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The Pregnant Professor



CASE OVERVIEW

The people in this case, Karen and Tim, are married academics attempting to balance the early stages of two careers with their close personal relationship and starting a family. The case raises the issues of choosing between competing personal and professional demands and needs, as well as the policies that institutions might offer to make this balancing act more feasible. Issues of how much separation should exist between personal and professional lives also arise in the case. The couple in the case also models a rather egalitarian marriage, in its career decisions and child-care responsibilities.

❖ BODY OF CASE

"You'd be fools to marry," exclaimed the dean of Arts and Sciences to the two outstanding Ph.D. candidates in front of him. "Do you know how tight the academic job market is? You'll be lucky to find one permanent job, let alone two!"

The two young scholars, of course, did not heed this warning. Tim had finished all his work except the dissertation, and his new spouse, Karen, was just ready to begin her dissertation research. At that point the two entered the teaching job market in economics. Hoping to find tenure-track positions in the same location, they were sadly disappointed. Tim accepted a position in New York City, while Karen landed a position in the prestigious Midwest University.

"We were groomed," she later said, "in graduate school to take the 'best' position, in the most prestigious department. We assumed this would lead to better pay, working conditions, students, and all the rest. I guess I was pretty naïve not to ask more questions." Thus the couple began a three-year period of commuting between New York and the Midwest.

"I was wary of putting my career on hold to follow Tim," Karen explained, "because I had seen other couples start out a marriage with great intentions of equality, only to resort to traditional gender roles, obviously favoring the man's career, when real decisions had to be made." No definite limits were placed on the length of time they would commute, and they had no real plan for terminating the commuting arrangement.

"Both of us found our jobs more difficult than we had ever really imagined," Tim reported later. "I didn't much like teaching, and it took up so much time that I didn't finish my dissertation in the first year, as I'd planned." Karen did finish her dissertation during her first year at Midwest University, but felt she compromised its quality in yielding to departmental pressure to finish it and actively publish other work. Meanwhile, the commuting was hard on them both. "Having two stressful jobs without the daily support of the other person was a drag, and the expense was quite a problem," Karen admits.

After three years, Tim quit his eastern position and moved to the Midwest. Karen's university was in a state capital, and Tim obtained a position as a policy analyst in a government agency. About the same time, Karen discovered she was pregnant. She had wanted a child and had worried about delaying pregnancy because there were fertility problems in her family. But she also knew that a pregnancy would complicate her life in an academic department where professors "were supposed to work all the time and never have a life." She recalled being told by one of the tenured (permanent) faculty that if she had commitments outside the department she shouldn't tell anyone about it, as they would think that she wasn't serious about academia. Still, "I knew I wanted a child and I didn't want to take the risk of waiting until my career was on more solid ground—which it wasn't at the time—as it was taking me a while to get my research published."

As it turned out, Karen was informed, during the second trimester of her pregnancy, that her contract would not be renewed for the following year. The university had yearly contracts for its assistant professors (something she had not asked about when applying for her position). The previous year, the department had been quite critical of her, not the quality of her work, but the quantity and the speed with which she was getting things published. They decided during her fourth year that she surely would not achieve tenure in the sixth year, and so they would terminate her before the tenure decision point. (It was, she described, a "general bloodletting," for three assistant professors in her department were terminated.)

"I thought it was sleazy," she said as she shared with a friend, "since I was not told until the week I was notified my contract wouldn't be renewed that this was even a possibility. There were several ways to stop the tenure clock (which would allow more time before the tenure decision) if all they were worried about was the clock running out. First, anytime one went on unpaid leave the tenure clock could stop; when I interviewed, they made constant reference to this policy. So I could have been allowed to take unpaid leave. Second, the university was in the process of adopting a policy of stopping the tenure clock when an assistant professor had a baby, though the policy was not yet formally approved. But these policies were both ignored by my department and I was let go."

Karen realized she might have sued Midwest University, but she did not have the emotional energy to do so. She was also filled with self-doubt and questioned her own dedication to the academic life, even after a very successful career as an undergraduate and graduate student. So she "retreated" and accepted a part-time temporary position in state government, during which she hoped to redefine her career goals and strategies. Her decision and her new job occurred when her baby was about six months old.

Meanwhile, Tim was learning a lot in his own government position. He had mastered writing regulations and other forms of writing effectively, negotiating with many types of people, and working in a bureaucracy. He was, however, working about 60 hours a week, in addition to sharing care of the couple's infant daughter. He couldn't seem to get any writing done, and his dissertation languished as a result. He found himself open to the idea of another change in their goals as a couple.

Karen reported another problem with Tim's government job. "My husband's office was terrible about recognizing the demands of having a new baby. We came home from the hospital on Wednesday and one

of Tim's coauthors wanted him to come to a meeting on Friday. When Friday rolled around, I just told Tim not to go, to say that he couldn't leave me alone. (This wasn't really true, but I'll lie when I have to.) He already had an important meeting scheduled, requiring lots of preparation on Sunday and Monday. It was a crazy time, and I'm not sure how he did it."

While finishing at the university and later working in her temporary job, Karen also was conducting research with a colleague at a small liberal arts college nearby. Karen observed that this colleague had more "people contact" and personal freedom than Karen experienced at Midwest University, and also she was energized by her contact with undergraduate students and colleagues in many academic disciplines.

"I had figured out that what stifled me at Midwest University was the lack of energy I got from other people, from my work environment itself. I was supposed to sit in my office, or the library, or my apartment, all day, doing research all by myself, and I just couldn't do it. It drove me nuts; I needed to get energy from the people and place around me. (Earlier when I had complained to the department chair about the lack of any intellectual exchange at Midwest, he said to me, 'Well, this is not a social club.')

I also didn't like the narrowness of the research university, the concentration on our own narrow specialties to the exclusion of everything else. It was the connections between my work and the 'everything else' that made academic work interesting to me."

A mentor, a female colleague in another department at Midwest University was another influence on Karen during this transitional period. The news that female assistant professors were leaving the university at a higher rate than male assistant professors had provided the impetus to establishing a mentoring program for women professors.

Karen reports that "I was hooked up with a woman in another department who was absolutely fantastic. I requested someone with children, and she understood what was going on, so I didn't have to justify or defend myself. She also let me know that my department at Midwest didn't have to act the way they did, that other departments at the university would have made different decisions and offered me some alternatives when I was pregnant. She helped me revise my vita and told me I should feel comfortable applying for any job I wanted.

"I decided a liberal arts college might be better for me," Karen states. "I was somewhat in a panic, since I had nothing lined up. I felt like I was jumping into the great unknown. I worried about it, but it was also somewhat freeing. I didn't have to worry about what other people would think about me, or what they wanted me to do; I only had to figure out what I wanted."

Eventually Karen did look for a liberal arts faculty position. She reported that she was “picky” about choosing a desirable location, for herself and her family, as well as a college with a good reputation and working conditions.

“I was willing to stay in academia, but only on my own terms. I wasn’t willing to settle for a mediocre school or position. On the other hand, in my temporary government job I had missed the intellectual life of academia—the supposing, and hypothesizing, and playing with ideas. So I went back on the academic job market.”

The first year there were no positions that met Karen’s criteria. The second year she was lucky, however: there were six liberal arts jobs in places acceptable to her and to Tim, and she was offered a desirable one. “Tim was very supportive,” Karen recalls. “If we moved to Worth, he could spend some time finishing his dissertation. He also thought the job was a good one for me. He liked the idea of living in New England, where Worth was located. He was willing to move without even seeing the place. I, on the other hand, was wary and risk-averse. I was worried about what would happen if I didn’t like Worth, or Worth didn’t like me. We’d be stuck out there, with no obvious way of getting out. I also didn’t want to spend five to seven years putting down roots in one place, only to have to move if I were denied tenure. Tim talked me into it.”

At the time of this move to Worth College, the couple’s child was two years old. They “bought as much child care as they could afford” so that Tim could work on completing his dissertation; he also did some part-time consulting for his previous employer in the Midwest, which eased his transition to their new location. Karen, meanwhile, started her tenure clock over at Worth, even though she had taught for four years, and published a book and a number of articles, which, she felt, “was enough to be an associate professor just about anyplace.”

“I didn’t mind starting the tenure process over, because it took the immediate pressure off. I considered myself ‘mommy-tracked’ even though no one ever said that to me, and I never told anyone else that that’s what I was doing,” Karen states. “I was slowing the progress to tenure, on purpose, to give myself more time before that critical decision came up again.” She found the demands of teaching in a small college intense and time-consuming.

“To manage my time, I came up with several tricks, like slotting so much time for preparing for class and not spending any more time than that on preparation, or having a quota of papers to grade every day in order to get them done on time. But I think the most important decision I ever made was to live my life now, as opposed to waiting

until I got tenure to have a life, and just accept the consequences. I would stay in academia on my terms."

She found Worth somewhat more hospitable to her terms. "Many of the faculty here have small children and expect to spend time with them," she said of the college. "I see little kids at work quite often, and no one blinks an eye when I show up with mine. Because it's a small college, far from a big city, I think it probably attracts people who want to have children and spend time with them. Midwest University was terrible on this score. We never heard about anybody having a life outside work, and certainly I didn't see children in the offices."

On both faculties, however, Karen found there are many extracurricular expectations of professors. "There are many after-hours meetings and dinners—work as socializing. I will do some of these, and refuse others—it depends on what is going on at home and how much I have been away recently."

Tim took a couple of years to finish his dissertation. Just as Karen was due to go on "assistant professor leave"—a year provided at half salary so assistant professors can take a full year's leave in their fourth year, prior to the tenure decision—Tim found a great job in a nearby state capital, as a research fellow at the Economics Institute, a private think tank. The institute was an hour's drive away from Worth, but Tim and Karen both report that, "since Worth is in the middle of nowhere," they feel pretty fortunate. It is common for spouses of Worth faculty not to find jobs. As Karen ironically points out, "This mostly applies to women, of course; it seems like when it's the man who can't find work, the couple moves away." And Tim adds that his new position was the kind of job he really wanted to have, one that eventually might take him back to state government, a possible future goal.

During Karen's assistant professor leave she started thinking about having another child. She was ambivalent, mainly because she hated being pregnant and being a pregnant assistant professor at Midwest University had drastically complicated her life. She spent a lot of time talking with other female faculty friends about when they should have children—would it hurt them if they got pregnant now or later, should they take maternity leave, who could they talk to about their decisions, and similar questions. They were aware of the small percentage of female full professors, nationally, who have children at all. It takes so long to finish the Ph.D., then six more years to earn tenure, so that by the time many women finish these first career stages, the best child-birth years are over.

Karen wrestled with her own questions. Should she wait until she came up for tenure to have another baby? She was already in her late

thirties and waiting just made it more unlikely that she would get pregnant. But if she became pregnant while an untenured assistant professor, how would she manage? What would happen? Could she risk her job security a second time, after all she and Tim had already been through?

❖ RELATED READINGS

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- Jacobs, J. (2004). The faculty time divide. *Sociological Forum*, 19(1), 3–27.
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- Schwartz, F. (1989, January/February). Management women and the new facts of life. *Harvard Business Review*, pp. 65–76.
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❖ STUDENT RESPONSE

1. What is the difference between a *dual-career* and a *dual-earner* couple? Which of these terms describes Karen and Tim?
2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of a *dual-career* relationship? How are the advantages different from those of a couple that has a dual-earner relationship?
3. Should work life and family/personal life be integrated or separated? Explain. What are the advantages of integration and of separating work and family? How did Karen and Tim approach this issue?

66 GENDER IN THE WORKPLACE

4. What specific expectations, on the part of their employers, created the most problems for Tim and Karen? Do you think these are common in other professions?
5. Research the idea of “mommy tracks” (special career tracks for mothers) to become familiar with the concept. What is the purpose of mommy tracks? What does Karen mean when she says she “considered herself mommy-tracked”? Do you think mommy tracks are a good idea or not? Why?
6. What institutional policies might have helped Tim and Karen pursue both their careers and their desire for a family? Do you think their employers’ attitudes, as expressed in their family policies or work demands, are typical of the contemporary workplace or not? (See the Appendices for some relevant policy information.)
7. In light of what the case reveals about Karen’s and Tim’s priorities, do you think they should have another child now or not? Why?

APPENDIX A: SUMMARY OF THE FAMILY AND MEDICAL LEAVE ACT (FMLA) OF 1993

The Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) of 1993 became effective August 5, 1993. The FMLA requires employers of 50 or more employees within a 75-mile area to provide up to 12 weeks of unpaid, job-protected leave to eligible employees for certain family and medical reasons. Employees are eligible if they have worked for a covered employer for at least one year and for 1,250 hours over the previous 12 months.

Reason for Taking Leave

An employer must grant unpaid leave to an eligible employee for any of the following reasons:

- for the care of the employee's child (birth or placement for adoption or foster care)
- for the care of the employee's spouse, son or daughter, or parent, who has a serious health condition
- for a serious health condition that makes the employee unable to perform her job

The employee may be required to provide advance leave notice and medical certification.

Job and Benefits Protection

Upon return from FMLA leave, most employees must be restored to their original or equivalent positions with equivalent pay, benefits, and other employment terms. The use of FMLA leave cannot result in the loss of any employment benefit that accrued prior to the start of an employee's leave.

SOURCE: United States Department of Labor, Wage and Hour Division. Retrieved August 25, 2006, at: www.dol.gov

APPENDIX B: FACTS ABOUT PREGNANCY DISCRIMINATION

The Pregnancy Discrimination Act is an amendment to Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Discrimination on the basis of pregnancy, childbirth, or related medical conditions constitutes unlawful sex discrimination under Title VII. Women affected by pregnancy or related conditions must be treated in the same manner as other applicants or employees with similar abilities or limitations.

Hiring

An employer cannot refuse to hire a woman because of her pregnancy as long as she is able to perform the major functions of her job. An employer cannot refuse to hire her because of its prejudices against pregnant workers or the prejudices of coworkers, clients, or customers.

Pregnancy and Maternity Leave

An employer may not single out pregnancy-related conditions for special procedures to determine an employee's ability to work. An employer may, however, use any procedure that is used to screen other employees' ability to work. For example, if an employer requires its employees to submit a doctor's statement concerning their inability to work before granting leave or paying sick benefits, the employer may require employees with pregnancy-related conditions to submit such statements.

If an employee is temporarily unable to perform her job because of pregnancy, the employer must treat her the same as any other temporarily disabled employee; for example, by providing modified tasks, alternative assignments, disability leave, or leave without pay.

Pregnant employees must be permitted to work as long as they are able to perform their jobs. If an employee has been absent from work as a result of a pregnancy-related condition and recovers, her employer may not require her to remain on leave until the baby's birth. An employer may not have a rule that prohibits an employee from returning to work for a predetermined length of time after childbirth.

Employers must hold open a job for a pregnancy-related absence for the same length of time that jobs are held open for employees on sick or disability leave.

SOURCE: U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Retrieved August 25, 2006, at: www.eeoc.gov/facts/fs-preg.html

APPENDIX C: RELEVANT POLICIES— MIDWEST UNIVERSITY AND WORTH COLLEGE

Midwest University's Policy Regarding the Tenure Clock and Childbirth

Requests for extension of the probationary period (the period prior to granting of tenure) with respect to childbirth or adoption shall be submitted by the faculty member in writing to the Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs (with informational copies to the faculty member's department chair and dean) within one year of the birth or adoption. Approval of the request for an extension of up to one year is presumed. The Vice Chancellor will notify the faculty member, department chair, and dean of the action taken.

More than one request may be granted because of responsibilities with respect to childbirth or adoption where more than one birth or adoption occurs during the probationary period. Where a leave of absence of six weeks or more has been granted for childbirth or adoption within one year of the birth or adoption, the total resulting extensions of the probationary period, for each birth or adoption, may not exceed one year.

Worth College's Assistant Professor Leave Policy

Worth has a program of leaves for assistant professors that provides a one-semester leave with support equivalent to full pay, for any eligible assistant professor who is deemed to have a worthy research or other creative project best supported by released time from teaching. Eligibility is restricted to assistant professors who have been reappointed to a four-year second term or whose initial appointments were for a term of more than three years. . . . Such leaves are most often granted in the person's fourth year at the College. . . . Assistant professors are expected to apply for grant funds available outside the College to help support the leave. . . . Should the assistant professor so wish, it may be possible to combine outside funding or a leave without pay with an assistant professor leave, in order to achieve a full-year leave of absence.

Note: This policy was *not* in effect during Karen's service at Midwest University

