

COMMENTARY

Maternal wall biases and the maybe baby effect

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Gabriel and colleagues' (2022) focal article addresses how academia's culture surrounding tenure, career success, and promotions can cause women scholars to question if they can simultaneously have both a successful career and a family. Balancing both a fulfilling career and family life has been an ongoing issue for women in all industries. Not only can this balancing act itself hinder career opportunities for women, but as the authors point out, a lack of support, toxic attitudes, and biased perceptions regarding pregnant women and mothers in the workforce can create additional career obstacles. Interestingly, recent research suggests that pregnancy-related biases may extend beyond even currently pregnant women or mothers, and may also apply to women who might simply be perceived as soon becoming pregnant (e.g., Gloor et al., 2018; Gloor et al., 2021). This has been coined the "maybe baby effect." The maybe baby effect proposes that the assumed likelihood of a young woman soon becoming pregnant increases employers' perceptions of accompanied inconvenience (i.e., maternity leave) while decreasing perceptions of the woman's job commitment (Gloor et al., 2018).

The maybe baby effect can be traced back to the "maternal wall" phenomenon, which embodies the different forms of discrimination and biases working mothers or pregnant employees experience in the workplace or while trying to enter the workforce (Williams, 2004). The maternal wall differs from the glass ceiling¹ because it specifically pertains to biases that occur because of a woman's parental or pregnancy status, and not because of other gender-based biases. The article by Gabriel and colleagues speaks to general maternal wall issues within academia. In this commentary, we expand upon Gabriel et al. (2022) maternal wall concerns by discussing the maybe baby effect and how it might adversely impact women within the academic work setting.

The maybe baby effect

Women tend to carry heavier household workloads, and because there is perceived conflict between the caregiver and employee role, working mothers' and pregnant women's job opportunities can be negatively impacted (e.g., overlooked for promotions; Correll et al., 2007; Hoobler et al., 2009; Fox & Quinn, 2015; Hebl et al., 2007). In addition to these challenges, pregnant employees can encounter workplace biases because of their pregnancy status (Gueutal & Taylor, 1991; Gueutal et al., 1995). Fox and Quinn (2015) found that pregnant employees reported being viewed by others as more emotional and less job dedicated. They also reported that others believed they would not return to work after their baby's birth. These negative attitudes towards

¹A metaphorical term that represents the phenomenon that women are more represented in lower-level job positions rather than higher-level positions, and this discrepancy is posited to occur because of gender stereotypes or biases (Williams, 2004).

pregnant employees are not inconsequential to organizations. Women who experienced pregnancy stigma and discrimination at their workplace had increased rates of turnover intentions throughout their pregnancy (Fox & Quinn, 2015). These findings relate to Gabriel et al. (2022) argument that institutions can lose top talent by not supporting pregnant or caregiving scholars.

The aforementioned research addresses those who are pregnant, current mothers, and those already within organizations. But what if pregnancy-related discrimination extends to women before they even become pregnant and before they are even hired by organizations? Maybe baby effect research investigates pregnancy biases that extend to young, childless women because of the expectation that those women will become pregnant (i.e., maybe baby expectations). For clarification, maybe baby expectations are the expectations that a woman will become pregnant, and maybe baby bias (MBB) are the work-related biases that result from maybe baby expectations. If MBB exists, this might severely disadvantage women when applying for jobs, including academic jobs.

As early evidence of MBB specifically within an academic context, Gloor and colleagues' (2018) correlational study showed that childless, young women scholars reported experiencing greater instances of incivility than childless young men scholars, and this gender difference was not significant for parents. They also found that the incivility discrepancy was greatest in institutions with greater differences in maternity and paternity leave policies. Furthermore, childless women indicated higher career withdrawal intentions (i.e., leaving academia) than childless men. These findings suggest a potential MBB effect, which would extend Gabriel and colleagues' overall concerns and provide further support for their case that negative perspectives regarding caregiving are related to sustained financial costs. The academic culture is a unique one for pregnant women, often characterized by a lack of institutional support, limited family-friendly policies, and a potentially toxic culture surrounding pregnancy and caregiving. Like potentially many readers, we've heard horror stories of women's application experiences during the academic hiring process. In one instance, over dinner following a job talk, a senior male faculty member casually asked the woman applicant what her "breeding plans" were. Questions like this reflect maybe baby expectations and MBB. They are also illegal under the Pregnancy Discrimination Act (1978).

In concept, the possibility of MBB as an influencing factor makes sense. Yet, the original study by Gloor et al. (2018) does raise questions regarding the causal nature of the effect and whether the bias was a result of maybe baby expectations, or possibly some other gender-related bias. It is challenging to confidently infer that negative perceptions are caused by maybe baby expectations in a correlational study. For example, young childless women might be viewed as less mature and less professional than young women who are parents. As such, the observed effects might not be due to maybe baby expectations but rather other biases.

More recently, Gloor et al. (2021) explored the possibility of MBB using greater control over the causal mechanisms. Although they did not explicitly measure traditional hiring perceptions (e.g., hirability), Gloor et al. (2021) manipulated different paper people profiles based on maybe baby expectations. Participants viewed mock applicant profiles and then made judgments regarding the length of work contract offered, benefits, and whether the offer would be temporary. Gloor et al. found that managers were more likely to offer less favorable employment conditions to the woman applicant who was of childbearing age and who mentioned wanting children. More specifically, they were more likely to offer 1) a limited work contract to the applicant, 2) limited benefits to the applicant (e.g., maternity leave), and 3) a temporary or conditional job contract to the applicant. This study more strongly showcases that women who are not even mothers or pregnant can suffer from maternal wall biases that were once thought to only impact pregnant or mother employees.

To further explore the maybe baby effect, we recently conducted several experimental studies that examined how various factors activate maybe baby expectations and their resulting impact on

the perceived hirability of job applicants. What we found is that maybe baby expectations can be easily activated based on limited information. In the first study, participants viewed videotaped mock interviews, and maybe baby expectations were activated by a young woman stating that she loves spending time with kids after answering a typical interview question. In the second study, maybe baby expectations were activated when a mock employee's profile indicated that the woman was recently married (presented as "just celebrated her three-year wedding anniversary"). These findings, in tandem with Gloor and colleagues' (2018; 2021), show that women are likely to experience different challenges in the hiring process than men. Specifically, maybe baby expectations can be activated by brief and common information, and these expectations have been found to lead to MBB (e.g., limited job contract; Gloor et al., 2021).

Although the magnitude of the biasing maybe baby effect may not overwhelm, such effects may be meaningful, particularly in hyper-competitive academic hiring contexts. In addition to its competitiveness, the academic interview process is a one-to-two-day event where a lot of informal conversation occurs amongst the job candidate and the current faculty. This high frequency of informal conversation is likely to include conversations that can activate maybe baby expectations. Thus, the combination of a competitive hiring context and a high occurrence of informal conversation has the potential to result in maybe baby expectations negatively impacting young women scholars' job opportunities. To combat this, universities might consider providing bias awareness training² for faculty and department heads to make them aware of the cognitive shortcuts that can lead to biased judgments and subsequent biased decisions (Wynn & Correll, 2018). This form of training may be especially beneficial in academic settings because of the informal and long interview process and how it likely prompts information that can activate maybe baby expectations. This speaks to just one of many concrete implications regarding MBB and a way in which universities might combat this bias.

Conclusion

In this commentary, we present pregnancy discrimination research that focuses on the maybe baby effect, which builds from Gabriel and colleagues' broader discussion of women's employment experiences in academia. As discussed, MBB might serve as yet another factor that disadvantages women in the workplace, with maybe baby expectations being primed from seemingly innocuous applicant signals (e.g., being recently married, discussing children). Thus, MBB serves as an additional challenge facing women in academia. Gabriel and colleagues' focal article presents solutions to academia's cultural challenges surrounding women, particularly those who are pregnant or caregiving. We agree that these issues need to be addressed and that more support for these women is necessary, and we further raise concerns regarding the negative impacts that can extend to childless women via MBB (e.g., Gloor et al., 2018; Gloor et al., 2021). MBB is an important phenomenon to examine in relation to women's employment experiences because adverse outcomes previously found to only occur against pregnant women or mothers (i.e., maternal wall biases) can occur towards young women who are not even pregnant or mothers. In light of this, we agree with Gabriel and colleagues' challenge to the assumption that having children conflicts with success in academic positions; such a change in perspective can have positive effects on all women in academia whether they are caregivers or are assumed to become caregivers.

²Although some research has found support for the training's effectiveness (e.g., Worden et al., 2020), other research has found mixed or failed results (e.g., Wynn & Correll, 2018). Thus, future research would need to establish training in respect for MBB before broad implementation.

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