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The Elephant (-Sized Belly) in the Room

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Synopsis

Had I known about the grim employment statistics facing mothers in academia I might have chosen a different path. I share my story of navigating the academic job market while visibly pregnant and connect my experiences to the wider issue of biases against motherhood in academia. Ultimately I was lucky to get a tenure-track job right out of graduate school, but the environment I found myself in was hostile to me as a new mother. There has been much interest in increasing gender diversity of the professorate, especially in mathematics; it is valuable to look specifically at how motherhood and the timing of child-rearing affect the underrepresentation of women at all levels of higher education. I conclude by offering several ideas promoting justice and fairness for academic families and practical improvements to increase both the hiring and promotion of caregivers.

My career inspiration to become a mathematics professor was my undergraduate advisor. She had been hired while she was still “ABD” with a small child. Her second child came quickly afterwards, yet she still achieved tenure at a prestigious small liberal arts college. I am sure there were some sleepless nights and stressful days, but I saw little of that from my perspective as her student and babysitter. I had a strong role model, and never questioned my ability to achieve the same great feat.

I am now a tenured associate professor of mathematics at a small liberal arts school who is married with two lovely children. I hope that I am able to inspire another generation of students that they too can pursue a faculty job and have children, but I also have to acknowledge that I have been very lucky. Even in my success, there have been struggles, conflict, and even times when I considered leaving academia.

Pregnant at the Joint Meetings

In my first job search right out of graduate school I received 30 first round interview requests from the 60 schools I applied to. These interviews would all happen at the Joint Mathematical Meetings in January over the course of three and a half days. In the end, I only accepted 24 of the interviews because I was unsure of how my energy level would hold up. Under any circumstances, that many interviews in a small amount of time would be grueling, but I would have the added challenge of being five months pregnant. My daughter was due in May, two months after my scheduled thesis defense. I had primarily applied for jobs at small liberal arts colleges because it was important to me to teach small classes, develop close relationships with students, and be part of a community of learning.

While other female friends agonized over the advantages and disadvantages of wearing wedding rings to interviews, I figured my choice was clear. If interviewers realized that I was pregnant, I thought it was a good idea to signal that I was also married. However, research shows that my assumption may not have been correct. Marriage itself is a disadvantage for women in the academic workforce, lowering the chances of getting a tenure-track position by 17% compared to unmarried women [6]. Employers may worry that a married woman will be less committed, or less likely to accept or stay in a position if their husband cannot find a job in the area. In scientific disciplines, being married with young children presents a stronger disadvantage. “Such married mothers are 35% less likely to get tenure-track jobs compared with married fathers of young children. The same women are 33% less likely to get jobs compared with unmarried women who aren’t the parents of young children” [6, pages 28–29]. Incidentally, this same disadvantage is not seen for male job seekers; married men with young children are the most likely group to receive tenure track job offers [6, page 43].

In preparation for my interviews, my mother took me shopping for a maternity suit. The seal grey suit we chose is still the most expensive garment that I have ever purchased, including my wedding dress. I didn’t have much hope of hiding my growing belly, but my suit was stylish, impeccably tailored, and made me feel confident. Hoping for some level of comfort, I also invested in supportive shoes and a rolling laptop bag.

In truth, my memories of the meetings that year are a blur. I had reserved a room in the conference hotel to decrease how much walking I would need to do—this allowed me to indulge in both room service and naps when I could fit them in. I carried snacks and antacids to eat between interviews. Most of my interviews had gone very well. I was prepared, naturally gregarious, and full of big ideas. Many of the people who interviewed me made a point of coming to see my research talk, stopping by my poster in a poster session, or seeking me out in social settings. Some search committee members shared encouraging comments with me. For example, I was told by several interviewers that I was their first choice candidate, and another told me that my teaching statement was one of the best that they had read in their career.

I chose not to acknowledge my pregnancy during my interviews, and I knew it was illegal for them to ask me about it. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 states that it is “unlawful employment practice for an employer to fail or refuse to hire an individual or otherwise to discriminate against any individual with respect to his compensation, terms, conditions, or privileges of employment, because of such individual’s race, color, religion, sex, or national origin”. It is additionally clarified in the definitions section of the document that the implications of the term “*because of sex* include[s], but [is] not limited to, because of or on the basis of pregnancy, childbirth, or related medical conditions; and women affected by pregnancy, childbirth, or related medical conditions shall be treated the same for all employment-related purposes” [2]. I idealistically believed that this law would be enough to protect me, that hiring committees would look beyond my pregnancy. If a college decided not to hire me because I was pregnant, I figured that it would not be a place I wanted to work anyway. Later I wondered if it would have made a difference if I had been able to share that my husband was planning to be a stay-at-home father, a fact they may have found reassuring if they were concerned about my ability to fulfill job duties with a baby.

In the weeks of waiting after the meetings, this idealism was challenged. I only heard back from one of the schools I had interviewed with. Although it is of course possible that my interviews had not gone as well as I’d perceived them, I spent much of this time worrying about bias, intended or otherwise, and playing what-if games. (In comparison, during a future job search when I was not pregnant, approximately a third of my Joint Meetings interviews resulted in campus interview requests.)

When I asked for feedback later in the interview cycle I received bland responses about having many qualified candidates to choose from, and a comment or two about “fit.” Indeed fit seems to be an important quality considered in job searches and the hiring process, but it is quite intangible and hard to describe. David Perlmutter in [10] tries to demystify fit, but it seems that often it is used as a catchphrase or even a rhetorical slight-of-hand that hiring committees employ to protect the cultural and demographic homogeneity of their institutions. Sensoy and DiAngelo offer a critical look at various such moves employed to protect Whiteness in [11]; most of the points made therein apply to all aspects of diversity, including gender and parental status.

Campus Interviews with Swollen Feet

As a pregnant job candidate, I received only two second-round campus interviews, one of which resulted from a phone interview instead of face-to-face. The first on-campus interview I attended was at a place I’ll call “Presidential College,” a small mid-atlantic liberal arts college. The woman who picked me up at the airport was one of my interviewers from the Joint Meetings; she did a visible double take when she met me at the baggage claim. The campus interview went very well—I was given very positive feedback. As I was being dropped back off at the airport, a search committee member told me that there was another candidate coming in, but that I had set the bar so high, she couldn’t imagine that I wouldn’t get the offer. Earlier in the day, when the department chair updated me on the search timeline he told me that the dean would be contacting me on Friday, and then corrected himself saying that the dean would call the “successful candidate” on Friday. I assumed this was a Freudian slip, projecting his subconscious decision that I would be the successful candidate, but in the end, it was not to be. I did not get the phone call I was waiting for on Friday. When I contacted the department chair for an update; he told me that they had decided to make an offer to a candidate who already had full-time college teaching experience.

Would I have gotten a job offer from Presidential College if I had not been pregnant? There is truly no way to know. Most search committee discussions are conducted behind closed doors. Although it is illegal not to hire a woman *because* she is pregnant, it is nearly impossible to prove that her pregnancy was the reason she was not hired. According to Kim Steiner, HR director at a

small liberal arts college, unless someone directly tells a candidate that their pregnancy status is the reason they weren't chosen or an employer rescinds an offer only after learning a candidate is pregnant, there is usually no legal recourse (personal correspondence, 2017). Often a search produces several qualified and well-liked candidates; in such circumstances it may be hard for the committee to overlook the elephant (-sized belly) in the room.

Later I would learn that members of the search committee at Presidential College were shocked when I arrived for my campus interview visibly pregnant. Although they had met me in-person, they told me that they hadn't noticed that I was pregnant during our first interview. Karen Kelsey, on her popular academic advice website *The Professor is In*, recommends that you let the person making the arrangements for your campus visit know that you are expecting [4]. Doing this certainly would have minimized my interviewer's shock upon seeing me on campus, as well as eliminating the possible perception that I had been hiding something from them. Again, it is difficult to know if this would have made a difference. As Kelsey says:

The demands of the job market are different, and frankly, the stakes higher, for the pregnant job candidate. There are so many assumptions about pregnancy, motherhood, and women that come into play when the highly cogitized realm of an academic department comes face to face with a conspicuously pregnant job candidate, assumptions that rarely work in the candidate's favor. Basically, bodies tend to make academics uncomfortable, and the pregnant body is hard to ignore [4].

Advice around being pregnant on the academic job market is hard to find. After all, only a small portion of all academics have ever encountered this particular issue. My sources of advice in graduate school were primarily men and a female faculty member who had waited until after tenure to have children. The idea of giving fair warning to interviewers never came up in any conversations with my mentors. It is telling that a full five years after its initial posting, Kelsey's blog is still actively receiving comments from women wanting advice. The comments are filled with stories describing campus interviews ranging from successful to nightmarish. This may be part of the reason that some female graduate students report that "we were told when we were getting ready to go on the job market, you can't be pregnant, You just can't" [1].

My second on-campus interview resulted from a phone interview at “St. Somewhere’s College.” The committee members had planned to conduct interviews at the Joint Meetings, but their flight had gotten cancelled by a blizzard. I showed up on campus at the beginning of February, seven months pregnant. I wore a winter coat borrowed from my husband since none of my winter coats fit me at that point. It was not the most complementary look and it was made more awkward by the fact that one of my male interviewers was wearing the exact same coat. The sidewalks on campus were icy, and one of the interviewers insisted that I hold his arm while walking outside because he was terrified that I would fall on the ice. He acknowledged that it was strange to touch a job candidate in any context, but continued to insist. I eventually agreed, despite the fact that it was an awkward request. I have to admit that it was also a little bit sweet. My campus interview went well and I was offered a tenure-track job within a day of returning home.

When the dean from St. Somewhere’s called to offer me the job, I requested to start at the beginning of the Spring semester so I could start my first faculty position with a nine-month-old instead of a four-month-old. After all, since a tenure-track position is potentially a lifetime investment it seemed that a delay of one semester shouldn’t be an unreasonable request to accommodate. In some ways it would be a bargain, a maternity leave that they wouldn’t have to pay for! After a brief discussion, both the dean and the department agreed to this. My delayed start date was possible in this case because a faculty member was on phased retirement, and only taught in the fall semester. St. Somewhere’s willingness to accommodate this request was supportive to my dual-role as academic and mother, but it did not accurately predict how family-friendly I would ultimately find the campus.

My daughter was due in May, which is relatively helpful on an academic calendar. Women who find out they are pregnant after they receive a job offer are in a more difficult position, and institutional policies may not be helpful. The Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) grants up to twelve weeks of unpaid leave that can be taken any time within a year after the birth of a child. However, an employee does not become eligible for FMLA leave until they have completed a full year at a job [17]. This obviously would not help a candidate who is due near the beginning of the semester. Some state schools allow faculty to bank sick days that can be used during maternity leave to replace some pay (e.g. [9] and [12]); this also wouldn’t help a new hire.

Academia has a punishing clockwork schedule. Classes have to be taught and new hires usually correspond directly to courses needing to be covered in the fall. There are too many stories about women returning to the classroom weeks, or even days after giving birth. In a 2002 study, a stunning 42% of female academics reported that they returned to work earlier than they wanted to after the birth of a child [1].

Rough Landing at St. Somewhere's

There were many ways that my new workplace's history and culture affected my experiences as a young faculty mother. St. Somewhere's was founded by and is still affiliated with an order of Catholic priests. Until the 1970s most of the school's professors were ordained Catholic priests (and so they were both celibate and male). The mathematics department had been one of the first departments to be made up entirely of lay people, and by the time I arrived on campus in 2009 there were only a few priest-scholars left in the faculty as a whole. Strangely, there had been a 27-year gap between hires in the mathematics department; during this time the department consisted of four tenured male professors with PhDs and two female instructors with masters degrees. This meant that for a long period in the department's history, the men taught major classes and the women taught service courses. The first two people hired after this gap were both women with PhDs and small children. My male colleagues all had adult children and wives who had stayed at home for at least part of their children's upbringing.

Not only were their family systems different than mine, but also the amount of publishable research expected at the beginning of their faculty careers was markedly different from what was now required for tenure and promotion. My older colleagues had not been financially incentivized to go up for promotions. After all, the salary structure was still historically influenced by a time when all teaching staff had taken vows of poverty! I often felt that my colleagues did not understand the time commitment needed in either my role as a parent or a researcher. This quote about "competency bias" from a fellow academic mother accurately reflects my memories of that time [15]: "I am constantly struggling against a perception that I'm not doing enough," says a University of California at Davis professor, "But I'm madly juggling in a way a lot of men can't even imagine."

Departmental culture created further problems for me, both as a scholar and a mother. I experienced firsthand what the literature shows; “the academic department plays a strong role in the ways in which individuals are or are not able to experience work-life balance” [13]. As a new faculty member it was difficult to navigate the fact that the department valued teaching over research in a way which was out of step with the rest of the campus expectations. Although the St. Somewhere’s faculty handbook lists the requirement that each faculty member posts two office hours per week, the mathematics department interpreted this as two office hours per class taught, requiring each of us to schedule eight office hours per week. Even though they had official office hours, the other members of the department kept their office doors open to students at all times. I faced pressure to do this as well, both from my colleagues and from students who had grown to expect constant access to their professors. My office door had a large window in it which I had covered with dark paper for privacy—in my first semester I needed at least two breaks to pump breast milk per day. This window covering was a source of conflict, as it emphasized that my door was closed and people “couldn’t tell if I was there”. However, I needed time in my office to get uninterrupted work done since it was difficult for me to get work done at home with a small child.

When we relocated for me to start my position at St. Somewhere’s, my husband was offered the opportunity to telecommute and keep his computer analyst position. I had anticipated having a stay-at-home parent during my first semester, but having two incomes was a better option. However, this left us scrambling for child care only a few weeks before the semester started. After many phone calls, I found a center with a spot for our daughter that seemed to be a good solution. Luckily, we weren’t in a large metro area where waitlists for quality child care are years long.

In the first week of classes, my daughter who had never experienced the petri dish of daycare before came down with pneumonia. I was also sick with both a sinus infection and a double ear infection. Sleep-deprived, feverish, and trying to keep my daughter hydrated so she wouldn’t need to be admitted to the hospital, I turned to my new colleagues for support. They told me that it was never a good idea to have a substitute at the beginning of the semester because it would change my relationship with the students and might take me weeks to “get things back on track”. College policy allows instructors to

cancel classes in case of illness or emergency, but the mathematics department historically covered each other's classes in cases of illness instead. They suggested I soldier on through my classes, but granted that I should probably cancel office hours and go home to rest. Unsurprisingly, teaching while quite ill can also interfere with developing relationships in the classroom. It was a struggle to regain students' confidence, I was nowhere near my best when I was making first impressions.

After my first year there, my husband decided to take advantage of the school's generous tuition benefits to attend my institution full-time to get his teaching certification. During this time, my daughter was attending a preschool across the street from campus. Due to our family schedule and the fact that we only had one car, when the weather was cold or rainy I would bring my toddler to my office for about half an hour at the end of the day. She was (almost always) quiet both in my office and the hallways. Nonetheless this caused conflict as an additional reason that I would keep my door closed while I was in the building. Colleagues fretted that "bringing my daughter so frequently to my building would make people take me less seriously" and that "I needed to be seen on campus as a professor, not as a mother". When I asked a colleague for advice on selecting letter writers from outside of my department for my second-year review, he commented that I needed to make sure that I chose someone whose office wasn't in my building so they wouldn't have seen me with my daughter as frequently. My colleagues were expecting me to engage in behaviors classified as *bias avoidance* by educational and labor researchers Colbeck and Drago: "Faculty engage in bias avoidance when they delay, minimize, or hide family commitments to escape potential reprisals from colleagues or supervisors." Bringing children to campus is classified as an act of *bias resistance*, which, if everyone did it, would reduce the possible stigma from having a family [1].

Maternity Leave

When my colleague announced that she was pregnant with her third child, an older male professor came into my office to lament that he "couldn't believe she would commit career suicide like this". In the same conversation he asked me if I was planning to have more children. I am not sure what answer he expected given his earlier exclamation about career suicide.

It is in part because of reactions like this that female faculty members often decide to have fewer children than they otherwise would have wanted. In a 2001-2002 survey, 25.5% of female tenure-stream faculty reported having a smaller family size than their ideal (whereas only 12.6% of men reported similarly). This survey also showed that 12.7% of female tenure-track professors make the choice to delay a second (and presumably subsequent) child(ren) until after tenure [1].

St. Somewhere College had no official maternity leave policy. Individuals were left to negotiate directly with the administration. This led to very different outcomes for different individuals. Since tenured faculty had both more leverage and job protection, nontenured faculty tended to get less generous leave terms. My (untenured) math department colleague's due date was very close to the beginning of the sixteen-week semester. She decided to take twelve weeks of unpaid FMLA leave. Since there were only four weeks remaining in the semester, it was clear that she couldn't teach classes that semester. She proposed to conduct research or be given an alternate assignment in service to the college during these weeks. The college countered by offering her four additional weeks of unpaid leave. She couldn't afford to miss another month's pay, and argued that her job description consisted of more than just teaching. Only after fighting a prolonged battle with both the administration and HR did she receive her full salary for an alternate non-teaching assignment.

Later that year, a maternity policy was proposed for insertion into St. Somewhere's faculty handbook. It would end the ad-hoc nature of maternity leave negotiation and ensure faculty members across departments received equal treatment. Senior faculty members argued against the policy during open debate, some of them complaining that this policy wasn't available for them when their children were born. The proposal was voted down. To this day the faculty handbook at St. Somewhere's doesn't mention that employees are eligible for FMLA leave, in violation of FMLA regulations, which require any employer which produces an employee handbook to include this information [16, §825.300(a)]. It is not unusual for faculty handbooks to violate these regulations; "[i]n a recent survey of 100 U.S. colleges' and universities' maternity and childrearing leave policies for faculty, over one-third of the respondents had policies that either did not comply with state and federal laws or were highly likely not to comply in their implementation" [15].

A Soft Place to Land

After three years at St. Somewhere's I was no longer sure that I wanted to work in academia. However, I decided to seek another faculty position and give a new environment a chance. This time, not being pregnant on the job market and having several years of experience under my belt, I had a much more successful job search. I was in the enviable position of choosing between multiple job offerers. At this time, my daughter was four years old. In one of my prospective departments, the only department member with small children was a brand new father. This fact gave me significant pause, and I ended up choosing the department where several colleagues had small children.

It was only in contrast to my new position at "Current College" that I could see some of the subtle ways in which St. Somewhere's College was not friendly towards mothers and families. At St. Somewhere's, faculty socials consisted of an open bar with heavy hors d'oeuvres after faculty meetings or catered meals where families were not invited. I could rarely stay for long at the socials because they interfered with daycare pickup. At Current College, faculty socials are held Friday afternoons after school; bringing children and families are both invited and encouraged. Older children watch the younger children and they all play together in the campus garden, or in the host's backyard. Instead of concerns that children not be visible on campus, faculty children are a common sight on public school snow days. On such days one can find a table of children in the cafeteria with a rotating cast of parents as faculty disappear to teach their classes. Some days the easiest solution for me has been to bring a sick child to class with me; there have been no negative repercussions for this choice, only concern for my children. Colleagues have offered to watch my children during classes, and have explicitly invited me to bring my newborn to meetings.

There are certainly ways my current school doesn't support me as a mother. For instance, our faculty meetings start at 4:30pm on Wednesday afternoons, causing me to miss dinner and bedtime once a month. However, I have certainly found a better culture here for me as both a mathematician and as a mother. I didn't know that I wanted a second child until I was in an environment where I felt supported as a parent. I submitted my tenure and promotion portfolio when my second child was three-months old without fear that a maternity course release might damage my chances to receive tenure

and promotion. For the first year of my son's life, I came home to presents on my back door stoop ranging from hand-me-downs to freshly baked bread. We have found a place where my family fits as a package deal.

Moving Towards Justice

On hiring committees, departments often state that they are seeking a candidate who has the "right fit", but the concept of "fit" is often poorly defined. Although choosing a new colleague who understands the mission and expectations of the college is essential to faculty retention, a narrow view of fit may eliminate a department's opportunities to add diversity. In the case of evaluating female candidates, over-reliance on fit carries the danger of perpetuating a historically male status quo and can particularly harm mothers. Instead of expecting that applicants all "fit the mold", I strongly believe that departments and schools should focus on how they need to change and grow in order to better welcome new hires and their families.

Simple and effective interventions exist to reduce bias in hiring and advancement. First, anyone reading resumes should be trained to ignore family-related gaps in candidates' histories. Second, tenure and promotion committees can be given clear instructions to not raise their expectations for research output if an applicant spent time with a "stopped tenure clock" because of childrearing [15]. Exposing faculty and administrators to sources such as *"Hitting the Maternal Wall"* by Joan C. Williams [14] can encourage decision-makers to consider the effects and results of the implicit bias against caregivers. Programs to educate department chairs, search committees and tenure and promotion committees about the effects of bias towards caregivers have been successful (see the STRIDE program at University of Michigan [5] as an example).

Another initiative proposed to reduce bias against married women is to have a university-wide proactive plan to help families solve "two-body problems" with centralized funding [15]. This could specifically help mothers in mathematics, since in the 1990s it was documented that 80% of female mathematicians were married to fellow scientists or engineers [3]. If such a regime were in place, it would reduce the chances that a woman turns down a position because of the career needs of an academic partner.

There is a silver lining to academic motherhood and the job hunt: having children over the age of six does not decrease a woman's chance of getting hired in a tenure-track position. Older children in the household may even help, since this signals to employers that a woman is done having children [6]. This suggests in turn that we should support women who have children during graduate school, as having children early in their graduate school career may be a way to avoid the bias against care-givers on the job market. To effectively accomplish this, significant financial and childcare support for new-parent graduate students must be provided to ensure they finish their degrees. Without a central place of record, demographic data on graduate student parents can be difficult to obtain. We do know that in 2009 it was estimated that only 13% of graduate students in the University of California system became parents before graduation [7]. Academia also needs to offer more support for family commitments during postdoctoral appointments since this is a common waypoint between graduate school and tenure-track careers [8]. Recognizing that job-seeking mothers with older children may experience less bias, institutions could also establish re-entry programs to assist mothers who decide to return after having left the academic pipeline to have children [15].

Another important intervention which would help recruit and retain female faculty members is offering on-campus daycare. Onsite childcare helps faculty of both genders with young children, but it also increases educational access for undergraduate and graduate students with young children and gives opportunities for students studying early childhood education. The presence of children on campus increases opportunities for bias resistance, normalizes families, and reminds hiring committees how many successful working mothers are already present on campus. A daycare center can increase the college's interaction with the broader community in many positive ways. The daily routine of dropping children off at a common time builds community among faculty parents and decreases the isolation that many working parents feel. When Current College closed their campus daycare center, it drastically changed how much time I could spend on campus. I spent an additional hour of driving every day, and had to pick my child up an hour earlier in the evenings.

Ultimately the ideas I listed above are all stop-gap measures, which will be needed as long as we lack a culture that supports women and mothers.

But it does not end with women and mothers. Jim Lewis, long time department chair of the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, once told me, “To make an environment better for women, you need to make the environment better for everyone”. It follows that to make the environment better for *mothers* we need to make the environment better for everyone. Everyone will benefit when a departmental and institutional culture exists that supports all people, including those who face elder-care issues, cope with long or chronic illnesses, or simply want to start a family. “Our colleges and universities cannot expect to hire and retain the most talented faculty unless they recognize that faculty are whole persons with commitments to a variety of people, organizations, and interests beyond academe” [1]. A work-life balance that allows faculty members to develop passions, have distractions, and nurture their families leads to happier faculty who will make a greater positive impact on their college communities.

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