

# What to Expect When You're Expecting

---

*Judith Pascoe*

---

A few years ago, a special session at the MLA convention in San Francisco was organized to address family issues and the profession. The topic was of great interest to me—my husband and I were thinking about starting a family, I was in my fifth year of graduate school, I had turned thirty—but the news from the front line, as represented by the panel participants, was disheartening. The women on the panel had opted to have children at different points in their careers. One person was certain that being far along in her pregnancy while on the job market had cost her at least one job. Another woman, who had got pregnant as an assistant professor, told of having to take a year off without pay to complete the work she needed to meet tenure requirements. A lone man spoke of his struggle to attain paternity leave from his university. For anyone attending (as I was) in the hope of learning when one might optimally combine motherhood and an academic career, the panel was disappointing. The only consensus the participants reached came in a moment of wry humor: the best time to have children, several agreed, was during one's undergraduate years.

The topic of when to get pregnant acquired a kind of talismanic appeal in the next year or two in discussions I had with my two best friends. We returned to this subject again and again, worrying the issue to death over endless cups of coffee, working it in between departmental gossip and dissertation angst. Unlike the MLA panel I had attended, however, we were able to come to a practical agreement, to chart out a reproductive course that did not depend on getting pregnant as a sophomore or junior in college. If one had not started a PhD program fresh out of college (as most of the women I knew in graduate school had not) and thus did not have the luxury of waiting until after receiving tenure to think about conception, the perfect pregnancy, as we envisioned it, would commence in the fall in which one sent out job letters. One would optimally get pregnant in a small window of time extending from

August to October, attend the MLA convention pregnant but not noticeably so, deliver the baby in early summer, and have the summer months to devote to the baby before embarking on a new job in the fall. The first year of a new job, we imagined, would be so frantic in any event that complicating things further by the addition of a baby would not make all that much difference. We figured that our spouses,

who would be changing jobs to move with us to our new positions, might feasibly take a year or more off before looking for new jobs in order to shoulder a large portion of the child care responsibilities. One might reasonably scoff at several of the assumptions we made in fashioning this ideal scenario, but at the time we thought we had come to the best possible balance of a number of conflicting concerns. I was the lucky one who did, in fact, manage to conceive within the window allotted. This is the story of how my perfectly timed pregnancy derailed my job search. It is also, I hope, the initiation of a discussion of pregnancy and the profession, of the synchronous ticking of the biological and tenure clocks.

As these things go, my daughter's conception was only almost and not exactly perfectly timed according to our group pregnancy plan. I got pregnant slightly earlier than anticipated, which meant that I would be attending the MLA convention more than five months, rather than just three or four months, pregnant. I had a visiting lecturer position at the university where I had just finished my PhD, and I taught through the fall without telling anyone that I was pregnant. As Christmas approached and it became increasingly obvious (at least to me) that I was pregnant, I went in to talk about this fact with a colleague. While she responded enthusiastically to my good news, she was unequivocal and emphatic in the advice she gave: do not let anyone know that you are pregnant. If I told even my professors and friends, the news was likely to get around, and in her mind this information was not neutral in a job interview. I left her office chastened, wondering if she might be overreacting, but I resolved to follow her

---

*The author is Assistant Professor of English at the University of Iowa.*

---

advice. I bought a boxy black jacket and some shapeless dresses and practiced pithy responses to the standard query, "Tell us about your dissertation."

My title is an ironic gesture to a handbook of the same name that has come to be the standard reference for expecting parents. As I write this essay, *What to Expect When You're Expecting* (Eisenberg, Murkoff, and Hathaway), with its comforting month-by-month delineation of physical and emotional changes, tops the self-help-book best-seller list. Armed with this volume, I knew exactly what to expect: by the time of the MLA convention, my baby would be eight to ten inches long, and I might have a backache; by the time campus interviews rolled around, my baby would have eyebrows, eyelashes, and fingerprints, and I would be able to feel its movement. By the time in my pregnancy when *What to Expect* discourages air travel, the active part of the job search would be over.

I set out on my first on-campus interview in the middle of January and kept a routine doctor's visit on my return. I was scheduled to teach two classes that afternoon and to fly out for another interview the following day. I expected the appointment to take fifteen minutes. Instead, I was sent to the labor and delivery unit of the hospital, where what my doctor had suspected was confirmed: I was having contractions, and my cervix had started to dilate. I was, in short, progressing toward delivering the baby at twenty-six weeks into the pregnancy. In retrospect, it is possible to see the first on-campus interview as an inducement to labor: I missed my flight home because of an ice storm and was held up overnight in Chicago. The layover was handled gracefully by the airline. I remember standing in long lines carrying my luggage; my husband, who was waiting for me at the Philadelphia airport, remembers a series of increasingly despondent messages on the answering machine. In any event, on the afternoon of the day of my routine doctor's appointment, I was put on complete bed rest for the remainder of the pregnancy.

The department I was scheduled to visit the next day proposed possible later dates for the interview but was unwilling to accept a conference call in place of a campus visit. A week later the department chair informed me that the other final candidate for the position had been offered the job. I had already turned down an on-campus interview at a small college that had been my last choice of my three possible options, a place that, in retrospect, I imagined would have found some more flexible way of dealing with my confinement.

In the fall in which I sent out job applications, I had a conversation with a woman who had successfully negotiated the job market the year before. In her opinion,

January is the cruelest month for job seekers. At this point, one has already survived two rounds of possible rejection—the dossier cut and the MLA interview—but still has no firm assurance of a job. If one is second or third in line for a job, the final rejection or acceptance can take a very long time to come. The best advice she could give was that one should spend as much time as possible in January and February going to see movies in an effort to divert oneself from the enervating anxiety of the job search. I remembered this advice as I spent January and February in one of two places: lying on the bed in the bedroom of my apartment or lying on the couch in the living room. In either scenario, I was never more than a foot away from a telephone. The disappointment that one can compress into a single moment if one is out teaching classes or going to movies—that breathless instant when one glimpses the number of messages on the answering machine and sees that it is zero—was protracted

over an entire day (a day prolonged an hour by the difference between the eastern time zone where I lived and the central time zone of the single university I had visited). I did watch movies in my living room, organizing my own Audrey Hepburn film series in an effort to cheer myself up, but a daylight living room with a silent telephone could not match a darkened theater for diversionary purposes. I was worried about my baby, and I was worried about my future employment status. The first worry so far outstripped all others in consequence and terror that I chose to neglect it for the latter. I had entire uninterrupted weeks to spend thinking about what I *should* have said in response to a question I had been asked after my single job talk.

Academic hiring is peculiar in that it is carried out far in advance of the date on which the new hire is expected to turn up to work. In surveying the literature on the effect of pregnancy on women's career tracks in the business world—a growing body of research—I have not come across research devoted specifically to the effect of pregnancy on job interviewing, presumably because it is not a pressing issue: most visibly pregnant women are not looking for new jobs. Most employers would justifiably pause before hiring someone who would be missing, at minimum, several weeks of work in the very near future. This problem is not an issue in academic hiring, however, and in fact one can

---

***One can build an argument for the pregnant job interviewee as the most desirable female job candidate.***

---

build an argument for the pregnant job interviewee as the most desirable female job candidate. Someone who is expecting a baby in the spring or summer before starting a job is most likely not going to be taking a maternity leave in the near future (or perhaps ever, since female academics typically have smaller families than male academics do).<sup>1</sup> One might argue that women with children are not as productive at work as childless women are, but surprisingly, the existent research on female academics' productivity does not support this intuitive assumption. A study that tracked the research productivity of female scientists (mathematicians, physical and biological scientists, economists, and psy-

---

***I am still concerned about the way pregnancy affects women's job searches and, more generally, about the way family and academic careers combine.***

---

chologists) found that "during the three-year periods preceding and following the birth of first children the annual published productivity of these women does not fall but actually rises from 1.5 to 2.7 papers" (Cole and Zuckerman 121).<sup>2</sup> Similarly, studies show that married women publish more often than do single (and presumably more often childless) women (Davis and Astin 92). A pregnant job candidate,

if one extrapolates from the research on female academics' productivity, is a safe bet.

When my colleague recommended that I keep my pregnancy incognito as long as possible, however, she was assuming that logical lines of reasoning do not always assume priority in the intense thirty minutes of an MLA job interview and that other, less easily addressed factors often intercede. Studies examining the way a woman's pregnancy affects her work relationships provide support for this sobering assumption. The most extensive research is devoted to pregnant psychotherapists, who, it has been demonstrated, elicit in their clients feelings of anxiety, rivalry, envy, hostility, anger, and insecurity.<sup>3</sup> The intimate quarters in which MLA interviews are typically carried out (in hotel bedrooms, no less) invite a psychoanalytic reading of the interviewer–job seeker exchange. I am sorely tempted to make more of the parallels with the psychotherapist–client relationship, but I turn instead to a study that documents a less charged working engagement, one that more directly approximates the job interview dynamic.

Sara J. Corse carried out a simulation of workplace conflict to examine the effects of a manager's pregnancy on male and female subordinates. Her study's participants were men and women from MBA programs who took part in interactive role play with two women managers—one apparently pregnant and one not—and then reported their impressions. Each of the managers simulated pregnancy at different phases of the experiment by using padding and maternity clothes. Corse notes that a weakness of her experiment was that the participants had no prior knowledge of the women who acted as their managers in the role plays: "In actual work situations, a manager's pregnancy occurs in the context of ongoing relationships with subordinates" (42). But Corse's experiment accurately mirrors the job interview scenario in which interviewers typically interact with job applicants for the first time. In Corse's study the participants had more negative impressions of the pregnant manager than of the nonpregnant manager and also reported that interactions with the pregnant manager were less satisfactory overall than were those with the nonpregnant manager (37). Corse links her result to a larger body of research that suggests that "people like pregnant women better when they act passively than when they behave assertively" (40). The participants expected the pregnant manager to be nice rather than intimidating, accommodating rather than aggressive, and they were disappointed when these expectations were not met (39).

Corse's study bears out my colleague's implicit assumption that there is no percentage in being pregnant during a job interview. One is likely to be categorized, if only unconsciously, in the interviewer's mind as a good mother or a bad mother. In the first case, the pregnant job applicant seems pleasant and nice, good qualities for mothers but not qualities that are likely to take precedence in hiring decisions. In the second scenario, the candidate seems smart and assertive, qualities one looks for in a colleague but that may rub slightly against unconscious stereotypes of the good mother. In either case, the pregnant candidate risks leaving a negative impression.

While this kind of unconscious bias should be kept in mind by job interviewers who are making good faith efforts to take female candidates as seriously as they do male candidates, it was not, of course, the factor that scuttled my job search, and I am increasingly convinced that it is not all that difficult to hide even an advanced pregnancy. So long as one avoids dresses with bows and pleated bodices or T-shirts with arrows directing the eye downward, one's girth is as likely to

be taken for excess weight as it is for pregnancy (although this misperception, admittedly, may be no real advantage in the discrimination sweepstakes). But one has very little control over one's inability to travel to a campus interview.

This is the point at which I feel I should be reaching conclusions, laying out a set of guidelines for the profession's handling of pregnant job candidates, but I feel unqualified to do so. I understand the conditions of the job market, that waiting for one candidate to deliver a baby before bringing her on campus might mean losing another job candidate. I am sympathetic to those who say that a woman who chooses to become pregnant must take responsibility for the consequences of her actions. It was naive of me to assume that I would sail through pregnancy; I would never make this assumption about myself or anyone else again. Still, it does seem to me that hiring committees and departments as a whole would be well advised to have a policy in place to address this kind of contingency.<sup>4</sup> I know of one job candidate who scheduled an on-campus interview for early February, two weeks after the birth of her baby, only to be told that another candidate had got the job. In a misguided effort at consolation, the department chair informed the rejected candidate that she had been the top applicant for the job and that the only reason she had not got the offer was that she could not travel to campus immediately.

My own story ends happily, as I received a job offer in the middle of February. By this time, I was in the antenatal unit of the hospital, entirely preoccupied with achieving a state of calmness that would make the galloping bumps on the contraction monitor separate and flatten out. My daughter, luckily, had the good sense not to be born until three weeks before her scheduled due date. Because of my fortune in this regard, because I have a job when many of my friends with equal credentials do not, because of the support I enjoyed from my dissertation adviser and graduate chair throughout my spring ordeal—because of all these things, I feel very grateful. But I am still concerned about the way pregnancy affects women's job searches and, more generally, about the way family and academic careers combine. Should I decide to have a second child before achieving tenure, I expect I will be visited by some of the same concerns that played a role in the timing of my first pregnancy, most notably by a fear that being pregnant will make me seem less than serious about academic pursuits.<sup>5</sup> While my colleague's advocacy of concealment in the job search may have been justified on the grounds of exigency, I am not

sure that deception is the best means of bringing about change in either attitudes or policies. As an academic facing unemployment, however, I did not feel inclined to challenge the status quo.

Since starting my new job, I have had two experiences that have kept these issues in my mind. First, I have noticed that when I am traveling around campus with my daughter, my students do not recognize me. Clearly, when they see a woman with a baby, they do not see a professor. Second, I have got a faint impression that some of my new colleagues were a little disappointed that I felt the need to conceal my pregnancy, since this decision cast them in a bad light. They wish that I had had more faith in their ability not to let pregnancy influence the hiring process. I have to place this response against my experience of moving invisibly across campus with my daughter. Since my carrying a baby makes my students, at least, see Mother instead of Mother and Professor, I think I did the right thing in keeping my impending maternity under wraps. But I hope to see the profession evolve in such a way that this kind of camouflage—whether motivated by internalized prejudice against pregnant women or by lacunae in departmental policy—is soon perceived as a quaint vestige of a repressive past, as the workplace equivalent of the corset.

---

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>A 1970 Carnegie-American Council on Education survey of college and university faculty members found that married women have an average of 1.13 children, compared with 1.89 for married men (qtd. in Hamovitch and Morgenstern 635).

<sup>2</sup>Hamovitch and Morgenstern also find no evidence that child rearing decreases the productivity of academic women, positing that "women professionals with children very likely spend less time than childless women professionals on leisure activities" and that "women scholars with greater familial responsibilities, out of necessity born of limited time, use their working time more efficiently than those who are childless" (644). Fox and Faver, studying women social workers' research productivity, conclude that "the presence of children—particularly children at younger ages (preschool and age 5–13)—is positively related to women's productivity" (545). Kyvik's study of scientific publishing among men and women scientists also finds that women with children are more productive than women without children (154). Kyvik does find, however, that having children under age ten has a negative effect on women scientists' productivity that is not paralleled in men with young children. Kyvik's study counters others (such as the study of Cole and Zuckerman) that assert that women's lower productivity cannot be attributed to maternal responsibilities and suggests that child rearing causes women scientists to reach their peak of productivity at a later point (at age fifty to fifty-four) than do their male peers (whose productivity peaks between ages forty-five and forty-nine).

<sup>3</sup>Corse summarizes the literature on pregnant psychotherapists in her study of pregnant managers and their subordinates (28).

<sup>4</sup>See Harris for a discussion of the Pregnancy Discrimination Act of 1978, an amendment to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that prohibits employers from firing or refusing to hire or promote a woman just because she is going to have a baby.

<sup>5</sup>Williams, in her discussion of the arguments for equal treatment versus special treatment for pregnant women, provides a fascinating historical survey of the laws governing pregnant women, such as those that dictated that women stop working at a certain point in their pregnancies. Williams writes, "The pattern of rules telegraphed the underlying assumption: a woman's pregnancy signaled her disengagement from the workplace" (335).

---

## Works Cited

---

- Cole, Jonathan R., and Harriet Zuckerman. "Marriage, Motherhood, and Research Performance in Science." *Scientific American* Feb. 1987: 119–25.
- Corse, Sara J. "Pregnant Managers and Their Subordinates: The Effects of Gender Expectations on Hierarchical Relationships." *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* 26 (1990): 25–47.
- Davis, Diane E., and Helen S. Astin. "Life Cycle, Career Patterns, and Gender Stratification in Academe: Breaking Myths and Exposing Truths." *Storming the Tower: Women in the Academic World*. Ed. Suzanne Stiver Lie and Virginia E. O'Leary. New York: Nichols, 1990. 89–107.
- Eisenberg, Arlene, Heidi E. Murkoff, and Sandee E. Hathaway. *What to Expect When You're Expecting*. 2nd ed. New York: Workman, 1991.
- Fox, Mary Frank, and Catherine A. Faver. "Men, Women, and Publication Productivity: Patterns among Social Work Academics." *Sociological Quarterly* 26 (1985): 537–49.
- Hamovitch, William, and Richard D. Morgenstern. "Children and the Productivity of Academic Women." *Journal of Higher Education* 48 (1977): 633–45.
- Harris, Diane. "You're Pregnant, You're Out." *Working Woman* Aug. 1992: 48+.
- Kyvik, Svein. "Motherhood and Scientific Productivity." *Social Studies of Science* 20 (1990): 149–60.
- Williams, Wendy W. "Equality's Riddle: Pregnancy and the Equal Treatment/Special Treatment Debate." *Review of Law and Social Change* 8 (1984–85): 325–80.