty rare. And we don’t get pushback from above because we are squaring that circle—from the managing partners—’cause we are one of the most successful parts of the company. Most of the partners have no idea our hours are that light.

Thus, Wesley acknowledges that he and his colleagues revealed their deviance to each other (“shared agreement”). He identifies the target of their passing behavior as AGM’s two managing partners. But as a result, in his account, a broader audience—most of AGM’s “partners”—was in fact unaware that people in his unit strayed from the expected identity.



*Revealing to High-Status Audiences Entails Revealing More Broadly.* Revealing to high-status audiences tended to result in revealing to the broader audience of the firm. This occurred in part because of the visibility of the accommodations people received and the complexity of negotiating them: an extended leave, or an internal assignment, often required negotiations with multiple people over several weeks. In addition, however, formal accommodations typically required ongoing negotiations with clients, teams, and partners that drew continued attention to the person’s deviance over time. The following quotations illustrate this dynamic:

It’s hard to stay on the line, doing client service, working part time. You’re kind of all in or you’re not. We set that expectation for clients. If you’re working part time, you’ll pay for it. If you’re working three days, four days, you will be asked, “Can you really not come in on that day off?” People are wondering, are they in the game or not? (Senior manager, M)

I worry that [those who go part-time] are getting paid 60% but end up doing 100%. But it’s up to the individual to manage this. Some partners are understanding and will remember that someone is 60%, and some will not. So it’s up to the individual to “remind” the manager . . . All in all, it’s not good. (Senior manager, F)

### Consequences of Passing and Revealing

By managing their identities differently across audiences, people found ways to stray from AGM’s expected identity such that they mostly passed in their interactions with senior members of the firm or mostly revealed their deviance to these people. Although, as previously noted, conflict with the expected identity was not restricted to any particular demographic group, men and women seemed to cope with conflict in different ways. Namely, women who strayed from the expected identity were unlikely to engage identity management strategies that enabled passing to senior members of the firm; rather, most (80% of those who strayed) ultimately revealed their deviance to senior members of the firm. The strategies of men who strayed, by contrast, seemed more evenly split between passing (54% of those who strayed) and revealing (45% of those who strayed). The reasons for these differences are likely complex; however, my analyses suggest that one important reason may be that mothers were targeted by AGM’s formal accommodation policies and thus tended to gravitate toward these policies. Men, however, were not targeted and instead tended to experiment with informal strategies for straying.

How people were perceived by senior members of the firm in turn influenced the performance evaluation system, a key mechanism through which AGM controlled consultants’ identities. As many of the examples I have shown suggest, at AGM, both those who embraced the expected identity and those who successfully passed to

senior members of the firm were typically labeled successes and rewarded, whereas those who revealed to senior members were recognized as deviant and penalized. In what follows, I draw on performance and promotion data to further support these assertions.

### External Perceptions and the Performance Evaluation System

*Embracing: Celebrated Successes.* The 35 people (42% of men, 44.5% of women) who embraced AGM’s expected identity were typically regarded as among AGM’s top consultants, described as stars and “superheroes” by their colleagues. They typically received high performance ratings relative to their colleagues (mean rating of 3.0 in 2009 and 3.14 in 2010) (see Table 6). Most reported straightforward career paths, with few stories of disappointments. Three of the 35 were promoted the year after the study, though 2 did not receive hoped-for promotions. Partners often occupied internal leadership positions, further signs that they were perceived as having embraced the expected identity.

*Passing: Celebrated Successes.* The 22 people (31% of men, 11% of women) who strayed yet managed their identities in ways that promoted passing to senior members of the firm were typically perceived as embracing AGM’s expected identity and were favorably regarded and highly rewarded. Like those who embraced, others described them in superlative terms, e.g., “stars” and “top senior men.” Echoing these perceptions, their performance rankings were slightly higher than those who embraced the expected identity (mean rating of 3.08 in

**Table 6 Performance Data**

|   | 2009            |             | 2010            |             |
|---|-----------------|-------------|-----------------|-------------|
|   | <i>N</i>        | Mean (SD)   | <i>N</i>        | Mean (SD)   |
| Strategy  |                 |             |                 |             |
| <i>Embracing (E)</i>  | 22              | 3.0 (0.62)  | 21              | 3.14 (0.47) |
| <i>Passing (P)</i>  | 12              | 3.08 (0.67) | 8               | 3.13 (0.78) |
| <i>Revealing (R)</i>  | 20              | 2.45 (0.69) | 14              | 2.85 (0.66) |
| Total   | 54 <sup>a</sup> |             | 43 <sup>b</sup> |             |
| Kruskal–Wallis test statistics <sup>c</sup> (df, with ties) | 8.65* (2)       |             | 1.5 (3)         |             |
| Mann–Whitney test statistics ( <i>z</i> )                   |                 |             |                 |             |
| <i>E</i> vs. <i>P</i>                                       | −0.37           |             | 0.06            |             |
| <i>E</i> vs. <i>R</i>                                       | 2.56*           |             | 1.31            |             |
| <i>P</i> vs. <i>R</i>                                       | 2.53*           |             | 0.78            |             |

<sup>a</sup>Total *N* is 54, not 60, because a few participants declined to release their data or were unreachable.

<sup>b</sup>Total *N* is lower in 2010 because of departures from the firm and one promotion to partner.

<sup>c</sup>Grouping variable: Type.

<sup>†</sup>*p* < 0.10; \**p* < 0.05; \*\**p* < 0.01.



2009 and 3.13 in 2010)<sup>4</sup> and significantly better than those who revealed their deviance to senior members of the firm. They enjoyed straightforward, even accelerated advancement; one was described by a colleague as “by far the fastest person I’ve ever seen make partner here.” Three were promoted in 2010; none reported being denied a promotion. Some of those who were partners occupied leadership roles within their groups. Thus, AGM did not appear to distinguish between those who embraced and those who passed. In this way, they evaded the performance evaluation system, a key mechanism of identity control.

*Revealing: Penalized Deviance.* By contrast, the 25 people (27% of men, 44.5% of women) who revealed their deviance to senior members of the firm were largely recognized as deviant and penalized accordingly. Their performance ratings were significantly lower than those of other consultants (mean rating of 2.45 in 2009 and 2.85 in 2010). When I interviewed them, just one had been recently promoted, and seven reported not receiving anticipated promotions. They complained of being persistently placed on difficult projects with demanding clients, and they had slow career trajectories, both indicators that they were not highly valued by AGM. Eight of the 25 left within a year for other jobs, the highest turnover rate of the sample. A few senior partners revealed their deviance by significantly reducing travel and working far less, without apparent penalty. They may have, after years of embracing the expected identity, accrued enough “idiosyncrasy credits”

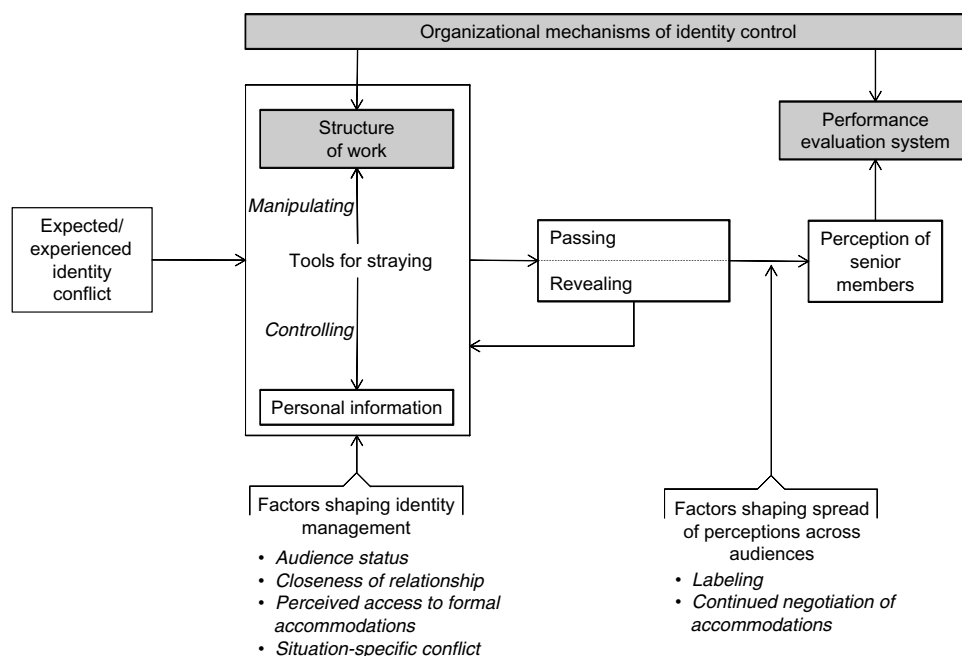
to openly stray without penalty (Hollander 1958). Overall, however, most who revealed their deviance to senior members of the firm were penalized.

## Discussion

I set out to understand how people cope with organizational expectations that they embrace a professional identity that centers on the ideal worker image in light of their experienced professional identities. In the firm I studied, most workers—not simply women and not simply those with families—encountered conflict between these identities, and they responded by straying from the expected identity. I found that this deviance did not in itself beget penalties: rather, some people strayed while still passing as having embraced the expected identity. Moreover, although men and women both experienced conflict, they managed their deviance differently: men tended to pass, whereas women revealed.

The analyses suggest a conceptual model of how people navigate conflict between expected and experienced professional identities, traced in Figure 1. In this figure, the gray boxes illustrate the organization’s mechanisms of identity control; the white boxes illustrate how people coped with conflict between the expected professional identity and their experienced professional identity. Reading from the left side, this model shows that people who experienced conflict coped by engaging tools that permitted straying from the expected identity. People’s use of these tools to pass or to reveal were shaped by situational factors, and efforts to manage one audience’s perceptions sometimes spilled over to shape

**Figure 1 A Model of Coping with Conflict Between Expected and Experienced Professional Identities**



other audiences' perceptions. Together, people's efforts at passing and revealing across different audiences coalesced to shape the perceptions of senior members of the firm, influencing the performance evaluation system, such that those who passed were highly evaluated and rewarded, whereas those who revealed were penalized. Overall, my findings and the model suggest that people's management of conflict between an expected professional identity and their experienced professional identity is best understood as a layered process involving passing and revealing across audiences. Together, the findings deepen our understanding of and suggest fruitful new directions for scholarship on how men and women can navigate ideal worker images and expected professional identities; they also enrich our understanding of passing and revealing in organizational contexts.

### Contributions to Theory

An important contribution of my study is to introduce the possibility of straying from the ideal worker image, and from expected professional identities more generally, while still passing as having embraced it. Although it is well known that people may be ambivalent about or resist expected identities, existing scholarship has mainly examined deviance that is known and penalized (Jackall 1988, Kunda 1992). My study highlights how not all deviance is detected: rather, people retain agency in how they respond to pressures to assume an expected identity and may find ways to pass.

My findings regarding how people passed, and the outcomes of passing, not only echo but also differ importantly from what has been found in research on stigmatized social identities. Research on stigmatized social identities shows that people manage these identities mainly through information control, for example, by managing status-relevant information (Phillips et al. 2009). But when belonging to a favored social category requires behaving in a particular way, as is the case with a professional identity, passing or revealing necessarily involves more than information control: I detail here how people manipulated features of their work alongside controlling personal information so as to pass or to reveal. Moreover, although in the context of stigmatized identities, passing involves denying a part of the self (DeJordy 2008), my study suggests that in the context of professional identities, passing may be understood as a way of constructing opportunities to stay true to one's experienced self while avoiding penalties for deviance. For research on professionals' identities, these findings thus underscore the importance of better understanding whether, why, and how people stray from expected identities, as well as the consequences of their management of their deviant identities for themselves and the organization. For instance, one implication of these findings is that people's abilities to mask their deviance and

receive high-performance evaluations may have unwittingly helped perpetuate the expected identity's position as the sole standard of success within the firm.

A second contribution of this study is to show that the gender inequalities typically associated with the ideal worker image may arise principally from systematic differences in how men and women cope with conflict with this expected identity, rather than from differences in who embraces it. As noted, this image has historically been identified as mostly problematic for women, particularly mothers. Conversely, at AGM, these expectations were experienced as problematic by most workers: men as well as women, parents and nonparents, married and single people. Men and women coped with this conflict differently, however: fewer women than men passed; rather, they tended to reveal their deviance. At AGM, an important reason for this divergence seemed to be that its HR accommodations were targeted at mothers, who were consequently more likely to take advantage of these accommodations, which revealed their deviance. Men, not expected to take HR accommodations, instead experimented with less formal, under-the-radar ways of straying from the expected identity.

However, access to accommodations is unlikely to be the only reason why women coped differently than men, and further analysis of gender differences in coping strategies, and the organizational and cultural factors shaping them, would be useful to understand how the ideal worker image contributes to workplace inequality. For example, some of the tools for passing required coordination with colleagues or clients; as women typically have different workplace networks than men (Ibarra 1997), they may have been relatively less able to access these tools. Another possible reason is that professional identities are often associated with particular social identities (Ashcraft 2013, Clair et al. 2012, Ramarajan and Reid 2013); in this setting, most consultants were men. Women might have been more focused on managing their status as women in a male-dominated role than on finding opportunities to pass. Racial minorities might face similar challenges, as they typically have different workplace networks than their white colleagues (Ibarra 1995) and, like women, often face stereotypes regarding their suitability for a particular job (e.g., Rosette et al. 2008). Overall, for scholars interested in the role of the ideal worker image in inequality, my findings suggest broadening the analytical lens to include all workers' experiences and moving beyond examining *who* experiences conflict to focus on *how* people manage this conflict, and the resources available to them to do so.

Third, by exploring the nuances of how people combined passing and revealing, my study also responds to recent calls to enrich scholarship on these identity management practices (Clair et al. 2005, DeJordy 2008, Jones and King 2014). In particular, the study suggests

that in an organizational context, passing and revealing are best conceptualized as interdependent components of an integrated identity management strategy. Affirming insights from scholarship on people's management of stigmatized identities and of work/nonwork boundaries (Clair et al. 2005, Phillips et al. 2009, Trefalt 2013), my study details certain situational factors—audience status, closeness of relationships, perceived access to accommodations, and extremity of conflict—that affect whether people pass or reveal to different audiences. My study also contributes to this work, however, by showing how people combined passing and revealing as they navigated their deviance across different audiences. Importantly, the study also shows the interdependence of these efforts: revealing to close colleagues may create conditions for straying and enable passing to others, and one audience's perceptions may spill over to shape other audiences' perceptions. Thus, at AGM, it was the interplay of how people managed their identities across audiences that shaped how they were perceived and treated by high-status audiences.

### Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study examined people's identity management at one point in time; however, scholars might also examine people's use of identity management strategies over time. For example, people might engage different strategies during certain career stages, such as job transitions, which prompt unique identity challenges (Hall 1976, Ibarra 1999, Ibarra and Barbulescu 2010), or they may cycle through embracing—passing—revealing. There may also be a relationship between people's identity management strategies and their performance evaluations: some may have revealed their deviance only after learning they would be poorly evaluated. People's accounts suggest that, at least in their internal experience, this was not the case: for many, the precipitating event for revealing was personal (e.g., illness), and they attributed subsequent penalties to having revealed their deviance. However, whether these attributions were always correct, and if not, how they were constructed, is an intriguing area for future research.

I studied a single setting in which there was one very clear expected identity. Moreover, AGM constitutes an occupationally based organization (Van Maanen and Barley 1984), wherein the community of interest—consultants—controlled how their work would be assessed. Future scholars might deepen the understanding of how people navigate expected and experienced identities by considering settings where there is greater variability in the identities favored by the organization, where there is greater heterogeneity in the types of workers employed by the organization, or among independent workers who are primarily beholden to client expectations.

I argue here that people's abilities to pass explain how they were perceived, but an underlying factor could be raw ability, such that talented people may need to work less to perform well. Without measures of ability that are distinct from performance assessments, this possibility cannot be fully examined. However, new recruits came from a select set of schools and were intensively screened; they therefore likely had relatively similar skills and abilities. Further, HR leaders' and senior partners' accounts strongly suggest that evaluations were based on compliance with an expected identity. Future scholars might seek alternative measures of competence to test the assertions made here.

Another possible explanation for the dynamics observed here is that people's professional identities were not important to AGM, as long as the work was competently performed. In this account, passing would be unnecessary, as competent workers would not be penalized for deviance. Yet the organization of work at AGM—the crisis situations, midproject expansions, and last-minute travel—belies such an account. Further, the salience of the expected identity to all participants, but particularly to senior partners and leaders of the HR department, suggests that embracing, or appearing to embrace, this identity was required to be considered a top performer.

### Practical Insights

This research also offers important lessons for practice. Society still tends to assume that primarily women, and mainly mothers, experience difficulties with devoting themselves wholly to work. This study shows that problems with demands for work devotion are neither only a mother's issue nor only a women's issue: rather, this conflict is experienced by most workers. It is particularly striking that so many people in this firm experienced this conflict, as AGM, like the consulting industry more generally, was well known to be demanding: people accepted this job with some knowledge of its demands. That so many still experienced conflict with the expected identity underscores a troublesome mismatch between people's preferences and organizations' expectations. The widespread nature of this conflict both heightens the importance for organizations to assess the need for demands for work devotion and suggests that solutions should be targeted at all workers, not simply women.

### Conclusion

Overall, this study underscores the continued salience of demands to be an ideal worker in professional work settings and the complex ways these demands shape men and women's work experiences. As the need to pass or reveal is typically associated with highly stigmatized social identities, the fact that many privileged workers



who strayed from the expected identity still felt the need to pass is both surprising and speaks to the power of the ideal worker image in defining success in this setting. Yet the very fact that people passed demonstrates that the association between total devotion and success may be as much a matter of perception as reality.

### Supplemental Material

Supplemental material to this paper is available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1287/orsc.2015.0975>.

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Quotations in tables and throughout text are attributed by position within AGM and sex (male (M) or female (F)).

<sup>2</sup>Partners were excluded from this assessment; their performance was assumed to fall between 3 and 4, and underperforming partners were asked to leave.

<sup>3</sup>FMLA stands for the Federal Medical Leave Act of 1993.

<sup>4</sup>As noted, men were more likely to pass than to reveal, and women were more likely to reveal than to pass. Women often receive poorer evaluations than men in male-type jobs and are held to higher standards for promotion (Lyness and Heilman 2006). To examine whether such differences in men and women's performance evaluations drove the observed difference between the scores of those who passed and those who revealed, I reran the performance data with only men's performance scores. This analysis revealed the same pattern of results and significant differences between people who embraced, passed, and revealed.

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