

# **Pregnant job applicants can act to dispel discriminatory stereotypes**

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Pregnant women are more likely to experience discrimination in the job search process than nonpregnant women, but they can minimize bias by addressing negative pregnancy stereotypes in the application process, according to a new study from researchers at Rice University, the University of Houston-Downtown and George Mason University.

"A Field Experiment: Reducing Interpersonal Discrimination Toward Pregnant Job Applicants" is the first field study that examined four potential stereotypes driving hostile attitudes and discriminatory behaviors toward pregnant job applicants—incompetence, lack of commitment, inflexibility and need for accommodation—and how these stereotypes can be refuted.

The experiment measured formal discrimination (whether applicants were told a job was available and allowed to complete a job application) and interpersonal discrimination (whether sales personnel attempted to prematurely end the conversation, pursed their lips, exhibited hostility, treated the applicant rudely, furrowed their eyebrows and seemed awkward).

The study revealed that ratings from three perspectives—applicants, observers and independent evaluators—converge to show that pregnant job applicants receive more interpersonal hostility than do nonpregnant job applicants. However, the study also showed that pregnant job applicants who address these stereotypes when inquiring about jobs (particularly their personal levels of commitment and flexibility) are

nearly three times less likely to experience interpersonal discrimination than pregnant [job applicants](#) who say nothing to combat pregnancy stereotypes.

"This study takes the research of discrimination against pregnant [women](#) a step further," said lead author and Rice alumna Whitney Botsford Morgan '04, assistant professor of management at the University of Houston-Downtown. "We know that this type of discrimination exists. This research helps us understand what can be done to reduce it. Statements that refute stereotypes about being inflexible and lacking commitment are particularly effective."

"Understanding what counterstereotypical information is effective at reducing discrimination is critical for [pregnant women](#) to know because then they can act or provide information counter to such stereotypes," said Mikki Hebl, professor of psychology at Rice and the study's co-author. "In addition, human resources departments also can benefit from focusing their employee training initiatives on the inclusion of effective counterstereotypical information that redresses pregnancy discrimination."

The study included 161 retailers in three malls in a major metropolitan area. All of these retailers confirmed that they were hiring prior to the study. Five undergraduate women participated as the study's "applicants" and wore standardized attire consisting of black shirts, dark blue jeans, low-heeled shoes and wedding rings. In addition, the "applicants" carried small black purses that concealed a digital audio-recorder for recording each interaction. Five additional undergraduates (three women, two men) served as observers for each of the interactions and three undergraduate women who were unaware of the study's purpose and conditions served as independent evaluators.

The researchers hope that this study will add to the body of research

about pregnancy and [discrimination](#) and help individuals and organizations empower themselves as well as decrease discriminatory behavior.

"Pregnant women are well-advised to know that negative [stereotypes](#) exist, and that they can do something about them," Hebl said.

**More information:** "A Field Experiment: Reducing Interpersonal Discrimination Toward Pregnant Job Applicants":  
[psycnet.apa.org/journals/apl/98/5/799](https://psycnet.apa.org/journals/apl/98/5/799)

Provided by Rice University

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