

When the Boss is Bad for the Baby

Research Links Perceived Pregnancy Discrimination to Adverse Health Outcomes in Mothers and Their Children

By Stephany Below, PR Specialist



While pregnancy is generally viewed as a period of joy and anticipation, women in the workplace may find it also brings feelings of anxiety over how their pregnancy might affect their career.

Recent research conducted by SMA members Kaylee Hackney (Baylor University), Samantha Paustian-Underdahl (Florida State), Pamela Perrewé (Florida State), and Ashley Mandeville (Florida Gulf Coast), along with Shanna Daniels (Florida State)

and Asia Eaton (Florida International) shows one more thing working women may need to worry about: how their workplace could affect their baby.

Across three studies, the researchers found that perceived pregnancy discrimination –unfavorable treatment of women at work due to pregnancy–in the workplace has a significant impact on mothers' and babies' health outcomes. This discrimination is associated with increased experienced stress for women, which is associated with increased levels of postpartum depression, decreased gestational age, and lower birth weights.

“Pregnant women are constantly bombarded with warnings about things to avoid during their pregnancy because of the potential harmful effects,” Hackney said. “For example, they are told to avoid certain foods or exercises. However, it is doubtful that many doctors are warning them of the potential negative effects that the work environment may have on their health and their babies' health.”

This study is one of the first to examine the consequences of perceived pregnancy discrimination for mother and baby health. Considering that 80-90% of female employees will be pregnant at some point during their career, the research has far-reaching implications, according to Hackney. The research was presented at the Southern Management Association's annual conference in November 2018, where it was honored with the distinction of best overall conference paper.

Pregnancy discrimination is defined as unfavorable treatment of women at work due to pregnancy, childbirth, or medical conditions related to pregnancy or childbirth, including subtly hostile behaviors incurred by pregnant employees such as social isolation, negative stereotyping, and negative or rude interpersonal treatment. In the last decade, more than 50,000 pregnancy discrimination claims were filed with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) and Fair Employment Practices Agencies in the United States. According to a study conducted by the National Partnership for Women and Families,

between 5% and 13% of pregnant employees were denied requests for accommodations related to their pregnancy, such as less lifting, schedule changes to allow for prenatal appointments, more frequent breaks to use the restroom. Based on these results, an estimated more than 250,000, women are denied their requests each year.

Previous research has shown that women who experience stress during pregnancy often experience negative health consequences such as postpartum depression. However, less research has examined the effects that perceived pregnancy discrimination might have on the health of working mothers and their babies.

During current research, female participants self-reported about their and their babies' health during and after pregnancy. Two studies focused on whether pregnancy discrimination is positively associated with stress and a third study focused on whether or not pregnancy discrimination is positively associated with emotional exhaustion. The women were asked questions that measured perceived stress, emotional exhaustion, and levels of post-partem depression in mothers. The researchers also measured babies' APGAR scores, gestational age, and birthweight. The APGAR score is used by physicians to provide a quick overall assessment of newborns' health. There are five subcategories (i.e., heart rate, respiration, muscle tone, reflex response, and color) rated on a scale of zero to two, with a total score of ten. A score of seven to ten is considered normal. Gestational age refers to how far along in her pregnancy the woman was when she gave birth.

All three studies measured *perceived* pregnancy discrimination using a workplace prejudice/discrimination Inventory adapted to focus on pregnancy discrimination.

"Our perceptions are our reality," she said. "Thus, it doesn't matter whether the perpetrator meant for their actions or words to come across as discriminatory. If the pregnant employee interprets them as such, then her perception of the discrimination is what will cause her stress and potentially lead to detrimental outcomes for her and her baby."

Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed with each statements such as "At work I felt socially isolated because of my pregnant status" and "At work pregnant employees receive fewer opportunities," and answered questions about their stress levels, such as "In the last month, how often have you been upset because of something that happened unexpectedly?" and "In the last month, how often have you felt nervous or stressed?" Postpartum depressions was measured by determining how much the women agreed with statements such as "I feel scared or panicky for no very good reason" and "I feel sad or miserable."

The researchers controlled for the effects of mothers' age and race for both emotional exhaustion and the baby's health outcomes, as both variables have been shown to relate to mother's psychological health during pregnancy.

Results showed:

- Perceived discrimination was positively associated with perceived stress. Further, perceived stress was positively associated with postpartum depression. Analysis revealed that the indirect effect of perceived discrimination on postpartum depression through perceived stress was significant.

- Perceived pregnancy discrimination was positively associated with emotional exhaustion. Further, emotional exhaustion was negatively associated with gestational age, but was not significantly related to the baby's APGAR score. Further analysis revealed that the indirect effect of pregnancy discrimination on gestational age through emotional exhaustion was significant.
- Perceived pregnancy discrimination was positively associated with perceived stress. Perceived stress was positively associated with postpartum depression. Further, perceived stress was negatively associated with gestational age and birthweight, but was not significantly related to the baby's APGAR score.

"This means that we can say, with 90% confidence, that when women experience pregnancy discrimination at work they will likely perceive greater stress which can then negatively affect the baby's health such as lower gestational age and birthweight," Hackney explained.

She said the researchers believe their work is important because it goes beyond the typical job outcomes like turnover intentions or job satisfaction.

"It is one thing to suggest that a discriminatory work environment might affect employees' job satisfaction or turnover intentions," she said. "However, our research findings underscore the harmful effects the work environment can have on both the baby and the mother. Although these are not outcomes we like to see in organizations, linking the discrimination at work to outcomes like postpartum depression, gestational age, and birthweight, highlights the serious implications that discrimination can have. Not only are the pregnant employees affected, but there is a ripple effect that encompasses their new babies and families."

Employers should be concerned about the health and well-being of their employees, she added, and this research highlights a specific stressor that managers should take seriously and do their best to create inclusive, supportive environments for their pregnant employees.

Takeaways for organizations may include training managers to be more family-supportive and less-biased against expectant mothers. Research has found that family-supportive training interventions for managers were associated with increased perceptions of family-supportive supervisor behaviors, which in turn related to higher employee job satisfaction, lower turnover intentions, and better physical health.

"The negative consequences of pregnancy discrimination could be attenuated in organizations where women perceive greater organizational commitment and support towards expectant employees and mothers," Hackney noted. "Thus, women should look out for work environments that are potentially stressful and less supportive of working while pregnant."

The researchers said they hope this study will inspire future research addressing pregnancy at work and encourage more organizations to create inclusive environments for all employees. Armed with the knowledge that a discriminatory work environment can have negative health implications for her and her baby, a pregnant employee can make informed, intentional decisions to address any pregnancy discrimination and/or seek out support, Hackney explained.

“In other words, we believe this research can help women recognize that this is a problem and encourage them to take care of themselves and their babies in the best way possible,” she added.