

Mothers and Mothering throughout the Life Course

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“What If Your Water Breaks during Class?” Student Messages about Faculty Pregnancy in Academic Spaces

This study examines memorable messages that pregnant faculty members receive from their students in academic settings. Drawing on survey data from 172 tenure-track female faculty who experienced pregnancy during their academic careers, the research identifies how pregnancy, as a visible manifestation of faculty members' personal lives, disrupts the ideal worker norm in higher education. Thematic analysis revealed three dominant patterns in student-to-faculty messages: concerns about academic impact, reactions to embodied disruption in academic spaces, and perceptions of professional capacity. These interactions function as more than fleeting remarks; they become lasting reference points through which faculty make sense of their identities as mothers and scholars. The findings demonstrate how pregnancy in academia represents a unique communicative phenomenon where personal and professional identities visibly intersect, often challenging institutional expectations of disembodied professionalism. By examining these memorable messages, this research illuminates how motherhood in academic settings is simultaneously celebrated, scrutinized, supported, and surveilled, with implications that extend beyond pregnancy itself and shape women's long-term professional trajectories and sense of belonging in higher education.

Motherhood is a dynamic journey that evolves throughout the life course, with pregnancy marking a pivotal moment that transforms both personal identity and social interactions. Unlike other aspects of parenting that remain private, pregnancy manifests as a visible, corporeal experience that often elicits both welcome and unwelcome community engagement. As this life course transition intersects with professional identity, latent cultural expectations for work and motherhood also become visible, particularly in academic settings.

For women in academia, pregnancy represents just one stage in the continuum of work-life balance, yet it serves as a particularly visible marker of their evolving identities as both scholars and mothers. This physical manifestation of motherhood frequently elicits responses from one's community, such as touches, comments, and unsolicited advice, as well as good wishes and congratulations. These communicative interactions, however, also provide valuable insight into the cultural expectations placed upon women navigating the maternal within academic contexts.

The concept of “memorable messages”—significant communications that recipients remember for extended periods and perceive as influential—offers a theoretical framework to analyze these interactions. Previous research has shown that memorable messages shape professional identity and performance in organizational settings. However, little is known about memorable messages within academic contexts, particularly the messages that visibly pregnant faculty members might receive from students.

This study identifies and analyzes the memorable messages that academic women recalled from their students during pregnancy. Focussing on this transition moment in women's lives offers a greater understanding of the climate for women in academia, potentially illuminating the factors contributing to their diminishing presence in higher education. This analysis seeks to identify the expectations communicated to mother-scholars and how mothers are supported in or excluded from academic environments.

Literature Review

Pregnancy represents a unique life moment where the boundaries between personal and public become blurred and the biological process becomes subject to collective scrutiny and evaluation. As a pregnant woman moves through public spaces, cultural expectations of motherhood begin to shape her interactions with others. Casual conversations about due dates and gender reveal broader societal expectations about ideal maternal behaviour and identity. These interactions often shift into subtle and not-so-subtle attempts to dictate how women should behave, eat, move, and feel during pregnancy, policing women's bodies through reinforcement of dominant cultural expressions of motherhood. This monitoring represents a more troubling dimension of pregnancy's public nature: the widespread societal belief that pregnant bodies require oversight to ensure conformity to the established ideals of maternal sacrifice and responsibility. Although often justified as protective measures, this regulation frequently renders women more vulnerable and enforces obedience to patriarchal standards.

The physical manifestation of pregnancy, the expanding uterus accommodating fetal growth, provides a visual cue that often serves as an unspoken

invitation for engagement from others, including strangers, who feel entitled to offer advice or initiate physical contact. Robyn Longhurst’s research on “pregnant embodiment” (34) demonstrates how the maternal body becomes public property, subject to unsolicited touching and commentary that would be considered inappropriate in virtually any other context. Unlike other medical conditions, pregnancy exists in both private and public spheres, subject to scrutiny and even criminalization in ways that other medical decisions are not. Cynthia Daniels documents how pregnant women’s consumption choices—whether coffee, alcohol, or certain foods—become sites of public intervention and judgment (9–30). This surveillance extends to legal realms as well. Lynn M. Paltrow and Jeanne Flavin’s comprehensive study identifies over four hundred cases between 1973 and 2005 where women were arrested, detained, or forced to undergo medical interventions based on actions during pregnancy. More recently, an Amnesty International 2024 report on United States (US) abortion protections for women details documented cases where women have faced criminal charges for miscarriages or stillbirths when authorities suspected drug use contributed to fetal harm. The “reasonable person” standard typically applied in medical decision-making is frequently driven by maternal sacrifice expectations, where pregnant women are expected to prioritize fetal interests above their autonomy, comfort, or personal health needs (Roberts)—a standard rarely applied to other individuals making personal health decisions.

Thus, pregnancy encompasses a unique combination of medical, physical, and cultural aspects. The visibility of the pregnant body creates a distinct social experience where the boundaries between private medical experience and public social engagement become permeable. This public dimension of pregnancy extends beyond casual social interactions and into professional environments, where pregnant bodies become subject to additional layers of scrutiny, assumptions, and often implicit biases about competence and commitment that can significantly affect women’s career trajectories and workplace experiences.

Pregnancy and Work

Women’s participation in the US labour force has been climbing since World War II (32.7 per cent of US women over sixteen years) to a current high of 57.3 per cent in 2024 (US Bureau of Labor Statistics). Currently, there are 74.6 million women in the civilian labour force in the US, representing 47 per cent of American workers (US Bureau of Labor Statistics). Despite a growing presence in the workforce, women continue to occupy fewer managerial and authority positions than men (US GAO). Decades-long declines in female representation in STEM-related fields have continued while women’s overrepresentation in the lowest-paying occupations (i.e., education, health-

care, and service) continues (Dewolfe; Kochhar). Additionally, the gendered pay gap blankets employment across disciplines: “In 2022, women with at least a bachelor’s degree earned 79% as much as men who were college graduates, and women who were high school graduates earned 81% as much as men without the same level of education” (Kochhar; US Bureau of Labor).

While the employment divide in occupation and wage is shaped by external pressures, such as cultural and economic factors, Joan Acker’s seminal research suggests women’s workforce challenges are a function of the gendered nature of the organizations themselves. Previous explanations of women’s failed professional advancement relied on assumptions that organizations are built upon two hierarchical systems: bureaucracy (i.e., policy, structure, and command) and patriarchy. Women’s lack of advancement was the result of failure within these two systems. Yet Acker challenged the premise that any part of the organization (e.g., the bureaucracy) can be gender neutral: “Gender is not an addition to ongoing processes ... rather, it is an integral part of those processes” (146). As evidence, Acker draws attention to how gender is embedded and reproduced in organizations through normative daily practices, organizational values, expectations, and assumptions. These organizational logics guide the evaluation and organization of everyday activities and frame the masculine ethic as preferred, right, normal, and superior. Thus, organizational logics create a “gendered substructure that is reproduced daily in practical work activities ... in written work rules, labor contracts, managerial directives, and other documentary tools for running large organizations” (Acker 147). Thus, gender neutrality is an illusion that masks how organizational processes privilege masculine traits as the ideal worker who is completely devoted to work, has minimal outside responsibilities, and can prioritize job demands above all else. Joan Williams extends Acker’s premise to include organizations’ expectations of employee dedication impeding family involvement. Workers are encouraged (expected) to hide, minimize, and make invisible any evidence of other roles, particularly roles perceived to conflict with employee responsibilities. Thus, demands for ideal workers not only demand intense and disrupted attention to work duties but also create difficulties in other, nonwork areas of life, as work “leaves little time for workers to invest substantial energy or time in their family lives” (Solomon 341).

Pregnancy, however, violates the illusion of organization as a gendered-neutral space supported by equally unencumbered, disembodied workers. Just as pregnant embodiment (Oliver 761) disrupts conventional understandings of bodily boundaries and autonomy, it represents a visible deviation from the disembodied, gender-neutral ideal worker that organizations often demand.

Pregnancy in Higher Education

The climate for women balancing motherhood and pregnancy within higher education is equally challenging. While US universities are subject to the same protections for pregnant and caregiving employees mentioned earlier, they are often rated worse than corporate workplaces by their employees regarding access to helpful work-family policies (Anderson et al.). Work-family policies such as parental leave (Family and Medical Leave Act), reduced teaching or service load, childcare subsidies, and stopping the tenure clock are most frequent within US higher institutions. However, these options are challenged as ineffective, exclusionary, and unhelpful, potentially negatively affecting women's career trajectories (Antecol et al.; Fox and Gaughan; Mason et al.). Furthermore, some faculty forgo using available policies, particularly female faculty who are junior and unpublished, for fear of negative perceptions by colleagues or potential future consequences (Carter; Maxwell et al.; Shauman et al.).

Additionally, faculty life presents a unique set of expectations and responsibilities. For instance, conference travel, often requiring extended nights away from home and personal cost, is important during the tenure and promotion process, as it serves as an opportunity to connect with other faculty, receive feedback and gain recognition in the scholarly community (Mata et al.). The extremely competitive nature of securing tenure-track positions often requires sacrifices in one's personal life (Mason et al.; Misra et al.), such as working evenings or missing family obligations. Forty-four per cent of faculty mothers and 34 per cent of faculty fathers reported missing some of their child's important events because they did not want to appear uncommitted to their work (Colbeck and Drago 13). Not surprisingly, among men and women tenure-track professors, fewer than 36 per cent of women and 44 per cent of men viewed tenure-track careers as family-friendly (Cech and Blair-Loy; Rhoads and Rhoads), as faculty members cannot participate in conferences or professional activities due to absent or inadequate child care (Tower and Latimer).

Akin to corporate environments, the academic setting has little room for scholars who cannot (or choose not to) perform as ideal workers. This tension is amplified for pregnant faculty who openly challenge disembodiment, as they “cannot conceal her body or maintain an impenetrable firewall between the public and private spheres of her life” (Ollilainen 962).

Marjukka Ollilainen's study explores the convergence of ideal worker ideals and pregnancy in academia; her description of conversations with pregnant faculty members identify the “inherent conflict between the pregnant body and the ideal academic worker expectations [which] began to emerge as the women talked about hiding their bodies at work, managing their self-presentation as ‘pregnant professor’ with supra-performance” (967). Ollilainen's

work references “embodied interactions,” where students and colleagues react to faculty members’ pregnancies (973). The pregnant body, as a visual reminder of life outside the classroom and academy, served as an invitation to others (e.g., students and colleagues) to ask questions or comment on faculty members’ health and maternal plans.

These communicative exchanges between pregnant faculty and their students are powerful and meaningful, as “humans come to make sense of their lives through communication” (Koenig Kellas and Kranstuber Horstman 80) and can play a significant role in pregnant faculty members’ understanding of the rules and expectations within the university context. From this perspective, the comments pregnant faculty members receive during interactions with others offer an avenue for exploring the socialization process and policing of norms within an organization, like the ideal worker. Furthermore, as communication conveys, reinforces, and shapes workplace culture, these messages provide insight into the continued gendered attrition of female faculty, as they remain more likely to depart academia than men at every stage of their careers (LaBerge et al.; Spoon, et al.).

Memorable Messages

Memorable messages represent a significant area of inquiry in communication research, as they can profoundly shape individuals’ perceptions, decisions, and behaviours. First conceptualized by Mark L. Knapp et al., memorable messages share several key characteristics: They are typically brief, personally meaningful to recipients, and often follow simple conditional (“if then”) structures. Recipients feel personally connected to the topic, so the messages are meaningful, influential and remembered for long periods. These messages are particularly relevant during periods of transition, as they provide a frame for interpreting experiences and guide responses.

In organizational contexts, these memorable messages differ from casual workplace communication in their lasting impact; messages become reference points for employees when facing challenges or making decisions, often serving as informal socialization mechanisms that complement formal organizational policies and training programs (Holladay; Stohl).

Previous research on memorable messages in academic settings has been minimal, with most work focussing on student transition and success in higher education contexts. For university employees, memorable message literature is even more scarce, as it only addresses faculty issues, such as newcomer transition (Dallimore), inclusion for minority groups (Lemus et al.), or classroom interactions (Garland and Violanti).

Memorable messages from students—whether supportive, inappropriate, or ambivalent—carry implications for how pregnant faculty perceive their roles as educators, mothers, and women in higher education spaces. These

interactions are not only reflections of cultural attitudes towards pregnant professionals but also serve as microsites of meaning-making, influencing how women understand and perform their dual identities. By exploring these moments, this study contributes to the literature on academic motherhood, identity negotiation, and the social shaping of maternal experiences across the life course. Therefore, this study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1. Do faculty members recall memorable messages surrounding their pregnancy from their students?

RQ2. What themes emerge from the messages recalled from female faculty members?

Methods

Participants

The target population for the study consisted of female faculty members in tenure and tenure-track positions who experienced a pregnancy while employed at their US college or university. Faculty members not currently in tenure or tenure-track positions, as well as those currently serving in administrative (e.g., provost and dean) positions, were excluded from the study.

Potential participants were recruited through snowball sampling, as well as through advertisements on social media platforms. Interested participants were asked to forward the study advertisement to their networks and others who fit the participation parameters. This recruitment method was a cost-effective way to reach those meeting the necessary sample characteristics.

Instruments

After acknowledging their consent and confirming their match with the study's participation parameters, participants completed an online survey via Qualtrics regarding their experiences as a female faculty member. The questionnaire consisted of several demographic items, such as family characteristics, identity, and employment descriptors.

To invite recall of memorable messages, participants were provided with a description of memorable messages:

Memorable messages are communication moments shared between individuals that offer insight, advice, or even expectations for behaviour in the academic and family environments. Sometimes these messages are stories; others are quick sayings. Memorable messages can be cautionary (e.g., “Big decisions get made in the hallways; don't ever close your office door”) or offer examples of success (e.g., “Smart researchers find a way to say ‘yes’ more than ‘no’”). Most importantly, these memorable messages are memorable to listeners and can influence one's understanding of how to be successful.

Participants were invited to share any message they received from students about their pregnancy.

Coding

The study employed reflective thematic analysis (Braun and Clark, *Thematic*) to analyze participant responses, embracing a constructivist epistemology that prioritizes meaning over mere repetition in the data. Following Virginia Braun and Victoria Clark's recursive six-step process, coders first familiarize themselves with the data through multiple readings of all responses. Initial coding uses participants' own words to create short descriptive labels, which are subsequently combined to identify common ideas within memorable pregnancy messages. These codes are then reviewed, grouped by shared meanings, and developed into themes that provide coherent patterns, contributing to the data's overall narrative. The generated themes are designed to offer internally consistent perspectives while avoiding redundancy, ultimately providing interpretative insights that capture important aspects of the research question. This approach acknowledges that themes do not simply emerge from data but are actively interpreted by researchers based on meaningfulness rather than predefined categories, creating what Braun and Clark describe as "meaning-based interpretive stories" ("Conceptual" 2).

Positionality

A central tenet of reflective thematic analysis is the researcher's perspective, as researchers inevitably bring assumptions about reality and knowledge production, even when unstated (Braun and Clark, *Thematic*). This reflexivity requires a purposeful assessment of how personal views influence data interpretation. As a tenured faculty member and mother of three, the author's interest stems from personal experience: balancing tenure with a toddler, experiencing pregnancy without institutional support, and later witnessing administrative resistance to providing paid leave for fellow faculty members. These experiences revealed systemic gaps affecting pregnant academics and shaped the author's worldview. However, the author's position as a cis heterosexual, white woman with a partner who works outside academia limits perspective and understanding. Minority women continue to be under-represented and marginalized in academic environments (Vasquez Heilig et al.), and the current study is no exception.

Results

Three hundred and sixty-eight participants began the survey as part of a larger data collection on academic motherhood; 172 participants indicated they had experienced a pregnancy sometime during their employment as a tenure or tenure-track faculty member. These participants (N=172) were the focus of the

current study.

The majority of participants (N=105; 61 per cent) were tenured associate professors working in public (four-year) institutions of higher education. Sixty-two participants were employed at (four-year) private colleges or universities (36 per cent). Two-year degree-granting institutions and other academic institutions accounted for less than 3 per cent (N=5) of participant employment. Sixty-two per cent of respondents (N=107) held faculty positions with expectations for balanced service, teaching, and research; participants with primarily teaching (13 per cent) or research (9 per cent) assignments were also represented. Thirteen participants (7 per cent) described their faculty positions as dominated by other expectations; common descriptors included mentions of graduate faculty positions, service commitments, or mentoring.

Participants were encouraged to select any, all, or none of the categories that best reflected their identities; a large majority of respondents (N=138; 80 per cent) identified as white (e.g., German, Irish, English, Italian, and Polish). Latino/a/x, Hispanic, Spanish (5 per cent), Asian (8 per cent), Middle Eastern (2 per cent), American Indian, or Alaskan Native (2 per cent), and Black, African American (2 per cent) categories were also selected. One participant preferred not to say, and eight participants did not respond to this item. Participants were invited to describe their family and household environments by selecting all or various descriptors; a large number of respondents identified as living in a married or domestic partnership (N=146; 85 per cent), with 5 per cent of respondents indicating relational divorce or separation (N=9). Six participants preferred not to answer this item (3 per cent). Single, widowed, cohabiting with relatives, multigenerational, adoptive or foster, LGBTQ+, and other households were also represented.

Memorable Messages from Students

Sixty-five respondents (38 per cent) were able to recall 70 distinct messages from students or in classroom settings. Seven entries stating “no messages” or “none” were not included in the results. Analysis of these recalled messages revealed several distinct themes characterizing student responses to faculty pregnancies. These themes illuminate the complex dynamics at play when female faculty members navigate pregnancy within academic environments. The following sections present these themes with representative examples from participants’ recalled messages.

Concerns about Academic Impact

For many faculty members, student comments captured how students prioritize their own needs. When confronted with their professor’s pregnancy, students’ messages centred around how the pregnancy would affect their own educational experience, class schedule, or academic support. On the surface

self-protective, these student comments demonstrate a tension between acknowledging the personal circumstances of their professor (i.e., pregnancy) and focussing on potential disruptions to their academic trajectory.

Direct and blunt reactions from students regarding the impact of pregnancy on class were common among the recalled messages, such as “Ugh. What will happen with our class?” or “Please don’t get pregnant and leave us again!” Other participants offered a summary of the multiple questions they received throughout the semester: “[I received] questions about when I would be gone and when I would be coming back (i.e., how my pregnancy would impact their learning/advising).” Faculty involved with graduate programs reported similar reactions from their advisees and graduate students, who seemed particularly concerned with their access to the faculty during leave. For example, one participant recalled an interaction with her assigned graduate advisee, who asked: “Will you still be able to mentor while out on maternity leave?” In some cases, recalled student messages indicated that a faculty member’s pregnancy (and subsequent leave) was a perceived violation of the advisor-advisee relationship. One faculty member, who chose to delay disclosure about her pregnancy due to health issues, shared her graduate student’s reaction to the pregnancy news: “I feel betrayed that you didn’t tell me.” Rather than offering congratulations or support, these direct inquiries exemplify students’ immediate turn towards self-interest. Another participant noted that while “students were supportive, their main concern was also how and whether my pregnancy would negatively affect them,” highlighting the conditional nature of student support.

The impact of these students’ concerns on their outcomes extended to formal evaluations of teaching effectiveness. As one respondent shared: “I had a course eval submitted the semester I had my second child that criticized the course simply because they had to do a hybrid learning situation, which was explained and communicated over and over so students knew it was going to happen.” Perhaps most strikingly, another faculty member reported: “My students gave me the worst teaching evaluations of my life because I was ‘gone too much.’ I delivered my baby in the middle of September. They could see that I was very pregnant the first day of class.”

Students also used teaching evaluations to critique faculty bodies, suggesting that the pregnant body can disrupt student learning.

I had students write in negative comments about my pregnancy. Things like, “it made me uncomfortable when the baby would move,” “it was like the movie *Alien*,” “I couldn’t concentrate, I thought she was going to have the baby in class.” I’m short and so I had a very large, round belly. Students definitely looked and stared and ironically made me uncomfortable. They stared. And there was that one student who was disgusted. And they all wanted me to go into labour early so that class would be over.

Recalled messages from students reveal a fundamental tension in how students navigate their professor's pregnancy. Rather than viewing faculty as whole individuals with lives beyond academia, students often prioritize their educational interests when responding to pregnancy disclosures. This reveals an underlying transactional view of the faculty-student relationship, where students perceive pregnancy and subsequent leave as a potential breach of educational contract rather than a natural life event. These reactions manifest in direct questioning, negative teaching evaluations, and expressions of discomfort with the pregnant body itself and suggest deeper issues around expectations of faculty availability and institutional accommodation.

Embodied Disruption in Academic Spaces

The pregnant professor's body creates a unique form of disruption in academic environments, where faculty bodies are typically rendered invisible or irrelevant to intellectual work. Student responses reveal a spectrum of emotional and social reactions to this disruption, exposing deeper cultural assumptions about the appropriate boundaries between personal and professional identities in academic spaces.

Many participants reported genuinely positive responses from students who embraced the news with enthusiasm. One faculty member recalled: “They clapped and cheered when I shared that I was expecting my second child. It was wonderful!” In some cases, students actively demonstrated their support through celebratory gestures: “They even threw a ‘baby shower’ and brought donuts and pizza to class a few weeks before I had my son.” Another professor noted the thoughtfulness of students who sent her personalized emails to congratulate her when they heard the news: “They were incredibly patient with changes to scheduled meetings and such. They were wonderful.”

However, these positive responses often reframed the professor's identity concerning traditional gender roles. Students' reactions sometimes shifted attention from the professor's academic position to their impending maternal role: “You're going to be a good mom” and “Would love to meet your kids.” Even supportive comments frequently emphasized the professor's changing body: “My students would comment on how ‘cute’ I looked with my bump” and “A student waiting after class to ask me where I got my maternity clothes because they were ‘adorable.’” These responses, while well-intentioned, highlight how pregnancy makes visible aspects of identity that typically remain outside academic interactions.

In contrast, faculty also encountered reactions characterized by discomfort or aversion. Some students expressed their unease directly: “It's so weird to have a pregnant professor.” Others reacted with visible disapproval or objectification, commenting directly on the pregnant body: “One student told me that she didn't want to have kids because she was afraid that her arms

would get fat, but because my arms seemed to be the same size as before my pregnancy, that maybe it would be ok.” One faculty member recalled encountering “a student who felt I looked too ‘ill’ to teach while heavily pregnant,” while another reported their students asking anxious questions, such as “What if your water breaks during class?” These reactions position the pregnant body as inappropriate for or unsettling in academic spaces. One professor even experienced a student’s jarring assertion that “There’s nothing natural about a pregnant woman” during a class discussion, suggesting deep discomfort with the biological reality of maternity in professional settings.

The visceral and emotional nature of these responses suggests that pregnancy introduces an embodied reality into academic spaces that students are unaccustomed to experiencing. These concerns reveal how the pregnant body introduces biological unpredictability into educational environments structured around pattern and hierarchy. This tension between celebration and discomfort demonstrates how the pregnant body is a site of contested meaning in academic spaces, thus highlighting the institutional norms of work-life separation.

Perceptions of Professional Capacity and Authority

Pregnancy also prompted students to question, reassess, or challenge female faculty members’ professional competence and authority. These messages reveal an underlying assumption that pregnancy and motherhood might be incompatible with academic roles and responsibilities.

Direct questioning of pregnant faculty’s capabilities emerged in comments, such as “Are you sure you can teach and be pregnant?” suggesting an inherent conflict between these two roles. This sentiment extended beyond the pregnancy itself, as evidenced by one participant who noted, “A student expressed surprise that I would continue teaching after the baby was born,” revealing assumptions about the incompatibility of motherhood with academic careers. Faculty also reported experiencing diminished professional standing, for example, “I had a student be suspicious that I would be a good professor.” These perceptions sometimes led faculty to alter their behaviour preemptively, as one participant explained: “I deliberately did not tell my students I was pregnant until nearly the end of the semester (when I was more clearly showing). I think I felt an unspoken sense that telling them would undermine my authority in the classroom, but I think this came more from me than from them.” This reflection highlights how internalized concerns about professional perception influenced disclosure decisions.

Some faculty experienced infantilization or were treated with excessive caution, as one respondent described: “Sometimes treated me like I was fragile or hysterical. Like their grades or unavoidable changes in the schedule (e.g., due to snow days) were about my pregnancy.” This account illustrates how

students reinterpreted routine academic occurrences through the lens of pregnancy, attributing normal educational circumstances to the professor's pregnant condition, thereby undermining her professional authority.

Pregnancy visibility also led to unsolicited concerns about faculty members' physical capabilities to perform routine teaching activities. One participant recalled, “Do you need a chair for teaching?” while another mentioned students who “would suggest I sit down to teach.” Although potentially well-intentioned, these suggestions position the pregnant professor as physically compromised and in need of accommodation, subtly challenging her professional self-determination and autonomy. Similarly, another faculty member described a discussion over the appropriate methods of transportation while pregnant, as the students suggested “renting a car and driving back to campus,” even though she had no problem flying while pregnant. This example illustrates how students may overestimate limitations or impose unnecessary caution that undermines faculty authority to make professional judgments.

Faculty members often felt compelled to demonstrate their continued professional competence during pregnancy. One participant highlighted this pressure when describing returning to teaching just two weeks postpartum: “They were surprised to see me back two weeks after I had one of my babies, who was born mid-semester. We had no leave policy, so I had no choice but to go back in and work. Very sad.” This experience reveals how institutional structures may exacerbate student perceptions by failing to normalize pregnancy and parental leave as expected events within academic careers.

For pregnant faculty, these challenges to professional authority create additional labour beyond their regular academic responsibilities. Not only must they perform their roles effectively, but they must also counter assumptions about their diminished capacity and justify their continued presence in academic spaces. This pattern reveals how pregnancy transitions from personal occasion to professional liability in environments where embodied female experiences remain marginalized or viewed as incompatible with academic positions.

Discussion

This study's findings illustrate how student responses to faculty pregnancy are not merely casual chatter but can become memorable messages, or communicative events that are recalled over time and shape how women in academia make sense of their lives as mothers and professionals (Knapp et al.; Fuller). For many participants, these messages were emotionally charged and enduring, signifying their role not only as educators but as visible representations of motherhood within the academy. For women in academia, the gendered balancing act between pregnancy and work is tumultuous, as it challenges

ideal worker norms with visual markers of outside responsibilities. In short, pregnant women cannot hide their other lives while walking the halls of the academy.

Across all themes, participants described student reactions that were unexpected, emotionally salient, and enduring, with many professors recalling specific words or interactions years later. For instance, supportive messages, such as “You’ll be a great mom!”, or celebratory gestures, such as classroom baby showers, became affirming reference points in participants’ narratives, often reinforcing their sense of belonging in academic and maternal spheres. Conversely, judgmental or critical remarks, such as “She shouldn’t be teaching in that condition,” or course evaluations that blamed the professor’s pregnancy for perceived academic disruption, became memorable in a negative sense, amplifying feelings of exclusion and discomfort. These findings extend the literature on memorable messages by demonstrating how even casual student remarks can shape how women view their competence, credibility, and emotional safety during a highly visible and transitional life stage. This discussion highlights the implications of these communicative interactions for sensemaking, identity, and the ideal worker norm for pregnant female faculty.

Making Sense and Identity

Participants engaged in complex sensemaking processes as they interpreted student messages within wider institutional norms. From the perspective of sensemaking, “who we think we are (identity) as organizational actors shapes what we enact and how we interpret, which affects what outsiders think we are (image) and how they treat us, which stabilizes or destabilizes our identity. Who we are lies importantly in the hands of others” (Weick et al. 416). Faculty did not passively absorb student comments; they actively interpreted them in light of their values, status within the university, and perceived risks. Participants reflected on how student responses either affirmed or complicated their maternal and professional identities. For some, student excitement and ongoing interest in their children helped them integrate motherhood into their academic self-concept. These women described feeling seen not only as professors but as mothers, suggesting that positive messages supported a more holistic sense of self. In this way, supportive messages show that motherhood and professionalism could coexist, potentially bolstering confidence and agency. For these faculty members, positive interactions with students helped normalize mothering in professional spaces and often became sources of strength (O’Reilly; Laffey et al.).

However, critical or negative feedback yielded a defensive sensemaking process, with participants interpreting these moments as cues to manage impressions, withhold personal information, or reassert their professional competence as parts of their identity affected by others’ messages (Tracy and

Trethewey). In these cases, faculty recalled feeling scrutinized or isolated, and some described strategic concealment of pregnancy or feelings of betrayal from students who learned about it late. For instance, one faculty member delayed revealing her pregnancy until visibly showing, due to concerns about losing authority, reflecting the requirement for pregnant faculty to “read the room” and manage impressions in the classroom. This sensemaking process, and the understanding that pregnancy in academic spaces requires impression management of dual roles, is important. This recognition offers insight into the complex multidimensional lived experiences of academic mothers, particularly during this life transition, affirming KerryAnn O’Meara and Corbin M. Campbell’s conclusion: “In most cases, the physical aspects of pregnancy, child-birth, and breastfeeding made women feel that they had fewer choices in achieving work/family balance” (470). Even well-intended physical monitoring messages, such as concerns about health or capability, could reinforce gendered expectations about fragility and maternal precarity, leading some faculty to reconsider how much of their personal lives should be visible in the classroom (Crabb and Ekberg; Enns and Sinacore).

Ideal Workers

The reactions of students also illuminate how deeply embedded the ideal worker norm remains in higher education (Acker; Ward and Wolf-Wendel). This ideal presumes constant availability, emotional neutrality, and disembodied professionalism—expectations fundamentally challenged by the visible, physical, and time-bound realities of pregnancy.

Comments celebrating the pregnancy or expressing admiration for the professor’s ability to balance academic and maternal roles contributed to a sense of legitimacy and inclusion. These types of messages, offering encouragement or recognizing their capacity to “do it all,” helped these women to understand themselves through the life course as mothers and scholars. Conversely, messages communicating anxiety about academic disruption and objectification of the pregnant body reflected the ongoing tensions arising when motherhood enters professional contexts that have historically privileged disembodied, masculine norms of labour (Acker; Ward and Wolf-Wendel). Comments like “Will you still be able to mentor while on leave?” or evaluations linking reduced course quality to pregnancy suggested that faculty who become mothers must defend their legitimacy against assumptions of decreased productivity or commitment (Lester). Messages questioning the faculty member’s reliability and assumed selfishness for taking leave or expressing unease at the physical realities of pregnancy revealed how student expectations are entangled in institutional logics that can marginalize caregiving identities (Lester). Even well-meaning offers to “sit down and rest” imply an expectation of diminished capacity, which contrasts starkly with expectations of tireless

availability framed by ideal worker standards. In this way, the recalled messages show how students can become enforcers of normative professional ideals that unconsciously mirror institutional norms and view caregiving as a disruption rather than part of the life course.

Conclusion

This study highlights the unique role students play in shaping how pregnant faculty experience and make sense of motherhood throughout their careers. These findings underscore how messages shape identity formation (Armenti; O'Reilly). Pregnancy, an intensely embodied and visible phase of mothering, is not only a private experience but a public and communicatively constructed event that reverberates across personal and professional arenas. The recalled messages from students offer insight into how mothering in academia is simultaneously celebrated, scrutinized, supported, and surveilled with imprints that endure beyond the pregnancy itself. Furthermore, student comments during a professor's pregnancy function as more than fleeting remarks; they are memorable messages that become central to how women in academia make sense of their professional and maternal identities. By examining the content and impact of these messages, this research sheds light on the cultural expectations, institutional culture, and identity negotiations that shape mothering through the life course in higher education. It also emphasizes the importance of creating communicative and structural conditions that affirm, rather than constrain, the complex identities of academic mothers.

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