

Pregnant women face hostile behavior when applying for jobs, new study shows

Pregnant women may still face judgment and obstacles to getting jobs, shows two recent studies by George Mason University and Rice University professors.

The studies, co-written by Eden King of Mason, Michelle Hebl of Rice and their collaborators, explored different interpersonal reactions that pregnant women face in their daily lives. It was recently published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*.

In one study, 81 adults evaluated a pregnant or non-pregnant applicant for male- or female-typed jobs. Those who provided evaluations for more traditionally “masculine” jobs such as corporate lawyer, janitor, high school math teacher or general surgeon were more judgmental toward the pregnant woman (for example, agreed more with the statements that the applicant “would complain a lot” or “would expect to have their work done for them”) than when evaluating the same applicant for positions such as a maid, kindergarten teacher or pediatrician.

In another study, research assistants entered 110 retail stores and followed a script in which they either applied for a job or browsed for a gift, sometimes wearing a prosthesis that made them appear pregnant. The research assistants, and a secret observer, rated salespersons’ hostile behaviors (e.g., rude, anxious, short) and patronizing behaviors (e.g., diminutive names, overfriendliness, touching).

“The Pregnancy Discrimination Act of 1978 prohibits formal discrimination against pregnant women in all federal jobs and in companies with 15 or more employees,” says King, assistant professor of psychology. “Unfortunately, when people suppress their discrimination in one arena, it may emerge in another—subtle interpersonal cues such as avoidance of eye contact or lack of warmth.”

The study found that the women who asked about job opportunities when wearing the pregnancy prosthesis were faced with significantly more interpersonal hostility than when the same women appeared as non-pregnant and inquired about jobs.

In contrast, the study also showed that pregnant women who stayed within more traditional bounds—shopping—experienced overtly patronizing behavior. King and Hebl’s results showed that pregnant women who went into retail stores asking for help finding a gift more often found themselves victims of behavior such as overfriendliness, physical touching and being called “honey” or “sweetie.”

“The question we also have to ask is: Does being overly nice have negative consequences? And we’ve seen that it does. These reactions serve to maintain traditional gender roles, which can inhibit women’s success both in and outside of the workplace,” King says.

The results of both studies suggest that pregnant women who pursue jobs—especially traditionally “masculine” jobs—may not be formally turned down, but still risk being discriminated against.

“This research highlights the challenges facing working mothers and suggests that current policies might not be as effective as hoped,” says King.

Source: George Mason University

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