

Disconnect between parenting and certain jobs a source of stress, study finds

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Some working parents are carrying more psychological baggage than others—and the reason has nothing to do with demands on their time and energy.

The cause is their occupation.

According to University of Iowa researchers, parents who hold jobs viewed by society as aggressive, weak, or impersonal are likely to be more stressed out than parents whose occupations are seen in a light similar to parenting—good, strong, and caring.

"We know that one source of stress for parents is the time and energy bind," says Mark Walker, a doctoral student in sociology at UI. "But what I wanted to examine was the extent to which discrepancy between the cultural meanings of a person's occupational and parental identities could impact the [psychological well-being](#) of working parents."

"What we found is, in fact, it does," he adds.

Walker will present his study at the 109th Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association.

"I think the research is important in that it gives a name to something that I think many working parents experience but couldn't quite put a finger on," says Walker. "I think identifying the issue as a social problem rather than an individual one, or even worse: an imaginary problem,

could be helpful to [working parents](#) in and of itself."

Walker's premise for the study was the fact that for every role people play in their lives—be it parent, church member, or professor—there is an identity. And attached to that identity is a "cultural meaning," which is how society views that identity.

"We use cultural information to define those identities," he says. "How people treat us and react to us is based on that cultural information."

For his study, Walker merged data on the cultural sentiments attached to parental and occupational identities with a traditional large-scale survey on work-family conflict and came up with a three-dimensional graph on which various occupations were plotted.

What Walker discovered is that the public is often skeptical about the abilities of parents whose occupations seemingly do not align with being a mother or a father.

"If a person is constantly met with skepticism, he or she can begin to feel stressed because that skepticism will take a toll over time," he says.

"Those parents are always swimming upstream trying to convince people they are, for example, a legitimate parent or a legitimate attorney."

Among occupations that create more psychological baggage are: attorney, salesperson, laborer, receptionist, police officer, or politician. Those that align better, in terms of societal perception, with parenting include: teacher, physician, registered nurse, principal, and professor.

Study co-author Mary Noonan, an associate professor of sociology at UI, said the findings warrant a closer look by sociologists.

"I used to think the whole conflict was about time and energy and not so

much this internal conflict about identity," she says. "These are pretty exciting results."

Walker says the study could help shape policy and workplace changes designed to reduce the psychological strain of juggling the roles of parent and worker.

"If employers are aware that working [parents](#) in a given occupation are more at risk of experiencing psychological strain, they could potentially provide more targeted [mental health resources](#) for those in 'at risk' [occupations](#)," he says.

More information: The paper, "More Than 'Maxed Out': Working Parents and the Psychological Toll of Spanning Culturally Discrepant Roles," will be presented on Saturday, Aug. 16, at 4:30 p.m. PDT in San Francisco at the American Sociological Association's 109th Annual Meeting.

Provided by American Sociological Association

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