Working while pregnant: how women cope with unsupportive organisations

"So I started busting my butt at work. And I started working that much harder . . . so I felt I took on even more. I was working that much harder because I felt like I had to for everyone to feel comfortable with the fact that I'm pregnant, I'm having a baby . . . Because if [my boss] thought that I wasn't going to be as driven, then maybe I wasn't the right person for the position."   — Pregnant worker study participant #45

Although pregnancy can be a wonderful and exciting time in women's lives, existing research suggests that pregnancy is not always viewed positively in work settings. Unfortunately, supervisors, coworkers, and subordinates may hold stereotypes that negatively affect pregnant women at work. In two recent papers, we investigated how working women view their pregnancy in the workplace and manage potentially negative perceptions associated with it.

In a 2015 paper, we started by interviewing pregnant workers to better understand their concerns balancing pregnancy and their job. Truth be told, we went into the study suspecting that the monumental change of becoming pregnant would drive women's concerns regarding work. We discovered, instead, that most women claimed that their perceptions of themselves had not changed substantially during pregnancy — rather, their concerns were focused on other people viewing them differently. Specifically, 80 per cent of the women we interviewed were concerned that their professional image or other people's perceptions of their competence and character would be damaged at work due to their pregnancy.

The women we interviewed were concerned both about stigmatisation and discrimination as well as their professional image at work. They did not want to be considered any less valuable at work just because they were pregnant and about to become a mother. And, in response, they engaged in two types of behaviours aimed at maintaining their pre-pregnancy professional image. The first we called *image maintenance*; these are behaviours aimed at maintaining and preserving the pre-pregnancy professional image. Women reported maintaining pre-pregnancy pace at work, not requesting special accommodations, shortening maternity leave, and going the extra mile in order to maintain positive perceptions in the eyes of others. For example, one woman said: "I definitely made sure that — it was so tempting to call in sick so many times — but I always made sure that I was actually at work, and not using pregnancy as an excuse, I guess. I probably could have taken a few more sick days than I did, but I didn't want them to start thinking, "Oh, see—she can't handle it."

The second behaviour we called *decategorisation*: these are behaviours aimed at avoiding negative outcomes by hiding their pregnancy or dodging the issue. Although we do not feel that women should *have to* hide their pregnancy or work harder to overcome stereotypes associated with pregnancy, we did find that they are doing so to avoid repercussions at work. For example, one women expressed her concern by saying: "I didn't want to tell them. You know, at a small firm, you think about if you're pregnant, you don't want to be let go . . . That's why I didn't want to tell them — my fear of their hiring someone to replace me."

In addition, we wanted to understand the consequences of these behaviours and thus, conducted an additional study to better understand the relationship between these behaviours and perceived discrimination, burnout, and the likelihood to return to work. We found that those who engage in image maintenance (i.e., maintaining pre-pregnancy pace at work, not requesting special accommodations, shortening maternity leave, and going the extra mile) perceived less discrimination, burnout and were more likely to go back to work after maternity leave. The decategorisation strategy did not influence these outcomes; however, when women felt devaluation at work because of their pregnancy, they also experienced more burnout and perceived discrimination.

In a [second paper](), we wanted to better understand the implications of these behaviours on stress—particularly in unsupportive work environments. Unfortunately, organisations vary to the degree that they are supportive of employees' family lives and we felt that unsupportive environments may be particularly difficult for pregnant women to navigate. We also wanted to better understand why image maintenance strategies seem to have a positive influence on outcomes such as burnout and return to work. We hypothesised that women in unsupportive environments would engage in these strategies more and that the choice of strategy would influence changes in these stress-related outcomes.

We conducted this study by asking women how supportive their workplaces were and to indicate how much work-family conflict (where work gets in the way of family time), family-work conflict (where family gets in the way of work), and work stress they were experiencing at the beginning of their pregnancy. Next, we asked women to indicate how much they engaged in image maintenance and decategorisation behaviours. Finally, we measured work-family conflict, family-work conflict and work stress at the end of the pregnancy.

Results suggested that women in unsupportive environments experience greater work-family conflict and stress at the beginning of the pregnancy and are more likely to engage in both image maintenance and decategorisation behaviours. We also found that the type of coping strategy they chose is important because decategorisation behaviours increase work-family conflict during pregnancy while image maintenance behaviours — because they increase work engagement — decrease work-family conflict and work stress.

Consider the opening quote from one of our participants. Her experience highlights the concerns and strategies many women employ during pregnancy to manage impressions and mitigate stress. Taken together, we found that women are highly concerned about their image at work when they become pregnant and thus, engage in strategies to manage their image. These findings run counter to prevailing stereotypes that suggest that pregnant women and mothers are not as engaged at work. Our findings also suggest that unsupportive environments are particularly damaging to pregnant women who begin their pregnancies with greater levels of stress and are more likely to engage in image management behaviours.

However, pregnant employees are not simply waiting for the organisations to fix these environments; in managing their professional image at work, they are able to take matters into their own hands, and in some cases minimise the negative impact of their unsupportive environment on their own work-family conflict and stress. Perhaps, though, we are asking too much of these pregnant coworkers, supervisors, and subordinates. While it is inspiring that many pregnant women successfully manage their image concerns in the workplace, we hope that more organisations will relieve pregnant women of this burden and create family supportive environments where these concerns aren't raised in the first place.

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Notes:

- *This blog post is based on the authors' papers [Managing the harmful effects of unsupportive organizations during pregnancy](), Journal of Applied Psychology, 2018, 103(6), 631-643; and [Professional Image Maintenance: How Women Navigate Pregnancy in the Workplace](), by Laura Little, Virginia Smith Major,*

Amanda S. Hinojosa and Debra L. Nelson, Academy of Management Journal, 2015, Vol. 58, No. 1
- *This blog post gives the views of its author(s), not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.*
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Laura Little is Synovus Director of the Institute for Leadership Advancement and associate professor in the department of management at the University of Georgia's Terry College of Business.

Amanda Hinojosa is an assistant professor of management in the Howard University School of Business. Her research focuses on diversity, the intersection of work and family, leader-follower relations, and employee job search and recruitment. In 2016 her research on professional image maintenance among pregnant women was recognised as the Best Paper in the Academy of Management Journal. This paper was also recognised as a finalist for the Rosabeth Moss Kanter award for work-family research. Dr. Hinojosa has taught courses in organisational behaviour, human resource management, staffing and compensation. She earned her Ph.D. from Texas Tech University.

Sam Paustian-Underdahl is an assistant professor of management at Florida State University. She's also a researcher and consultant whose work is dedicated to enhancing employee and organisational well-being and effectiveness. Her research focuses on the work-family interface, gender and diversity in organisations, and leadership, in the context of work and organisations. She holds a B.S. in psychology from the University of Georgia, as well as a M.A. in organisational psychology and a PhD in organisational science from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Previously, she was employed at Florida International University (FIU) as an assistant professor of management, where she was named a Top Scholar in 2015, and was awarded Best Professor and Best Course teaching awards by FIU MBA students in 2017 and 2018.

Kate P. Zipay is an assistant professor of management at the University of Oregon's Lundquist College of Business, and is a graduate of the management department at University of Georgia's Terry College of Business. Prior to pursuing her doctoral degree, she worked in public accounting as an auditor at a Big Four accounting firm. Her research examines the influence of life outside of work (e.g., leisure, hobbies, side jobs, family situations, etc.) on work performance and well-being; the social and emotional outcomes of justice, fairness, and leniency in the workplace; and the unique role of nostalgia in cultivating employee resources and building relationships.