

We Do Babies! The Trials, Tribulations, and Triumphs of Pregnancy and Parenting in the Academy

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Abstract:

The most awkward moment at that faculty meeting occurred when a certain senior colleague in the department replied, "Well, when my wife was pregnant, she gave birth during spring break and didn't miss a day of class." Despite backstage reassurances that these were unrealistic expectations, those who were pregnant experienced an unspoken pressure that failure to minimize the interference of impending parenthood on their careers threatened public impressions of their professionalism. The major component of this performance was the management of images and identities-the struggles of negotiating the integration and blurring of the boundaries between parent and professional; private lives and public roles; pregnant body and professional entity.

Keywords: pregnancy | motherhood | parenting | higher education | academic careers | women's studies

Article:

One might say that 2005-2006 was a productive time for us. In addition to the usual scholarship, we experienced another form of productionprocreation! Shortly into the spring semester, MK, the department chair, learned that four faculty (of eleven total) were pregnant. Eight of us (see Table 1) recently met to reflect upon the impact that multiple pregnancies had on our collective experience. We followed a three-step process. Initially, the group generated a list of important topics. Then, we recorded a two-hour, semi-structured conversation about our experiences. Finally, after transcribing and individually identifying themes, the group met again and decided on the following themes as the most important ones.¹ How we prepared for and enacted our performances (Goffman 238) emerged as important processes upon which to theoretically

ground the analysis of our experiences. Moreover, because gender was an integral part of the performances, doing gender (West and Fenstermaker 9) provided another important layer. Performing pregnancy and childbirth in the academy provides a unique opportunity to observe people doing gender. This process is particularly important given the increasing attention to family leave policies (Smith and Waltman 1-3), and the stress that work creates for mothers in academe (O'Laughlin and Bischoff 79). So, this is our story, or at least the most salient and compelling aspects of how we came to the realization that "we do babies."²

Preparing for the Performance: Structures and Precedents

According to Goffman, individuals present themselves in particular ways in an attempt to control others' impressions of them, and teams of individuals "cooperate to present to an audience a given definition of the situation" (238). This impression management occurs within an institutional context and is based partly on previously established norms for both the "back region," where the performance is planned, and "front region," where the performance is enacted. In our case, the faculty were performers, the department the team, and the performance consisted of pregnant faculty members in their joint roles as professors and soon-to-be mothers.

The most challenging aspects of the performance were navigating the institutional structures that were (not) in place to support maternity leaves and making sense of established precedents. Unclear policies (context) and precedents (norms) worked together to create expectations for how the group of pregnant women was to perform as "pregnant academics."

The challenges began shortly after MK informed the first-to-announce pregnant faculty of the university's "stop the clock" benefit, which meant individuals could add a year to their tenure clock for family-related issues. About this time, a senior colleague stated, in a faculty meeting, that his wife (a former department member) returned to work very quickly after birthing their child. Probably meant as a compliment to his wife, his comment suggested a departmental and academy norm regarding pregnancy. The group recalled the moment as follows:

MK: The most awkward moment at that faculty meeting occurred when a certain senior colleague in the department replied, "Well, when my wife was pregnant, she gave birth during spring break and didn't miss a day of class." And the pressure on the rest of you from that statement was appalling to me.

JA: We were also appalled by it. Everybody was.

MJ: It just lay there like the big golden egg it was.

MC: Those of us who were either pregnant or trying to get pregnant, when that was said, were like, "Great, I can't wait for the day when I announce my pregnancy."

JA: I had a big meltdown that day. I was walking upstairs, and I was panicked because I knew that I might be pregnant too.

MK: I believe the faculty member meant no harm and was simply proud of his wife but it implied that a dedicated junior faculty member would do the same.

Despite backstage reassurances that these were unrealistic expectations, those who were pregnant experienced an unspoken pressure that failure to minimize the interference of impending parenthood on their careers threatened public impressions of their professionalism.

By emphasizing the influence of power differentials, feminist scholars (e.g., DeFrancisco and Palczewski 24) provide an explanation of how one faculty member's comments would be taken as a powerful indicator of norms. In this case, the faculty member was a male, highly respected, long-time, full professor who would later vote on the tenure of each of the pregnant faculty members. By contrast, the pregnant faculty were female, junior faculty who had been in the department only a few years, or, in the case of the first woman to announce her pregnancy, only a few months. Not surprisingly, then, the pregnant faculty gave his comment considerable weight even though he was the only one to make such a statement, and no one else supported it.

Meanwhile, unbeknownst to MK, the college had adopted a familyfriendly policy that allowed for a one-semester one-course reduction as a tangible benefit for the immediate needs of parenthood. Dubbed the "phantom policy," it was ineffectively communicated to institutional constituents. Only because MC's husband served on the committee that wrote the policy was she aware of it. This put her in the awkward position of informing MK of the policy. MC recalled the tension involved in informing her boss of institutional policy, since she was also pregnant:

MC: When MK came in to talk to me about what I wanted to teach the next semester, and I was sweating, and you know, having to tell him I was pregnant. And he said, "No, there's no policy." And I said, "No, there is, really." And so we got on the web site to look for it, and it wasn't there. I was starting to feel like, like I made it up. So I had to end up calling the dean's office and have them send me a copy because they had pulled it down from their web site because the president of the university wanted a campus-wide policy.

MK recognized the awkwardness of the situation, saying, "It was embarrassing to find out about a policy from a faculty member." The phantom policy in tow, MK informed the first two faculty members, "Oh, and you get a reduced teaching load also." MK was able to inform the next two women to announce their pregnancies about both policies. Complicating matters more, the university system president learned that colleges were individually crafting policies and placed a moratorium on them. His campus-wide edict arrived just after MK finalized the negotiations with all of us. Fortunately, the dean of the college provided the resources necessary so that each faculty member could receive one course reduction at some point during the year.

Once the phantom policy was known, it provided welcomed institutional support to help deal with the unrealistically high expectations in the senior faculty member's comment:

JA: I remember the day I found out about the policy, I was like, AHHH [arms in the air], I'm so happy! I was so thrilled that there was something that we could use.... We had gone to the faculty meeting where that one comment set this high bar. And even though DD had had a choice, she had set the precedent of not taking any time off. [Senior faculty X] did not take any time off. So, you think, "I guess I'm not taking any time off."

On the surface, everyone was cooperative. On stage, no one publicly questioned whether the policy was sufficient or asked for more than it provided. Backstage, however, the pregnant faculty grumbled about the "phantom policy" and struggled with departmental precedents. They felt that if they "chose" to have a child, they needed to minimize the impact of that decision on their professional lives.

Enacting the Performance: Pregnant Bodies, Time, and Relationships

Our discussion also focused on several issues related to the enactment of the roles of the parent/professional. A main concern for the pregnant faculty was that the experience of being pregnant essentialized them. Their pregnant bodies displayed, for all to see, their femaleness, and they felt this significantly impacted their identities as teachers, researchers, and colleagues.

DD: [My husband] didn't tell anybody that he was going to have a baby and he could get away with that until we showed up at a party and I was . . . out to here (gesturing to belly). And they're going like "You're having a baby?" It was so obvious; I hated the inequity.

Our job is an intellectual one, yet the pregnant women felt their bodies lessened their credibility with students and colleagues. While trying to teach, for example, their pregnant bodies interrupted, distracted, and protruded into the workplace (Trethewey, "Disciplined." 438-439). They represented fertility and looming motherhood as well as potentially a lack of professional commitment.

Their pregnant bodies also seemed to signal to students that they lacked an ability to think and act rationally. They noted that, for the students, the pregnancy pervaded everything. Because the women were carrying babies in their bodies, the students thought they would be more maternal overall, carrying that sense of nurturance into the workplace. When those expectations were unfulfilled, the students were quick to blame the bodies, or "hormones."

DD: The students expect you to be the earth mommy, like somehow I am going to start forgiving them for things, like when they can turn stuff in, they can do less hard work.

JA: Oh, I know. When I was pregnant. I was teaching the large class, and I can't be lenient in that class. So the students expected me to be maternal, loving, nurturing, and I wasn't. [Laughter] "There, there, it's okay" [stroking back of hand]. So then, when I wasn't, it was like "I don't know what's wrong with her; it's because she's pregnant. She's hormonal."

At the same time that the pregnant faculty recognized the distraction that their bodies caused, they also attempted to exert resistance (Trethewey, "Resistance," 283-284) to the notion that their

pregnancies interrupted their ability to do their job by refusing to essentialize the experience. Their primary method of resistance was to complain to each other about their experiences, which, in turn, emboldened them to more actively draw students' attention to the absurdity of essentialism.

JA: So, and this was when I was pregnant with [first child], I was writing on the chalkboard and when I was done writing, I looked back at the class, and there were twenty five people staring right here (gestures toward belly) and not at all looking at what I had just written on the board. I literally said, "No, see, I wrote something on the board," just to show them what they were doing. And they went oh, ha-ha-ha. I felt like it was a completely objectifying experience. And it was very dehumanizing.

Making time for research is another significant aspect of performing our professional identities. Not surprising, then, part of our discussion focused on how we struggled to manage our time and modify our identities to "make room" for all of our roles. Many expressed feelings of guilt and anxiety caused by adjusting our scholarly and parental identities.

JA: I had my baby during finals week, so I felt like I had to get those papers graded. But then I felt guilty for having that need. You know, I should be enjoying this time with my newborn and looking lovingly into his eyes and really what I'm doing is I'm holding the baby in this arm, and I'm doing grading with the other hand. And I'm feeling guilty that this is not the picture of new motherhood.

DD: It's so paradoxical. Each part of my life is something valuable to me. I really love doing what I do. But I also need and love to be with my children, and when I'm not doing one I feel guilty, regardless. So if I'm not hanging out with my kids, I feel guilty. If I'm not doing my work, I feel guilty.

MF: I'm just not as able to be that productive a scholar anymore. And, I'm trying to change my identity, to being a great father and a great husband, and, for now, an okay scholar. But, that's hard. I mean, 'cause I feel like I've really lost something by being out of the mainstream of people publishing and contributing, and I just can't do it. It just isn't going to happen right now!

DD: What I've tried to do, MF, is accept that my identity, who I am, has to sort of be in flux. Sometimes I'm a really strong scholar. And, sometimes I just kind of float. And, I just have to accept that, that's who I am at least while the kids are really little.

We acknowledged that academia offers a flexibility that many other work worlds do not. But this flexibility became a source of anxiety as the parent/professionals worried that their absence from the office prevented them from publicly performing their work duties. Some felt that time spent in our departments symbolized productivity and dedication to the job. Several of us wished we had the time to have a nine-to-five presence in our offices.

JA: I'm doing better with this, but when I started to work here, I felt like I needed to be here at a certain time and I need to be here during certain hours. And I needed it to be known that I was here. That was not really a pressure that anyone put on me; that was more of an internal pressure. But you know you come in on Saturdays, and now I have a colleague, who on Friday night always says to me, "see you tomorrow." Not that I feel like "Oh, I have to be here to see him," but it does it kind of set that pattern.

DD: In academic life, what we should be focusing on is the outcome, what people produce as opposed to how we produce it or when or where you produce. So if a person needs to be gone for a child-related thing, but they're still getting their stuff done, I don't really care. I don't want to go knock on doors and see who's where, when. But I feel really bad, when I have to miss something because I need to be home for a kid getting off the bus.

MF: When I was a chair, I totally bought into the notion that you should be evaluated solely based on what you produced. The one thing that's different though is there's some sense of being in your office to be available to the ebb and flow of everyday life of students coming and going. There should be a presence. I feel like I'm violating that now.

LO: There were times when I felt pressured to be here. I didn't feel that my grad students should have to in any way suffer because of my [maternity] leave. One of my advisees even asked if she should put off taking her comps. I said, "NO! You can't do that. I can't let my choice interrupt your plans." So for me it was more the sort of the pressure from dealing with the grad students. Not that any of them pressured me. It was mostly internal.

Finally, faculty being simultaneously pregnant created new and rewarding relationships. As LO put it, a "sisterhood of professionals" developed for the pregnant faculty. However, this insider group inadvertently created an outsider group in which other colleagues felt excluded.

MC: The fact that we were all pregnant at a certain time and other folks had kids, maybe gave us the chance to expand relationships in certain ways.

LO: Yeah, a sisterhood of professionals. But also, I think that with the pregnancy and then the parenting, some tensions built up and strained relationships developed.

DD: I must say, I felt a little jealous. You all became such friends. You were all in Mommy Yoga together, or whatever it was. And I, for the only time in the last four, almost five years I thought, "Oh I wish I was pregnant" [laughter] so I could have the camaraderie.

MC: We asked you to try. You said "no." [laughter],

DD: It wasn't that strong of a pull. I wasn't that jealous. I was a little envious. Not in a bad way. It was cool to see the friendships develop. But it was also like, "Oh I wish that was something I could ..."

JA: That you would have had that. Yeah, I wish that for everybody. That they could go through [pregnancy] with colleagues. Because it really helped, being able to talk about what's happening to you. So RM you're going to have to hold out. Find a cadre of women to get pregnant with.

MC: You let me know and maybe I'll have another one too. [Laughter]

RM: One thing coming into this for me is, I'm not trying to get pregnant. I don't want to become a mom right now. And so for me, I struggled with how am I going to fit in if, you know, everyone else is actively trying and might not understand my position of "I really don't want that right now." But I was a little timid about admitting that.

MC: That is the opposite kind of pressure ...

DD: ... of what most working women feel. Yeah. That's just terrible.

Reflecting upon the Performance

Yes, it was a productive year. In addition to welcoming five children into our families, we learned a lot about ourselves from our experience of a situation that administrators fear. In our conversation, it became evident that "doing babies" was a legitimate way of performing the professoriate. The major component of this performance was the management of images and identities-the struggles of negotiating the integration and blurring of the boundaries between parent and professional; private lives and public roles; pregnant body and professional entity.

We do not want to pretend that we implemented a strategic plan that worked for everyone-we made it up as we went along, and we made some mistakes. One year later, through this process of reflection, we start to see what worked and what did not. Some of us perceived that historic workplace norms discouraged the pursuit of available accommodations by pregnant faculty. As a result, the institutionalization of policies was essential to enable the pregnant faculty to obtain a personal accommodation. We stress that policies must be clearly written, visible, and the organization and its members must actively work to construct cultures that support the use of such policies (Smith and Waltman 7).

Our experience also highlighted how important it is to have a support system. As simple as it sounds, we encourage faculty to talk with colleagues, students, and administrators about the experiences and demands of work-life issues. Ignoring, minimizing, and essentializing pregnancy will only maintain the status quo. Doing gender and doing babies means challenging that status quo; it means actively participating in the (re)construction of the professor(iate).

Footnote

Notes

1 Participants in the focus group took turns transcribing what resulted in tony eight single-spaced pages of talk. Participants all read the transcript individually, identifying themes, and then broke into two groups to further analyze major themes. This essay was then written collaboratively.

2 As a result of our experience, we felt a bit more prepared to support our newest faculty member-who, by the way, gave birth to her first child just before the fall semester began! When the newly hired faculty member visited campus and intimated to several of us that she was nervous to tell MK that she was pregnant, DD responded. "Don't worry; We do babies!"