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"Maybe baby?" The employment risk of potential parenthood

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Abstract

Research grounded in gender role theories has shown that women face numerous employment disadvantages relative to men, with mothers often facing the greatest obstacles. We extend this literature by proposing that motherhood is not a necessary condition for women to face motherhood penalties. Instead, managers' expectations that an applicant will have a child in the near future (i.e., "maybe baby" expectations) increases their perceptions of risk associated with employing childfree, childbearing-aged women—but not men. Investigating the intersection of gender and age, and integrating economic theories of discrimination, we conceptualize hiring as a risk assessment process, proposing that managers' risk perceptions drive more precarious employment conditions for this group of women. Results from a field study with early career employees (Study 1) and a randomized experiment with hiring managers (Study 2) support our predictions across attitudinal (e.g., desire to offer a temporary job contract; Study 2) and objective indicators (e.g., having a temporary job contract; Study 1); female applicants can also mitigate this "maybe baby" risk by signaling a lack of interest in having children or by emphasizing their commitment and work ethic (Study 2). Our findings suggest that the perceived risks of parenthood can be hazardous for child-bearing-aged, childfree working women who simply may become parents (vs. men and mothers; vs. childfree women who are significantly younger or older than the average age of the first childbearing in the local context).

1 | INTRODUCTION

> "No self-respecting small businessman with a brain in the right place would ever employ a lady of child-bearing age."—Godfrey Bloom, European Parliament Member
>
> (BBC News, 2004).

Women face numerous employment disadvantages relative to men, notwithstanding equal performance and qualifications (Koch et al., 2015). However, not all women are affected equally, as mothers may face greater employment obstacles than childfree women (Crosby et al., 2004; Cuddy et al., 2004; Fuegen et al., 2004; Heilman & Okimoto, 2008; Hideg et al., 2018; King, 2008; Morgenroth & Heilman, 2017; Peus & Traut-Mattausch, 2008), including pregnant women who will noticeably become mothers soon (Hebl et al., 2007; Jones et al., 2020; Morgan et al., 2013; Paustian-Underdahl et al., 2019). However, as the quote above illustrates, it is possible that pregnancy and motherhood are not necessary conditions for women to experience motherhood penalties. Instead, simply being a woman of a particular age may entail expectations of motherhood and perceptions of risk or cost to an employing organization.

In this research, we investigate employment decisions at the intersection of gender and age. We anticipate a "maybe baby" bias wherein managers assume women of child-bearing age will have a

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child in the future and thus ascribe more risk to childfree women (vs. men and mothers; vs. childfree women who are significantly younger or older than the average age of the first childbearing in the local context), ultimately reflected in more precarious employment[1] decisions (e.g., offering shorter, more temporary job contracts to female applicants expected to become parents). By showing that even childfree women face motherhood penalties, we argue that the distinct parenthood boundaries previously outlined by existing theory and research are not as distinguishable in practice, and that women may face "motherhood bias" in employment processes irrespective of their plans for parenthood. While management, economics, and sociology scholars have theorized about the potential employment effects of future parenthood (e.g., Becker et al., 2019; Biewen & Seifert, 2018; Conrad & Cannings, 1997; Gloor et al., 2018; Roth, 2003), to our knowledge, there is no explicit evidence of this mechanism. Taking a psychological approach, we aim to provide micro-level evidence of maybe baby bias in decision-makers' beliefs and behaviors toward applicants by taking an intersectional approach (Crenshaw, 1989) and integrating economic theories of discrimination (Arrow, 1973; Phelps, 1972) necessary to understand how to reduce this bias in employment more broadly.

This novel analysis of how *future* childbearing expectations shape managers' perceptions of and reactions toward potential and actual employees makes three key contributions. First, the bulk of existing research on gender at work has been guided by gender role theories (Eagly, 1987; Eagly & Wood, 2012; Heilman, 1983, 2012). The current research extends current knowledge by incorporating insights from intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989) and by outlining the importance of the intersection of gender with parenthood and age to more accurately construct the meaning and experience of early career women.

Second, by exploring a novel outcome in perceptions of risk (i.e., subjective judgments about the probability and importance of an outcome, as well as how concerned one is about the potential consequence; see Slovic, 1987), this research goes beyond the variables often studied in existing gender and parenthood research (e.g., judgments of agency, competence, commitment, and dependability; Cuddy et al., 2004; Hideg et al., 2018; King, 2008). In contrast, economic theories of discrimination (i.e., statistical discrimination, Arrow, 1973; Phelps, 1972) argue that employers estimate the costs of hiring potential employees based on their demographics as a profit-maximizing response to uncertainty, with "risk" as important as the specific evaluative consequence. In other words, when making decisions with financial implications (e.g., hiring), we consider the potential outcome *and* the likelihood of that outcome (see Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). Integrating these theoretical insights from economics, we examine managers' uncertainty about early career women's future childbearing as a trigger for perceptions of greater risk of future organizational costs or losses; we link these perceptions with biased employment decisions, illustrating that risk affects early career women's concrete employment outcomes.

Finally, by focusing on early career professionals, we examine employees' experiences at the "leakiest" point in the career pipeline (Catalyst, 2018; Eagly & Carli, 2007). Because this critical career period coincides with women's prime childbearing years (i.e., when they are perceived to be fertile and within the normative range of childbearing, generally between 25 and 39 years of age; Pew Research Center, 2018; The World Factbook, 2019), it further highlights the relevance of potential motherhood—in addition to actual motherhood (see Crosby et al., 2004; Verniers, 2020)—as an underpinning mechanism of women's underrepresentation in leadership.

In two studies, we examine "maybe baby" bias by investigating the effects of applicant gender, age, and potential parenthood on women's employment risk. By exploring perceptions of risk in hiring, we argue that the ambiguity surrounding the "maybe baby" intentions of young women blurs the lines around women's parental status, resulting in perceptions of increased risk of future organizational costs when hiring young female professionals. We further argue that employers compensate for this increased risk by offering childfree women more precarious and uncertain employment conditions. In Study 1, we provide empirical evidence of "maybe baby" bias by illustrating that early career, childfree women are more often placed in more precarious employment positions compared with their male and parent counterparts. We operationalize more precarious employment outcomes by examining job tenure or length (i.e., how long an employee has worked in a specific role) and type of employment contract (i.e., temporary vs. permanent). In Study 2, we replicate and extend Study 1 findings using an experiment with hiring managers, showing causal evidence that maybe baby bias can be mitigated by providing clearer evidence about an employee's (non)interest in having children (i.e., manipulating the mediator), alongside a comparison condition reinforcing the target's work ethic. Together, these studies consider and test key boundary conditions and mechanisms for gender biases more generally, while also constituting the first explicit test of "maybe baby" bias in employment decisions (see Figure 1 for a complete overview of the theoretical model).

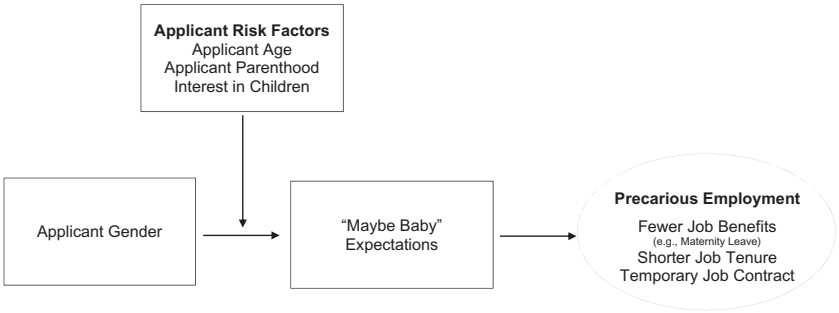
2 | THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK & HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

2.1 | Blurring the lines of parental status: Moderators of "maybe baby" risk

Derived from critical race and feminist perspectives, intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989) highlights the meaning and experience of simultaneous membership in multiple social categories. Although the intersection of gender and parenthood (Benard & Correll, 2010; Cuddy et al., 2004; Fuegen et al., 2004; Güngör

[1]Although the term "precarious employment" is typically used to denote self-employment, temporary or gig work, consistent with the review by Benach and colleagues (2014), we consider it "a multidimensional construct encompassing dimensions such as employment insecurity" (p. 230).

FIGURE 1 Complete theoretical model



& Biernat, 2009; Heilman & Okimoto, 2007, 2008; Okimoto & Heilman, 2012), gender and age (Goldberg et al., 2004; Newton & Simutin, 2015; Thomas, 2020), and race, gender, and parenthood (Correll et al., 2007) have been examined in the context of hiring and promotion decisions, it is important to directly consider how gender and parenthood expectations intersect at specific ages. As age is a key demographic factor in the context of "maybe baby" bias, we argue that considering age is particularly informative, offering a more comprehensive picture of gender hiring discrimination (see Perry & Finkelstein, 1999).

Just as gender and motherhood might be used to reconcile uncertainty over leadership capability or job commitment, such demographic characteristics can also inform the anticipated costs of employment. For example, early career employees might require more training or mentoring; young women, in particular, might require costly childbearing entitlements. In absence of clear information about a young woman's intention to leave the organization in the next few years to have children, that cost may be nonetheless inferred by other available characteristics. In many countries, it is illegal for employers to ask about family status or planning, or at least, it is not required for employees to reveal this information if asked (e.g., in Switzerland; Swiss Employment Law, 2014; in the United States or U.S., The Pregnancy Discrimination Act, 1978).

Given these costs, decision-makers may use imperfect signals (see Spence, 1973), in this case, demographics, to infer an employee's work and family priorities. The two strongest demographic signals here are likely to be gender and age.[2] Unlike childrearing intentions, these signals are more often listed in application materials, if not inferable (e.g., from graduation dates), publicly available (e.g., on social media), or apparent in the interview process. Applicant age is a rather reliable, biological indicator of fertility (Petit, 2007; Thomas, 2020), and thus serves as a heuristic for the likelihood of future (new) parenthood. The average age of a woman having her first child in our research contexts of Switzerland is 30.7 years (Study 1; The World Factbook, 2019) and 26.4 years in the U.S. (Study 2; The World Factbook, 2019); although these averages increase a few years for more educated mothers, few women have children after age 40 (Livingston, 2015; Swiss Info, 2017). Applicant gender also triggers expectations about the likelihood of human capital investment losses and potential turnover hazards because of the asymmetric burden of childbearing and childrearing on mothers (Crosby et al., 2004; OECD, 2014), and women's greater likelihood of taking parental leave and for a longer time than men (OECD, 2016, 2017; The Council of Economic Advisors, 2014). We argue that this combination of gender and age affects managers' perceived risk of the organization incurring costs from an employee's future childbearing (for macro-level evidence supporting this argument in the U.S., see Thomas, 2020; in German-speaking Europe, see Becker et al., 2019).

Although utilizing these demographic heuristics may (rightly or wrongly) help to make more accurate cost/benefit judgments, using applicant gender and age cues to predict employee behavior and inform hiring decisions generates a significant career challenge for professionals—particularly women—because their key career formation years coincide with their prime childbearing years (see Eagly & Carli, 2007). Moreover, making decisions based on potential parenthood, even if rational and reflecting actual costs, constitutes legally actionable pregnancy discrimination in many countries, including the U.S., U.K., Australia, and the E.U. (see International Labor Organization, 2012). Yet, as with many biases, they nonetheless persist in subtler forms (see Grandey et al., 2020, and Hebl et al., 2020, for recent reviews). Aligned with intersectionality theory, we predict that applicant gender and age are used as signals of potential childbearing that factor into hiring managers' employment decisions. Thus, focusing on childbearing-aged employees (Study 1) and applicants (Study 2), we formally predict:

Hypothesis 1a *Childfree, childbearing-aged women experience more precarious employment conditions (e.g., shorter job tenure and shorter job contracts) than childfree, similar-aged men.*

We elaborate on previous research to consider perceived risk as a relevant process that disadvantages women in the hiring process—disadvantages derived from the potentiality of *future* motherhood, rather than the attributes implied by women's current parental status. To reiterate, perceived risk refers to subjective judgments about the probability and importance of an outcome, as well as how concerned one is about the potential consequence (see Slovic, 1987).

[2]Although some scholars may consider marriage as an additional, third indicator of potential parenthood, being married is not a necessary precursor for having children (particularly in the absence of more critical information about age). Similarly, it is common for couples to have children before marriage in our research context for Study 1 (e.g., there are tax disincentives for couples to marry in Switzerland; Swiss Info, 2018, 2019). Thus, marriage may be somewhat outdated and/or less relevant as a signal of "potential parenthood", although we do account for it as a control variable (Study 1).

Personnel decisions can be considered risk assessment processes because organizations invest ample time and financial resources into employee selection, training, and career development. During employee selection decisions, managers collect and evaluate information about applicants with the goal to hire a new employee who is likely to be effective in the job (i.e., low perceived investment risk). Although these processes include consideration of applicants' education, knowledge, skills, abilities, and personal attributes, the inherent complexity of the job means that there is often a high degree of uncertainty over which factors are most predictive of success and the validity of the indicators. For example, an applicant might present as having high job commitment, but there is still a risk that her apparent commitment is inaccurate or unstable over time. Importantly, past bias research in psychology and management has overlooked the riskiness of an applicant's suitability for a job as a potential contributor to personnel selection, despite the widespread role of risk calculations in decision-making processes in economics (e.g., Aigner & Cain, 1977; Arrow, 1973; Kahneman & Tversky, 1979; Phelps, 1972).

In the current research, given the potential costs of childbearing (e.g., parental leave, turnover) and childrearing (e.g., job commitment), combined with its asymmetrical impact on women (see Heilman, 1983, 2012), we propose that young, childfree women will be perceived as "risky" hires. Although they might be evaluated as committed and suitable for future organizational leadership, there is still uncertainty around future childbearing and the associated costs to the organization—a childbearing risk. Interestingly, although people may assume mothers are less committed to their job than childfree women, those childfree women might be seen as riskier hires given the uncertainty over their future employment trajectory and the potential for losing the organization's investment in her career. Women who have had children and return to work show willingness and ability to combine work and family, while these intentions and abilities for childbearing-aged, childfree women remain unknown (Gloor, Li, Lim, et al., 2018). Thus, we predict:

Hypothesis 1b *Childfree, childbearing-aged women experience more precarious employment conditions (e.g., shorter job tenure and shorter job contracts) than childbearing-aged mothers.*

Until now, we have alluded to general, linear effects of target age on "maybe baby" expectations toward childfree women of childbearing age. However, as argued earlier, age is likely to be a critical conditional factor. Specifically, we propose that childfree women face more "maybe baby" expectations (compared with childfree men and mothers) within a general period of "prime childbearing years" (i.e., approximately ages 25 until 39; Thomas, 2020),[3] increasing within this biologically fertile period if they remain childfree (Petit, 2007) because gatekeepers' childbearing expectations also increase as long as women are perceived to remain "fertile" and childfree. This prediction aligns with explicit messages from practitioners, such as the sentiments reflected in our opening quote (BBC News, 2004). Managers have also vocalized similar themes in qualitative research (e.g., "after three women in this company had gotten pregnant one shortly after the other, my boss did not want to hire [young] women anymore"; Peus & Traut-Mattausch, 2008, p. 565; see also Fitzsimmons et al., 2014; and Joshi et al., 2015). Formally, we predict:

Hypotheses 2a–b Childfree women experience more precarious employment conditions than (a) childfree men and (b) mothers if they remain childfree with increasing age within their prime childbearing years.

Importantly, we propose that maybe baby expectations are dynamic, revolving around the local group average age of women's first childbearing. This reasoning echoes the core tenets of statistical discrimination theory (e.g., Arrow, 1973; Phelps, 1972), which argues that group averages are incorporated as valuable input when decision-makers have imperfect information. Here, because decision-makers have incomplete information that they believe is relevant to female applicants' long-term productivity in a job (e.g., their family plans), they infer its likelihood based on applicants' ages relative to the local average age of maternity. For example, managers may ascribe a 38-year-old, childfree woman in Europe with a moderate likelihood of future childbearing, while the same applicant in the U.S. may be ascribed a very low likelihood, because the average age of maternity is years later in Europe versus the U.S., even for educated women (see Roser, 2017). Hence, we predict that maybe baby expectations and their negative employment consequences peak the latest in Study 1, preceded by Study 3, anchored around the average age of the first childbearing for educated, professional women in these contexts.

2.2 | Plan of study

In summary, we examine "maybe baby" expectations toward childbearing-aged female employees and same-aged men. To outline the important moderators and boundary conditions of our proposed effects, we examine employee age, parenthood, and interest in children as key factors triggering heightened judgments of risk. To demonstrate the generalizability of these "maybe baby" effects we operationalize precarious employment in multiple ways with managers' beliefs (e.g., willingness to grant precarious employment conditions such as temporary contracts) and concrete, objective measures (e.g., childbearing-aged women's shorter job tenure and more temporary contracts relative to their male and mother peers). We first test for "maybe baby" bias in the field with a sample of early career professionals (Study 1), then

[3]The upper limit of this range is notably wider than the 25–29 "maternity" age range suggested by Grandey et al. (2020) in their recent review because we focus on highly educated professionals for whom the age of the first childbearing is years later (Livingston, 2015).

via an experiment with hiring managers evaluating early career professionals (Study 2).

3 | STUDY 1

To provide evidence of the effects of "maybe baby" bias in employment, we analyze field data from a sample of early career academics in Switzerland. This sample provides a suitable context to test our hypothesized effects because compared with other countries, academics (e.g., research assistants or medical students) in Switzerland are employees—not just students—with employment contracts and duties separate from their studies, comparable pay with similar roles outside the university, as well as legal rights and employment conditions rivaling that of nonacademic employees (see Higher Education in Switzerland, 2006).

Importantly, the context and sample selected may also be particularly useful for identifying a "maybe baby" effect. The early career nature of our sample overlays with the prime family formation years (i.e., the average age of the first childbearing for women is 31.7 years; Swiss Federal Statistical Office, 2016), making childbearing expectations particularly salient. Furthermore, the frequency of job changes in academia (e.g., from research assistant to research associate) also make this an ideal context to study "maybe baby" bias, because job contracts tend to change multiple times during the early career period (e.g., due to changes in project funding and grants, finishing and defending one's dissertation or habilitation, etc.). Finally, academic supervisors in Switzerland typically have extremely autonomous decision-making power over employee contract length and contract type, as well as discretion on whether or not to (dis)continue those contracts. Supervisors also have rich information about those employees, including the demographic factors discussed earlier (i.e., gender, parental status, and age), which are often included on résumés; typically, they also have more intimate information that is rarely included on résumés such as relationship status and/or plans for a family. Notably, these factors may all serve as relevant "maybe baby" signals, shaping managers' employment decisions.

To test for the effect of these signals on women's career trajectories, we operationalize precarious employment conditions in two ways: with job tenure (which reflects how long an employee has worked in a specific position) and job contract (which reflects the temporary vs. permanent nature of the formal employment agreement). Specifically, we would predict that childfree women may have shorter job tenure and a higher probability of having a temporary (vs. permanent) job contract compared with their male and mother counterparts as they approach the upper end of their prime childbearing years (i.e., between ages 25 and 39). Indeed, only 6% of mothers have a child at age 40 or later in Switzerland (Swiss Info, 2017). We base these predictions on our theoretical arguments that childfree women are the "riskiest" demographic group to employ, with this age range being the "riskiest" period to employ them. Indeed, if managers view childfree women as the riskiest employees, then this could be reflected in more precarious employment relative to men and mothers. Our measured outcomes reflect this uncertainty because it comprises two pathways through which childfree women could be treated as riskier and more costly: via a greater likelihood of selection for shorter-term, temporary positions and/or rejection for longer-term, permanent positions.

4 | STUDY 1 METHOD

4.1 | Sample & procedure

The data was collected from research assistants (e.g., PhD and MD students), research associates (e.g., post-docs and senior researchers), and early career professors (e.g., assistant professors) employed by 12 universities in Switzerland. These organizations were selected because they represent all federal and cantonal (i.e., state) universities in the country. A total of 1,030 participants responded to the email invitation sent by internal contacts at each organization (e.g., an administrator in the university president's office) as part of a survey on job stressors and supports. Incentives included a chance to be entered in a lottery to win a gift card.

After excluding participants with missing data (e.g., gender, parenthood, age, and job tenure), 791 remained (76.8%); we then excluded one extreme outlier—a mother—whose job tenure was +7.73*SD*. Women (50.6%) comprised half of the sample, but more participants were childfree (63.3%) than parents ($M_{children}$ = .43, *SD* = .74; 19.6% had 1 child). Nearly half of the sample were research assistants (45.8%), followed by research associates (28.2%), assistant professors or higher (8.9%), and those now working outside of research (17.2%).[4] Mean employee age was 33.1 years (*SD* = 4.4) and employee job tenure was 2.42 years (*SD* = 1.69).

4.2 | Measures

4.2.1 | Job tenure

We continuously measured years in employees' current position but with reversed valence for a more intuitive interpretation aligned with our theorizing (i.e., positive values indicate more precarious employment).

4.2.2 | Job contract

We dichotomously measured job contract type for employees' current position (0 = permanent, 1 = temporary), such that positive values indicate more precarious employment, consistent with our coding of job tenure.

[4]Of note, our results remain largely unchanged when calculated without the last group of participants.

TABLE 1 Descriptive statistics and correlations (Study 1)

Variables	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Gender	.51	.50	–							
2. Parenthood	.37	.48	.00	–						
3. Age (in years)	33.13	4.49	−.13***	.36***	–					
4. Job tenure (in years)	−2.42	1.69	.04	−.02	−.14***	–				
5. Job contract	.92	.27	.05	.02	.03	−.01	–			
6. Discipline	.53	.50	−.08*	.01	−.07	−.02	−.14***	–		
7. Pregnancy/Baby (in last year)	.22	.41	.09*	.70***	.03	−.10**	−.04	.02	–	
8. Position	1.97	1.11	−.07	.27***	.50***	.28***	.00	.01	.09*	–

Note: Variable coding is as follows: gender (male = 0, female = 1), parenthood (childfree = 0, parent = 1), discipline (non-STEM = 0, STEM = 1), pregnancy/baby in the last year (no = 0, yes = 1), position (PhD/MD = 1, post-doc = 2, assistant professor = 3, other = 4). Job Tenure and Job Contract (0 = permanent, 1 = temporary) are recoded such that higher = more precarious employment. *Ns* = 790–791.
*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$.

4.2.3 | Gender, parenthood, and age

We coded participant gender (0 = male, 1 = female)[5] and parenthood (0 = childfree, 1 = parent) dichotomously, but continuously measured age (in years).

4.2.4 | Covariates

We include arguably objective—or exogenous—demographic and job characteristics as covariates. For example, 174 participants reported that they or their partner had become pregnant or had a baby in the last year (1 = yes, 0 = no),[6] which may influence job tenure, for example, if participants include parental leave in their estimates. Some scholars argue that being in a committed marriage or partnership is a normative expectation of modern parenthood (e.g., King & Botsford, 2009), so we included a dichotomous variable of being married/in a serious relationship (1) or not (0). However, this variable did not significantly predict our outcomes (*p*s > .05) nor did it change our pattern of results and was thus dropped for parsimony. Similarly, we also included discipline or area of study to account for employment differences across fields (e.g., time to complete a dissertation; see AMACAD, 2020; coded 1 = STEM or Science Engineering Technology & Mathematics, 0 = non-STEM such as humanities). Finally, we also included position (i.e., PhD/MD student, post-doc, assistant professor, other) to account for hierarchical level and employment differences associated with those levels.

5 | STUDY 1 RESULTS & DISCUSSION

We calculated Generalized Structural Equation (GSEM) models (Stata, version 16.0) using employee gender, age (standardized), and parenthood status to predict employee job tenure and job contract type in a single model, including the covariance between the two outcomes (*p*s = .064–.172 across models). We clustered the *SE* by cultural regions (i.e., German, French, Italian, and other) to account for participant nonindependence for a small number of groups in accordance with recent recommendations (e.g., see McNeish et al., 2017). See Table 1 for the descriptive statistics and correlations. Although typical *SEM* fit statistics cannot be calculated for GSEM models, AIC for the main effects model was 3,018.73 and BIC was 3,028.07; because both values decreased when adding the interaction (AIC = 2,994.82; BIC = 3,004.16), this implies improved model fit (Kenny, 2020). See Table 2 for the complete GSEM model results.

5.1 | GSEM path model results

In a single, combined model, we predicted employee job tenure and job contract type from employee gender, parenthood, age, and their interactions. As predicted, childfree women reported having shorter job tenure than childfree men (*contrast* = .33, *SE* = .01, $p < .001$, 95%CI [.30, .35]) and mothers (*contrast* = .95, *SE* = .13, $p < .001$, 95%CI [.69, 1.21]). Similarly, childfree women were also more likely to have temporary job contracts than childfree men (*contrast* = .05, *SE* = .03, $p = .093$, 95%CI [−.008, .10])—although the difference was not statistically significant—and mothers (*contrast* = .02, *SE* = .01, $p = .007$, 95%CI [.01, .04]). These results generally support Hypotheses 1a and 1b, which predicted more precarious employment for childfree women than childfree men and mothers, respectively.

Results further revealed a significant 3-way interaction of employee gender, parenthood, and age predicting job tenure ($b = -0.70$, *SE* = .01, $p < .001$), such that childfree women reported shorter job tenure than childfree men, a difference that increased with age (simple slopes calculated at −1*SD* or 28.7 years: $b = -0.12$, *SE* = .02, $p < .001$; *M* age or 33.1 years: $b = 0.33$, *SE* = .01, $p < .001$; and +1SD or 37.5 years: $b = 0.77$, *SE* = .02, $p < .001$). Similarly, childfree women also reported shorter job tenure than mothers, a difference that also

[5]We also had a third category of "other/please indicate" gender, but no participant selected this option.

[6]Of note, our results remain largely unchanged when calculated without these participants.

TABLE 2 GSEM path analyses (Study 1)

Variables	Job tenure (*SE*)	Job contract (*SE*)	Job tenure (*SE*)	Job contract (*SE*)
Constant	−3.34 (.10)***	0.85 (.04)***	−3.46 (.06)***	0.85 (.04)***
Gender	0.02 (.10)	0.03 (.04)	0.33 (.01)***	0.05 (.03)
Parenthood	−0.57 (.11)***	−0.03 (.01)*	−0.43 (.19)*	−0.01 (.02)
Age	−0.66 (.10)***	0.02 (.02)***	−0.88 (.14)***	0.03 (.01)**
Gender × Parenthood	–	–	−0.52 (.28)	−0.01 (.02)
Gender × Age	–	–	0.44 (.01)***	0.01 (.00)**
Parenthood × Age	–	–	0.36 (.07)***	−0.02 (.01)
Age × Gender × Parenthood	–	–	−0.70 (.01)***	−0.06 (.01)***
Discipline	−0.05 (.09)	0.08 (.03)*	−0.07 (.12)***	0.08 (.03)**
Pregnancy/Baby	0.71 (.05)***	0.04 (.01)***	0.81 (.10)***	0.02 (.01)*
Post-doc	1.63 (.07)***	0.04 (.00)***	1.64 (.07)***	0.04 (.00)***
Assistant professor	1.70 (.01)***	−0.01 (.04)	1.71 (.01)***	−0.02 (.04)
Other position	2.25 (.30)***	−0.02 (.03)	2.25 (.33)***	−0.02 (.03)
Log pseudolikelihood	−1,507.36		−1,495.41	
AIC	3,018.73		2,994.82	
BIC	3,028.07		3,004.16	

Note: Variable coding is as follows: gender (male = 0, female = 1), parenthood (childfree = 0, parent = 1), discipline (non-STEM = 0, STEM = 1), pregnancy/baby (no = 0, yes = 1), job contract (0 = permanent, 1 = temporary), job tenure coded such that higher numbers = more precarious employment conditions. Participant age is standardized. Reference group for position is PhD/MD. *Ns* = 790–791.

*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$.

increased with age (slopes calculated at −1*SD* or 28.7 years: $b = 0.61$, $SE = .21$, $p = .003$; *M* age or 33.1 years: $b = 0.95$, $SE = .13$, $p < .001$; and +1SD or 37.5 years: $b = 1.29$, $SE = .07$, $p < .001$) (see Figure 2).

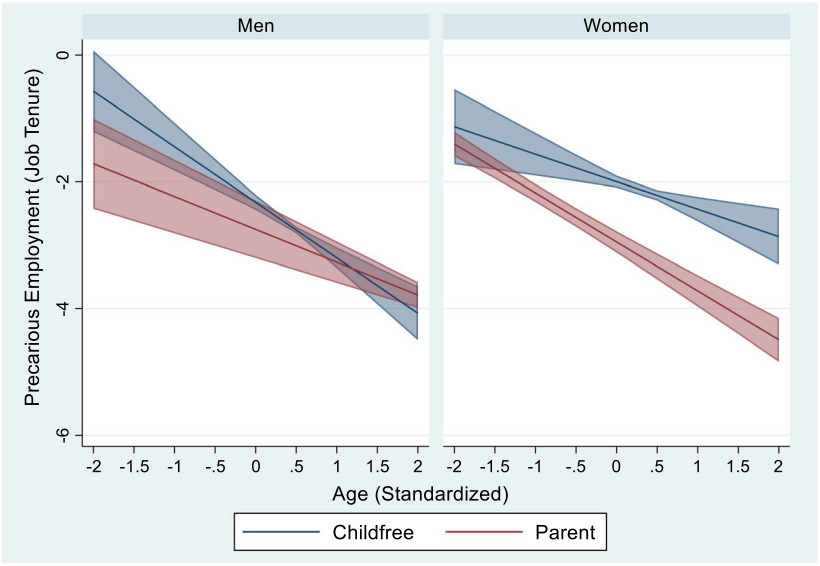
Similarly, results further revealed a significant 3-way interaction of employee gender, parenthood, and age job contract type ($b = -0.06$, $SE = .01$, $p < .001$), such that childfree women reported shorter job tenure than childfree men, a difference that increased with age (simple slopes calculated at −1*SD* or 28.7 years: $b = 0.04$, $SE = .03$, $p = .236$; *M* age or 33.1 years: $b = 0.05$, $SE = .03$, $p = .093$; and +1SD or 37.5 years: $b = 0.07$, $SE = .02$, $p = .003$). Similarly, childfree women also reported shorter job tenure than mothers, a difference that also increased with age (slopes calculated at −1*SD* or 28.7 years: $b = -0.06$, $SE = .01$, $p < .001$; *M* age or 33.1 years: $b = 0.02$, $SE = .01$, $p = .007$; and +1SD or 37.5 years: $b = 0.10$, $SE = .02$, $p < .001$) (see Figure 2). Together, these results support Hypotheses 2a–b, which predicted more precarious employment for childfree women than childfree men and mothers (respectively), with increasing age within the prime childbearing years.

In sum, these results generally supported our hypotheses, such that the negative effect of being a woman on more precarious employment conditions (i.e., shorter job tenure and a higher probability of having a temporary job contract) was strongest for childfree women, particularly older childfree women (i.e., in their mid-to-late 30s); results generally replicated across both precarious employment outcomes: job tenure and type of job contract. Further underlining the idea that maybe baby expectations may peak just after the average age of childbearing, analyses of the curvilinear effects of age (i.e., age^2) revealed a peak in precarious employment conditions a few years after this time—but only for childfree women (see Figure A1).

While these results generally supported our hypotheses, we cannot rule out all employee-based explanations (e.g., childfree women seek out shorter, more temporary job contracts or new mothers have longer job tenure due to recent maternity leaves—even though we controlled for the latter). Thus, in Study 2, we conduct an experiment with hiring managers to facilitate causal claims and more explicitly test our proposed mechanism of "maybe baby" expectations.

6 | STUDY 2

Study 1 showed that age, gender, and current parenthood combined to elicit more precarious employment for childfree women who remained childfree during their prime childbearing years. This study showed implicit evidence of "maybe baby" bias and decision-makers' tendency to compensate for that expected risk and costs of a potential pregnancy with more precarious employment conditions. But, this perceived risk is implied in the outcome variable rather than explicitly measured or manipulated. This is consistent with the broader motherhood literature in economics, where scholars manipulate various applicant demographics (e.g., gender, parenthood, age, and sexual orientation; Baert, 2014;



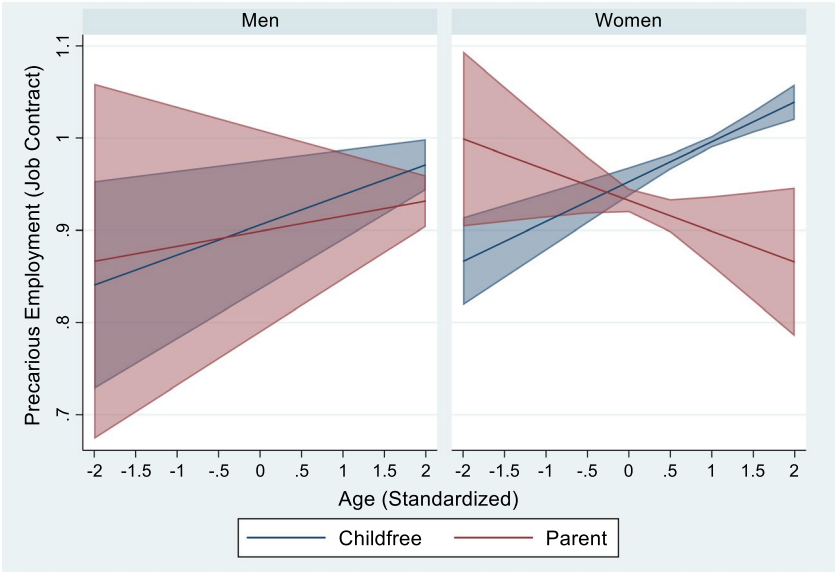


FIGURE 2 Job tenure and job contract according to employee gender, parenthood, and age (Study 1). The *y*-axes are coded such that higher values represent more precarious employment (i.e., 0 = 0 years of job tenure and 1 = temporary contract) to align with our theorizing. To facilitate interpretation, mean age = 33.1 years (*SD* = 4.4). Bands represent 95% CIs. *Ns* = 790–791

Becker et al., 2019; Biewen & Seifert, 2018; Petit, 2007; Skilling, 2014), then assess the effects of these characteristics on employment outcomes—most often interview invitations. Yet, these results—and the results from Study 1—can only show implicit evidence of a future parenthood risk. The predictors of interview invitations are also not necessarily the same as the predictors of hiring (Johnson et al., 2016).

In Study 2, we test this mechanism by manipulating the mediator (Pirlott & MacKinnon, 2016; Stone-Romero & Rosopa, 2010), applicant interest in children, to show that—all else equal—managers distinguish between childfree women whom they expect will become mothers versus women they do not expect will become mothers. In doing so, we aim to outline the specific, micro-level decision-making process driving these effects, which is necessary to understand how to reduce this bias in hiring and employment decisions more broadly. However, because some applicants may want children one day, we also test the third strategy from research on hiring discrimination toward pregnant women (Morgan et al., 2013): emphasizing applicant work ethic (without mentioning children, family, or interest in either).

Formally:

Hypothesis 3 *Managers will award childfree women they expect will (vs. will not) have a child with more precarious employment conditions.*

Because most of the existing, macro-level and indirect evidence of "maybe baby" bias hails from German- and French-speaking Europe (e.g., Becker et al., 2019; Biewen & Seifert, 2018; Gloor, Li, Lim, et al., 2018; Petit, 2007), but some U.S. research has also provided some macro-level and indirect evidence of "maybe baby" bias (e.g., Roth, 2003; Thomas, 2020), we examine a U.S. context in Study 2. This is also important to inform the rich and relatively more prolific work-family research typically hailing from the U.S., but often lacking experimental methods (see Casper et al., 2007; Williams et al., 2016, for

reviews). However, our "maybe baby" risk theorizing centers around the "prime childbearing years." Because our data thus far hails from Europe, but women's age upon the birth of their first child is significantly younger in the U.S. (The World Factbook, 2019), we predict that—in contrast to Study 1—maybe baby risk will be higher toward younger applicants (i.e., 30 years) than older applicants (i.e., 40 years) in Study 2. This idea is further underlined by macro-level research from economics that showed promotion penalties for women ages 39 and younger (vs. 40 years and older) in the U.S. after the federal increase in unpaid leave for the birth/care of a new child (i.e., the Family Medical Leave Act or FMLA; Thomas, 2020). Thus, we propose that maybe baby expectations and their negative consequences are anchored around the average age of the first childbearing, which is somewhat earlier in this context (vs. Study 1).

7 | STUDY 2 METHOD

7.1 | Sample & procedure

We recruited participants with hiring experience from Prolific Academic, a web-based recruitment platform with a reputation for high-quality data (Gloor, Gazdag, et al., 2020; Peer et al., 2017), in exchange for £1.00GBP. In total, 400 eligible participants (i.e., employed American adults) began the survey and 376[7] (50.8% men, 48.4% women, .8% other gender) finished with complete data (94.0%). Participants were an average age of 42.9 years (SD = 12.8), identified as White/Caucasian (85.1%), Black/African American (7.7%), Hispanic/Latinx (5.6%), Asian American/Pacific Islander (1.3%), or Mixed/Other (1.3%); multiple selections were possible. Participants reported having significant working experience (M = 21.4 years, SD =11.9).

In a 6-condition (age 30-years old vs. 40-years old) × interest in children (yes vs. no; and a comparison commitment/work ethic condition that did not mention children), between-subjects design, participants took part in a "social media study." Each participant was presented with two profiles (i.e., LinkedIn and Facebook)[8] from 1 of 2 targets (Jennifer Davis or Melissa Brown). Each profile contained the same information: name, gender, age, education, current position, and previous work experience. Target gender was indicated by applicant names and profile photos including the applicants' faces, which were partially occluded (ostensibly for anonymity).

Targets were described as coming from a database of applicants who had recently applied to leadership-track positions in the southeastern geographical area. Applicants' ages were indirectly indicated by listing their BA and MBA degree graduation years, implying ages 30 and 40.

7.1.1 | Manipulated interest in children

Interest in children was manipulated subtly within the Facebook post showing outdoor photos alongside comments implying a lack of interest in having children (i.e., "Travelers always! We could never do this with kids!") versus interest in having children (i.e., "Had so much fun with my niece today! Excited to have kids of my own one day."). The third condition (commitment) provided no reference to children but also included an outdoor photo and text, "I am an extremely dedicated person willing to put in the work required to get the job done!" (Morgan et al., 2013). For the complete materials, see the Appendix.

7.2 | Measures

7.2.1 | Precarious employment conditions

We employed a new method to encourage honest responding to sensitive questions (see Engeler & Raghubir, 2018): after asking participants how they believed others would respond to the questions,[9] we asked participants about their own willingness to offer various job conditions to the applicant using a 3-item, self-developed scale with high face validity including job contract type and length (which were outcomes in Study 1) and benefits (e.g., maternity leave, a key factor related to "maybe baby" bias in previous research; Gloor, Li, Lim, et al., 2018, and implicitly implied in Study 1, because all organizations studied offered significantly more maternity leave than maternity leave). Items included, … "you would offer … an unlimited contract?" (reverse-coded), …a temporary or conditional job offer?", and … limited benefits?", rated from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5); $\alpha = .69$.

7.2.2 | Manipulation and comprehension checks

To ensure our manipulations were effective and participants paid attention, we asked about the applicants' gender, age, degree (i.e., MBA) and field of study (i.e., finance). On average, participants answered more than 3 of the 4 items correctly (M = 3.24, SD =0.87).[10] We included these questions at the end of the survey so as not to reveal the true purpose of our study and included this score as a covariate.

[7]An a priori power analysis conducted with G*Power to detect a small effect (f = .13) recommended a sample size of 432 to achieve a .80 level of power. However, a post-hoc power analysis based on the smallest significant effect in this study reveal a .74 level of power (Faul et al., 2007, 2009).

[8]Gatekeepers increasingly use social media to inform their employment decisions; although often a supplement to more traditional materials (e.g., a résumé), here, the LinkedIn profiles contained the same information included in a résumé (see Brown & Vaughn, 2011; Roth et al., 2016).

[9]Although these items were not of particular interest for this study and included chiefly to encourage honest responding, in response to a reviewer request, we can report that these three items (= .68) were significantly and positively correlated with the self-rated precarious employment conditions (r = .660, p < .001).

[10]Results remain unchanged in size and significance when including only the manipulation checks (i.e., applicant age and gender) as covariates. We also calculated these results excluding those who incorrectly answered the gender or age manipulation checks; results changed only slightly (i.e., the interaction of applicant condition and age became b = −0.21, SE = .11, p = .053 for the 40-year-old applicants, compared with the previous result, b = −0.37, SE = .02, p < .001); doing so increased the magnitude of the coefficient, but also the SE, thereby reducing power.

TABLE 3 Descriptive statistics, correlations, and scale reliabilities (Study 2)

Variables	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Committed app	.33	.47	–					
2. No children app	.34	.47	−.50***	–				
3. Children app	.33	.47	−.50***	−.50***	–			
4. App age	.51	.50	−.03	.01	.02	–		
5. Precarious employment	2.74	.82	−.06	.05	.01	.05	–	
6. Checks	3.24	.87	.18**	−.05	−.13*	−.28***	−.17**	–

Note: App = Applicant. Checks = manipulation and comprehension checks (0–4, higher = better). $N = 376$.
*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$.

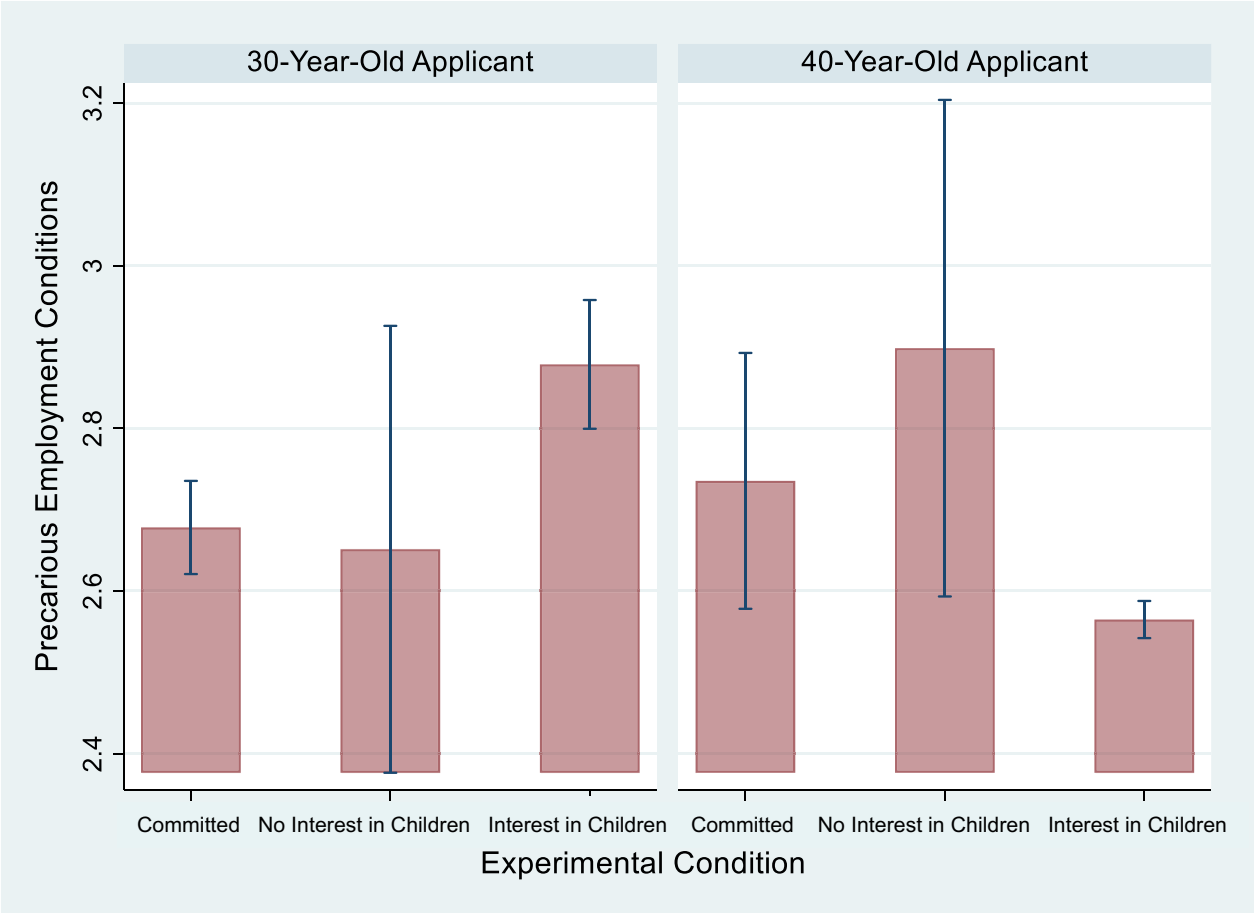


FIGURE 3 Precarious employment conditions by applicant interest in children or commitment/work ethic (Study 2). The "committed" applicant emphasized their commitment/work ethic without mentioning family or children; the "no interest in children" applicant indicated no interest in children; the "interest in children" applicant indicated interest in having children one day. The original precarious employment conditions scale ranged from 1 "strongly disagree" to 5 "strongly agree." Error bars denote 95% CIs. $N = 376$

7.2.3 | Covariates

Upon reviewer request, we included the participant gender ×parenthood interaction, to account for demographic similarity (e.g., a mom rating a mom).

8 | STUDY 2 RESULTS & DISCUSSION

We calculated results with GSEM in Stata (version 16.0). Although GSEM is rarely used in management and psychology research to analyze experimental data, it is particularly suited for this study

TABLE 4 GSEM path analyses (Study 2)

Variable	Precarious employment conditions *b (SE)*	Precarious employment conditions *b (SE)*	Precarious employment conditions *b (SE)*
Constant	3.01 (.03)***	3.20 (.15)***	3.02 (.03)***
No children app	0.07 (.21)	−0.02 (.19)	−0.03 (.17)
Children app	0.02 (.08)	0.21 (.16)	0.20 (.07)**
App age	0.00 (.03)	0.06 (.03)*	0.06 (.05)
No children app × App age	–	0.17 (.03)***	0.19 (.07)**
Children app × App age	–	−0.37 (.08)***	−0.37 (.02)***
Checks	−0.15 (.00)***	−0.16 (.08)***	−0.16 (.01)**
Participant gender	0.14 (.14)	–	0.16 (.12)
Participant parenthood	0.31 (.09)***	–	0.33 (.12)**
Gender × Parenthood	−0.21 (.19)	–	−0.26 (.16)
−2LL	−442.14	−447.72	−438.20
AIC	886.28	897.44	878.40
BIC	890.20	901.36	882.31

Note: App = Applicant. "No Children App" and "Children App" coefficients are relative to the reference group of the "Committed App."
Checks = manipulation and comprehension checks (0–4, higher = better). Because 5 participants did not identify as male or female, results are also reported without the covariates of gender and parenthood, although that decreased model fit. *N*s = 371–376.
*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$.

and a superior method to more popular approaches (e.g., ANOVA or ANCOVA; see Breitsohl, 2019). GSEM offers more flexibility to account for participant nonindependence (e.g., by stimuli version; Judd et al., 2012, as recommended for analyzing nested data like ours; McNeish et al., 2017). AIC for the main effects model was 886.28 and BIC was 890.20; because both values decreased when adding the interactions (AIC =878.40; BIC =882.31), this implies an improved model fit (Kenny, 2020). See Table 3 and Figure 3 for descriptives and correlations.

We predicted applicants' precarious employment from applicant age and commitment/childbearing expectations (i.e., our manipulations). Compared to the committed applicant (i.e., the reference group), results showed a significant interaction between interest in children and age for the applicant who indicated no interest in children ($b = 0.19$, $SE = .07$, $p = .004$) and the applicant who indicated interest in children ($b = -0.37$, $SE = .02$, $p < .001$; see Table 4). As predicted, managers awarded the most precarious employment to 30-year-old applicants with interest in children ($M = 2.89$, $SE = .04$), significantly more than all other conditions (*contrasts* = .20–.31, *SE*s = .03–.10, *p*s < .001–.023) except the committed 40-year-old (*contrast* = .14, $SE = .12$, $p = .235$) and the "no interest in children" 40-year-old (*contrast* = −.02, $SE = .12$, $p = .863$).

In sum, these results indicate that, as predicted, hiring managers granted the younger (vs. older) women applicants more precarious employment conditions when they signaled interest in having children (vs. no interest in children and vs. commitment/work ethic), thereby showing explicit evidence of our theorized mechanism. In addition, these results also show causal support for Hypothesis 3, which predicted that managers award female applicants they believe will have a child with more precarious employment conditions.

9 | GENERAL DISCUSSION

Across two studies, this research shows evidence of "maybe baby" bias whereby women are identified as risky in employment decisions because of their *potential* for future motherhood. Specifically, childfree female employees experienced more precarious employment conditions than their male and parent counterparts (i.e., shorter job tenure, rejection, and more temporary job contracts)—effects that were driven by managers' "maybe baby" expectations or perceived pregnancy risk. Together, these studies triangulate evidence of "maybe baby" bias toward childfree, childbearing-aged women from both manager *and* employee perspectives with results from a mixed-methods program of research across two countries.

9.1 | Theoretical implications

This research aims to make three core theoretical contributions. First, building on gender and social role theories (Eagly, 1987; Eagly & Wood, 2012; Heilman, 2012), the current research incorporated insights from intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989). Although previous results have largely supported these theoretical perspectives illustrating bias against women and mothers in particular (e.g., Cuddy et al., 2004; Heilman & Okimoto, 2008), our findings provide additional insight by showing that it is not

mothers alone who suffer from motherhood penalties. The social role of motherhood is not only an objective status characteristic but also a gendered social role. Family-work conflict bias argues that being a woman signals to a manager that a follower's family will interfere with her work irrespective of her actual family status or family-work conflict (Hoobler et al., 2009), echoing similar themes. Although family-work conflict bias has been shown to affect existing employees' promotions (Hoobler et al., ,2009, 2014), and maybe baby bias has been theorized to predict childfree women's workplace mistreatment and career withdrawal (Gloor, Li, Lim, et al., 2018), our findings suggest maybe baby bias may also reduce the chance that women are in the talent pool in the first place. This bias may apply to a growing part of the workforce as fertility rates hit all-time lows, with childfree women comprising one-fifth of highly educated employees (Livingston, 2015) and 37% of childfree adults under age 50 reporting they never plan to have children (Livingston & Horowitz, 2018).

Second, integrating insights from economic theories of discrimination (i.e., statistical discrimination, Arrow, 1973), we conceptualized hiring as a risk assessment process, diverging somewhat from the more commonly examined areas of competence/agency and warmth/communality in the context of gender and parenthood biases (e.g., Benard & Correll, 2010; Cuddy et al., 2004; Heilman & Okimoto, 2008; Hideg et al., 2018). By explicitly evaluating women of childbearing age, we could more accurately examine the perceived risks of "potential parenthood"—a contribution informed by intersectionality—which is perhaps helpful in clarifying the lack of consistent findings in this area (e.g., Fuegen et al., 2004; contrasted with Heilman & Okimoto, 2008). As previously mentioned in qualitative research and popular media (BBC News, 2004; Fitzsimmons et al., 2014; Kassam, 2014; Peus & Traut-Mattausch, 2008; Slater Gordon, 2017), we found evidence that gender and even subtler cues (e.g., age) signal to managers that applicants may soon become parents and are a risk to employers. These results complement the few macro-level studies from economics suggesting that gender, age, and/or sexual orientation signal applicant fertility (Baert, 2014; Becker et al., 2019; Biewen & Seifert, 2018; Petit, 2007; Skilling, 2014), negatively predicting managers' interview callbacks. We extend this work by outlining the specific, micro-level decision-making process driving these effects, which is necessary to better understand how to mitigate it. This work also extends the implications of maybe baby bias to include employment outcomes beyond ostensibly low-cost callbacks. In doing so, these findings support claims that gender and age biases are alive and well in modern firms (e.g., Finkelstein & Truxillo, 2013; Joshi et al., 2015; Kleissner & Jahn, 2021) they just live elsewhere: in managers' risk perceptions.

Third, by focusing on early career employees, this research approximated employee experiences at the "leakiest" point in the pipeline (Catalyst, 2018; Eagly & Carli, 2007). While research on gender and leadership is an essential literature (e.g., Bosak & Sczesny, 2011; Braun et al., 2017; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Gloor, Morf, et al., 2020; Hentschel et al., 2018; Kark & Eagly, 2010), it inherently excludes the many educated women who have already dropped out of the talent pool, creating sample selection bias (Heckman, 1979). Because this critical career period coincides with women's prime childbearing years (i.e., ages 25 to 39; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Pew Research Center, 2018), we uncovered a "maybe baby" bias, pointing to *potential* motherhood and maternity leave expectations as underpinning mechanisms for the persistent and pervasive loss of trained female talents at the "leakiest" point of the pipeline. These results extend evidence of work-family backlash (Gloor, Li, Lim, et al., 2018; Leslie, 2019; Perrigino et al., 2018) by showing a spillover effect, such that even beliefs about *future* work-family recipients can be affected. These results also extend research that has examined uncertainty about senior women's ability (e.g., for leadership positions; Conrad & Cannings, 1997; van Esch et al., 2018; Heilman & Okimoto, 2008) or gendered perceptions of leadership suitability in times of risk or crisis (Morgenroth et al., 2020; Post et al., 2019) by testing perceptions of childbearing risk for potential *future* leaders.

9.2 | Practical implications

Although certain kinds of precarious employment may not be uniformly negative for employees (e.g., shorter job contracts also allow for greater mobility and/or flexibility), our results suggest bias, because employment patterns depend on social group membership. Furthermore, more job security during this critical time of career and family formation could facilitate young professionals' health and well-being, performance, and even persistence in the field (Benach et al., 2014; Huisman et al., 2002; Kraimer et al., 2019; Ryazanova & McNamara, 2016). As with other types of decision-making under risk conditions (e.g., corporate strategy), then, decision-makers can employ cognizant risk assessments by weighing the relative risks and rewards of various applicants and scenarios to make optimal selection decisions (Cabrera, 2010). Similarly, gatekeepers can implement evidence-based techniques (e.g., taking more time to make their decisions) to reduce discriminatory employment decisions (Axt & Lai, 2019).

At the organizational level, companies could offer paternal leave or a general "family leave" to complement the existing benefits and norms that reinforce women's caretaking and unpaid labor. These policies could better balance the anticipated (or actual) costs of employing young male *and* female "potential parents." To increase policy uptake for men, organizations can make parental leave the default (Gloor et al., 2018) so employees are automatically entitled to parental leave unless they decline it, increasing gender equality by design (see Bohnet, 2016).

Although the onus for addressing such biases should not be on young women, there are nonetheless strategies that women can initiate to alleviate biases in employer perceptions of risk. For example, Study 2 showed that female applicants can mitigate gatekeepers' perceptions of risk and its effects on their employment conditions by openly expressing a lack of interest in having children. Because this strategy may backfire if untrue (Peck & Hogue, 2018), other

strategies may be more useful to reduce risk and bias if women do wish to have children one day. For example, young women can proactively clarify their commitment (as in Study 2; Morgan et al., 2013), desire for advancement (King, 2008), or reaffirm their professional image (Little et al., 2015), especially in pre-employment discussions. In this way, women reduce discrepancies between managers' expected professional identities and their own experienced professional identities, proactively reducing bias (i.e., "passing" to control others' beliefs about who they are, Reid, 2015; or in this case, who they may become). Because even minor supervisor biases can have sizeable, cumulative effects (see Eagly & Carli, 2007; Hoobler et al., 2014), women may do well to clarify and reinforce their commitment, work ethic, or career goals as early as possible.

It may also be worth noting that this "bias" is not necessarily irrational. If the underlying cause of these risk judgments is largely cost-related, then decision-makers may simply be adjusting their evaluations to account for the perceived investment. Although beyond the scope of this research, this perceived cost might even be quite accurate (see also Bohren et al., 2019). Nonetheless, it would be discriminatory to use demographic characteristics to make unfounded assumptions about an applicant or employee, particularly in absence of clear evidence supporting those assumptions. The "maybe baby" bias illustrates that managers unfairly assume that this risk exists based on noisy demographic features. It is not appropriate to use gender as a heuristic for mathematical competence in hiring situations; neither is it appropriate to use gender and age as heuristics for determining an applicant's long-term commitment or cost to an organization, particularly if those judgments are used to determine their appropriateness for employment. These assumptions may represent an underappreciated source of women's underrepresentation in leadership: any reluctance to invest in the long-term career development of young women disadvantages their progression into higher positions of power and status in organizations.

9.3 | Strengths, limitations, and future research

With a field study and two experiments, this research triangulates evidence of the predicted "maybe baby" bias from mixed methods designs. Although gender and potential parenthood biases are sensitive organizational topics (King et al., 2012), we focused our analyses on arguably objective information (e.g., participant gender, parenthood, age, job tenure, and job contract), and conducted between-subjects, interaction effects. With these methods and design features, we aimed to reduce demand effects (Charness et al., 2012) and common method bias (Siemsen et al., 2010), but we cannot definitely say if such biases were eliminated.

In an attempt to create a generalizable model, we tested "maybe baby" bias across multiple countries (i.e., the U.S. and in Switzerland) and professional fields (i.e., academia and finance). Because these are all "Western," highly educated contexts, we are limited in our claims about other cultures and less-educated employees (Henrich et al., 2010). This may also extend our already dynamic, moving "maybe baby" target with even younger local mean fertility rates (see The World Factbook, 2019). Furthermore, because existing evidence suggests that managers' *future* fertility discrimination may not extend to LGBTQI + couples because they are expected to forgo having children (e.g., lesbians; Baert, 2014), and stereotypes of mothers from other racial/ethnic backgrounds may differ (see Rosette et al., 2018), reducing the uncertainty around potential mothers' plans and/or ability to work after having a child, we are also limited in our claims based on the largely White/Caucasian, heterosexual targets[11] that we tested.

Finally, our theorizing centered on the negative bias for future mothers. Thus, we encourage future research to explore potential positive parenthood biases for future fathers, complimenting existing research on "fatherhood bonuses" (e.g., Budig & England, 2001; Glauber, 2018); such an effect may have been uncovered in Study 1 (see Figure A1). Research exploring "never baby" bias toward women who choose to be childfree would be similarly valuable (see Ashburn-Nardo, 2017; Verniers, 2020); such an effect may have been uncovered in Study 2 toward the 40-year-old U.S. woman who indicated no interest in having children (see Figure 3).

10 | CONCLUSIONS

Across two studies and mixed methods, this research showed evidence of a "maybe baby" bias that disadvantages young women's careers by increasing their employment risk. This highlights a need for increased attention and objectivity in personnel selection and employment decisions, especially at early career stages. Such decision-making inefficiencies are harmful because they prevent us from establishing and maintaining workforces whose diversity reflects that of the talents we develop, thus inhibiting the hiring and retention of our best applicants. Although mothers have been highlighted as an especially disadvantaged group, it seems that even *potential* motherhood can be hazardous for women's career progression.

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[11]We did not ask about participants' sexual preferences in Study 1and left it ambiguous in Study 3, and thus, we cannot make definitive claims.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

All data will be made available here https://osf.io/s2et9/ upon publication.

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APPENDIX

NONLINEAR EFFECTS (STUDY 1)

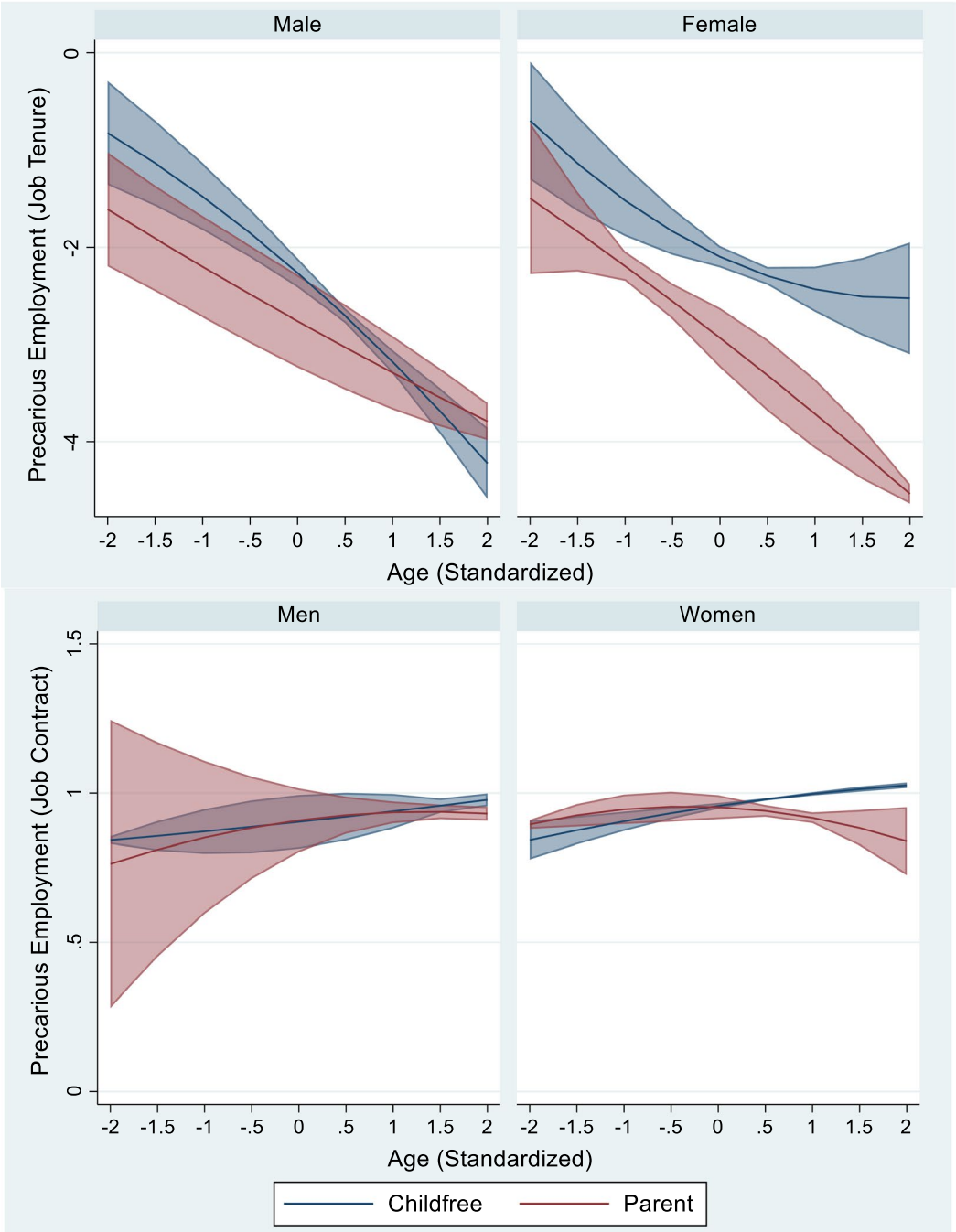
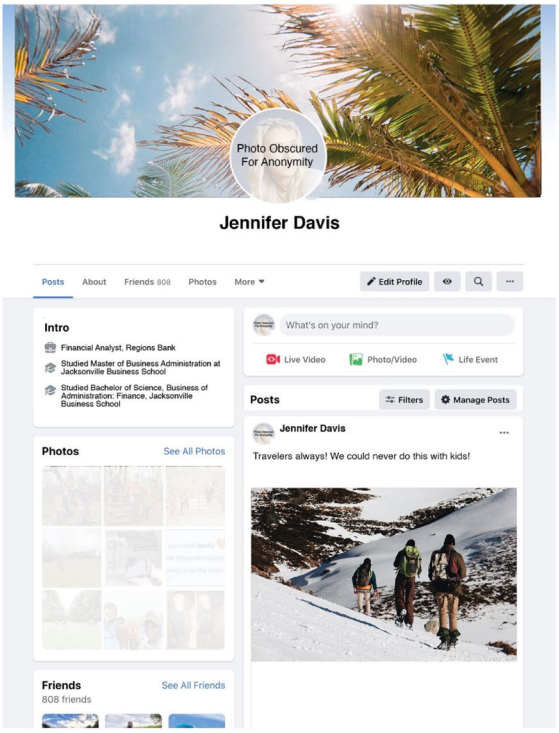
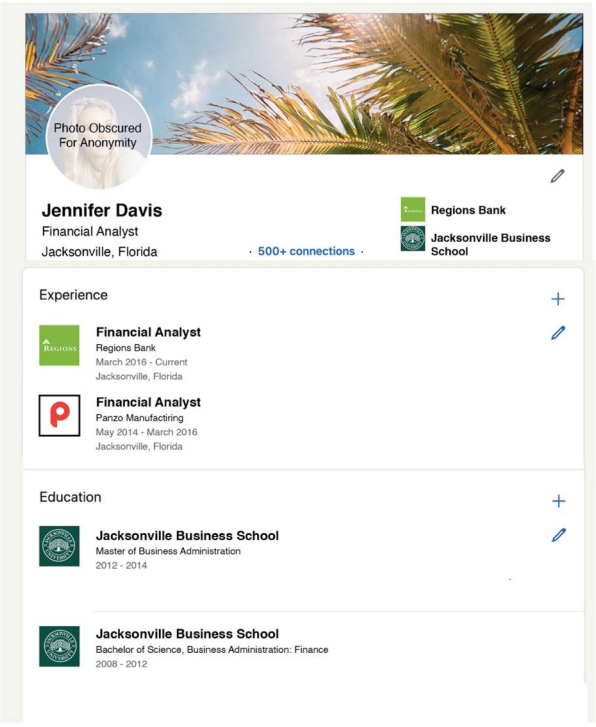


FIGURE A1 Precarious Job Conditions According to Employee Gender, Parenthood, and Age^2 (Study 1). The *y*-axes are coded such that higher values represent more precarious employment (i.e., 0 = 0 years of job tenure and 1 = temporary contract) to align with our theorizing. To facilitate interpretation, mean age was 33.1 years (*SD* = 4.4). Bands represent 95% CIs. *Ns* = 790–791

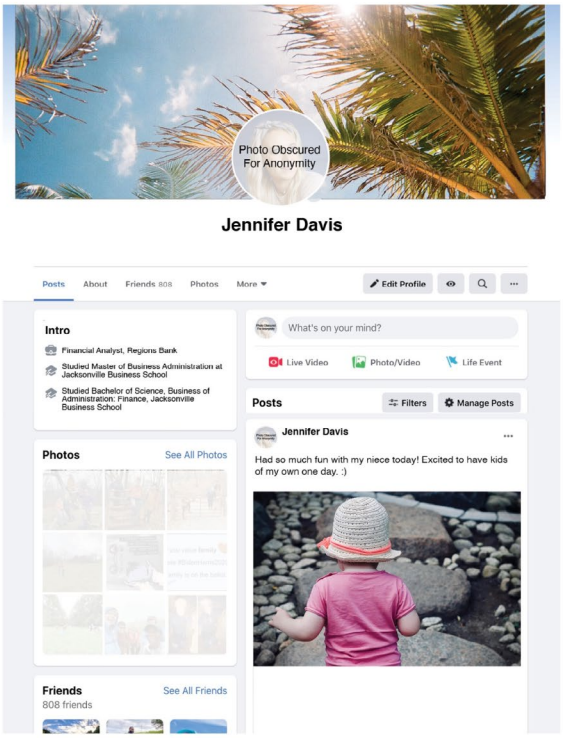
STUDY 2 MATERIALS

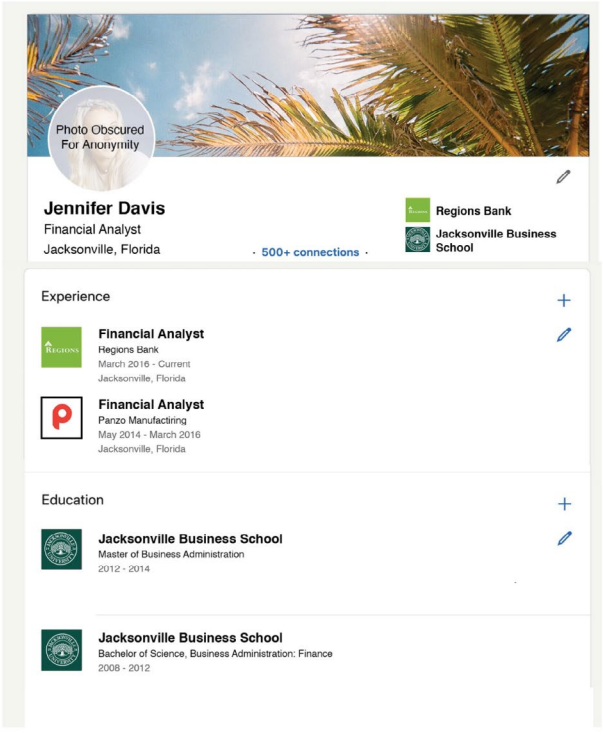
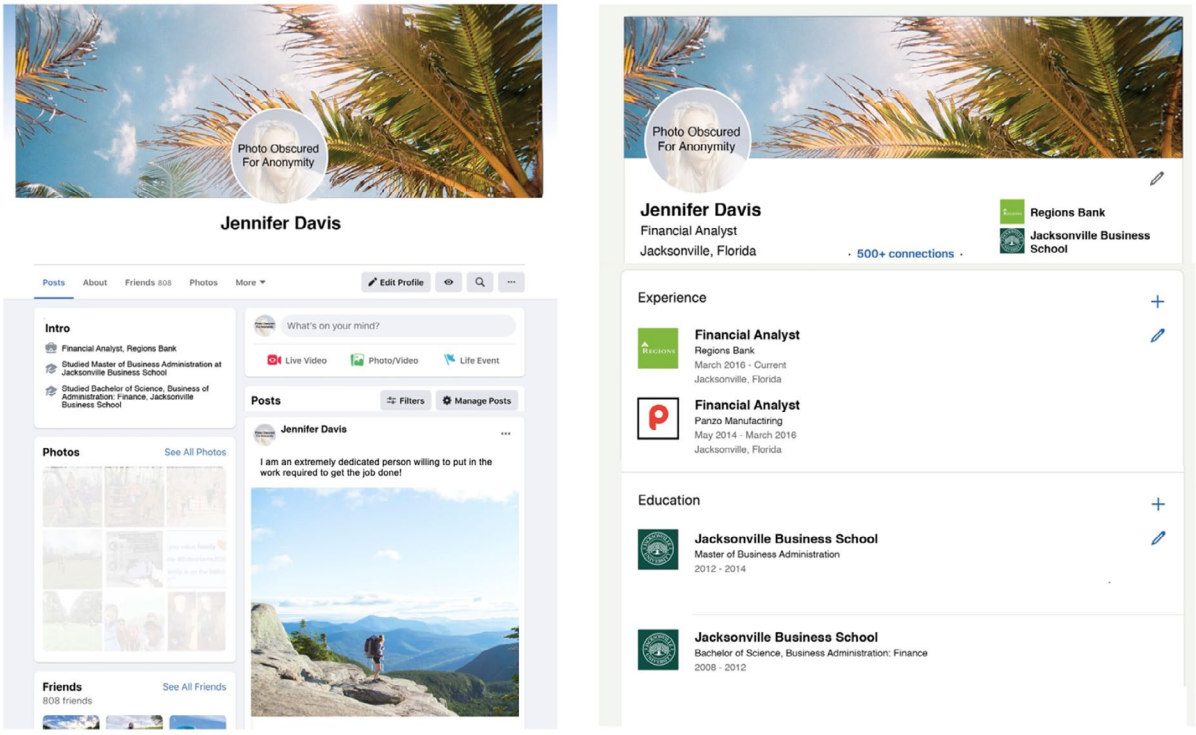
Applicant social media profiles: No signaled interest in children





Applicant social media profiles: Signaled interest in children





Applicant social media profiles: Signaled commitment/work ethic (no mention of children)