

## 2 'Mum's the Word' 'Coming Out' as Pregnant at Work

You're pregnant and you're riding a wave of happiness like no other. Your family knows. Your most intimate friends know, but no one at work does. You're probably starting to think about when and how to announce your big news to your immediate supervisor and co-workers. Each pregnancy is different. The relationship you have with your boss and co-workers is different from anyone else's. So, the 'right time' to announce your pregnancy at work is unique to you. Below are some tips to help you put together a plan to announce your pregnancy at work. (Clearblue, 2006, available <<http://www.clearplan.com/TellingYourBossYou'rePregnant.cfm>>, accessed 22 February 2006)

Just found out you are pregnant? Afraid to tell your boss? Learn about the best way to break the news. And, know your rights so you can relax a bit more and enjoy your pregnancy — even at work. (Pregnancy-info.net, 2006, available <[http://www.pregnancy-info.net/pregnancy\\_and\\_work.html](http://www.pregnancy-info.net/pregnancy_and_work.html)>, accessed 22 February 2006)

These quotes are from websites that offer advice on how to tell an employer that you are pregnant. They are typical of many that can be found on the Internet. The academic literature has much less to say on this topic. Extensive research has been carried out on mothers and waged work, the feminisation of the workforce, gendered organizational cultures, pregnant women's experiences of waged work, maternity leave, discrimination issues, health and pregnancy at work, and returning to work after maternity leave but there is still little published research on announcing one's pregnancy at work.<sup>1</sup> The aim of this chapter therefore is to address this topic. I am especially interested in some of the difficulties that pregnant women potentially face when they announce their pregnancy. It is not always easy negotiating the subject position of Pregnant Woman at work. The way I have chosen to examine this topic is to use the metaphor of 'coming out of the closet'.

Initially the closet may seem like an unusual, and perhaps even inappropriate, choice of spatial metaphors to use to discuss the experiences of pregnant women. After all, when women become pregnant, aren't they

## 20 *Maternities: Gender, Bodies and Space*

doing the very thing women are revered for — performing the sacred duty of motherhood? And yet, for some women, in some spatial contexts (especially the workplace), announcing their pregnancy to friends, family, loved ones, colleagues, and acquaintances can feel painful, risky and even shameful. Possible reasons why a woman might want to hide her pregnancy, why she might want to go unseen and remain closeted for as long as possible, are that she feels too young, too old, has no partner, no desire to be a mother, is an addict, a sex worker, a lesbian, committed to a profession, might be thought to be overly emotional or forgetful or afraid of miscarrying and feeling like a ‘failure’. Fear of co-workers’ and employers’ responses to ‘the news’ can also lead pregnant women to remain in the closet at work for as long as possible even though they may be out in other places. Sometimes women disclose their pregnancy to some people in some spaces but not in others. People are told at different times. Some may be asked to keep it a secret, to keep quiet — ‘Mum’s the word’ — to say nothing.<sup>2</sup>

During the past 15 years that I have been researching pregnancy it has become apparent that some women experience a great deal of anxiety and nervousness deciding how and when to broach the subject of pregnancy with their employer and co-workers. Many times pregnant women are worried about how the news of their pregnancy will be accepted at work by their boss and co-workers and what their options are. Some women and men also face telling their employers and co-workers that they plan to foster or adopt a baby or child. This issue also deserves attention but this is not possible within the space of this chapter. Here I deal only with women who are pregnant rather than with women and men who are fostering or adopting a baby or child.

The chapter begins with a brief discussion of ‘the closet’. Second is a story about my own coming out as pregnant to my Chair of Department and colleagues at the University of Waikato. The third section offers some background information on the participants involved in this research. Fourth is a discussion of pregnant women’s fears about harassment, discrimination and even dismissal as a result of coming out as pregnant at work. Following this the chapter examines women’s positive experiences of telling employers and co-workers that they are pregnant. Two points conclude the chapter: first, that coming out of the closet is a useful metaphor for deepening understanding of women’s experiences of disclosing their pregnancy at work; and second, that it is difficult to generalize about pregnant women coming out as pregnant at work because women ‘do’ pregnancy in different ways, in different workplaces. This mutually constitutive relationship between pregnant women and workplaces is infinitely complex.

### THINKING THROUGH ‘THE CLOSET’

Michael Brown (2000) in his book *Closet Space* argues ‘the closet is not just a metaphor for the concealment, erasure, or ignorance of gays’ sexu-

alities.' The closet also has a materiality and exists at a variety of spatial scales, from the body to the globe, and in an array of different spaces and places. Brown (2000) explains that the closet is a key term in queer theory and parlance because it relays so effectively the specificity of subjugation based on sexuality and gender.

It [the closet] allows us to speak our anger and pain about lying, hiding, being silenced, and going unseen. The closet's ontological demands are exacting and exhaustive; that we cannot be in the world unless we are something we are not. ... it also signifies the inevitable oppression we face if we 'come out of the closet' either by choice or force. (Brown 2000: 1)

Brown (2000: 147) notes 'People can be in and out of the closet simultaneously through resituating that broader environment. Its space can reveal and conceal at the same time, often dependent on one's own location.' Diana Fuss (1991) makes a similar argument when she says to speak of being in or out of the closet is problematic because it creates a binary opposition which tends to construct being in the closet as dark and oppressive and being out of the closet as light and liberating (also see Butler 1991; Sedgwick 1990). Fuss (1991) explains the difficulty with the inside/outside rhetoric is that it disguises the fact that many people are both inside and outside simultaneously.

Despite these criticisms coming out of the closet can be a useful metaphor for understanding a variety of different embodied subjectivities that people, for one reason or another, might feel troubled about disclosing. Over the past few years the notion of coming out has become used increasingly to describe a variety of disclosures (not just sexual) including coming out as an alcoholic, coming out as ill, or even coming out as a Christian in secular circles or as a conservative in liberal circles. It seems there are many closets. Coming out of one can mean entering another. For example, after I came out as pregnant I went into the closet to drink wine (there is growing 'public concern' about fetal alcohol syndrome). As a pregnant woman I felt under surveillance in public places such as pubs, bars and clubs and therefore only ever drank non-alcoholic drinks in these places. At home, though, I occasionally enjoyed a glass of wine.

The notion of the closet has been developed under the guise of queer theory. The term queer, as a critical theory and methodology, originates in gay and lesbian studies. Queer has provided a platform from which to critique heteronormativity (Sullivan 2003). Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues, however, that queer theory can be usefully applied to a broader range of normative knowledges and identities than just sexual ones. She explains:

a lot of the most exciting work around 'queer' spins the term outward along dimensions that can't be subsumed under gender and sexuality at all: the ways that race, ethnicity, postcolonial nationality criss-cross

## 22 *Maternities: Gender, Bodies and Space*

with these *and other* identity-constituting, identity-fracturing discourses, for example. (Sedgwick 1993: 8–9, italics in original)

Giles (2004), interestingly, yokes together breastfeeding with this definition of queer as ‘identity-fracturing’ by pointing to the merging of mother and infant subjectivities. Giles (2004: 303) argues ‘If it is accepted that the normative Western subject is developmentally reliant on individuation, then breastfeeding, however conventionally practiced, is perhaps already an activity which “queers” us.’

When women tell people at work they are pregnant their identity is fractured. The individuated worker becomes a maternal subject who is no longer one but two (or more). Her corporeal boundaries are radically reconfigured as her body grows to accommodate the baby growing inside her. Giles (2004: 303) notes that there is likely to be some resistance to queering something that is not usually perceived to be overtly sexual but it could be argued that ‘queering can usefully be applied to any behaviour that has been extravagantly regulated, especially where those regulations have repressed any sexuality that the behaviour might once have owned.’ Pregnancy brings sex into the workplace. Arguably it also queers the workplace.

### ‘WRITING ONE’S LIFE’: A PREGNANT GEOGRAPHER

On disclosing my own pregnancies at the University I felt like I was bringing sex into the workplace, like I was queering the hallowed halls of academia. Pamela Moss (2001: 7) notes ‘Autobiography and geography are not strangers. Historically, autobiography has been used to chronicle geography as a discipline’. Moss suggests there are many benefits of ‘writing one’s life’ to the continued construction of the discipline of geography. Following Moss’s lead I reflect here on my own coming out as pregnant in 1994 to my chairperson and colleagues in the Geography Department at the University of Waikato. I hasten to add that I am not the first geographer to write about coming out as pregnant, or at least coming out as a mother. Carol Ekinsmyth, Rebecca Elmhirst, Sarah Holloway and Helen Jarvis (2004: 95) write their autobiographies as mothers explaining:

We recognize the very real dangers of ‘coming out’ as mothers and admitting — dare we? — that our children come first. How regrettable, alien and disabling it is that still, in the 21st century, we are acutely aware that love and family responsibilities are incompatible with hegemonic constructions of paid employment (and even academia) that demand total commitment.

In 1994 I was already out as pregnant to my family and friends but in my mind my chairperson and colleagues posed a difficulty. My partner and I decided to attempt to have a second baby. I had been working as a lecturer in the Geography Department at Waikato for two years. My first child was four. Despite the Department having a reputation for supporting 'others' such as women, lesbians, and Māori I had a strong sense that having a baby would potentially disrupt the teaching of courses, hinder my research, and risk coding me to colleagues and students as being well and truly 'on the mommy track' (as it is sometimes referred to in the United States). I was already juggling motherhood and career (see Ekinsmyth *et al.* 2004: 100), but this juggling was about to become more intense. I was not concerned about being unmarried but I was concerned that as a pregnant woman I would not be taken seriously in the academy.

There were four other academic women employed in the Department at the time but only one had children and her children had grown up and left home. This colleague had nevertheless to some degree paved the way. I carefully planned the conception (as much as one can plan these things) so that the baby would be due in the break between semesters so as to minimize possible disruption (when I reflect on this decision now I am surprised that I was so willing, in a sense, to prioritize the institutions' needs over my own). Everything went to plan. At approximately four months pregnant, when the Department met to organize teaching for the upcoming semester, I 'announced' that I was pregnant but hopefully would be able to return from giving birth straight after the semester break to take up a full teaching load. I remember feeling very nervous and apprehensive about having to tell colleagues this even though I was clearly attempting to be (almost unbelievably) accommodating.

As it turned out my colleagues seemed happy that I was pregnant and perhaps relieved that I would be taking only very limited parental leave. I still vividly recall that meeting. Disclosing my pregnancy felt like a coming out of sorts. I gave out more personal information to my colleagues than I felt comfortable with. I felt a certain pleasure and delight that I was having a baby — proud that my body was able to do this amazing thing — but I also felt shame. I felt shame that my colleagues knew I'd had sex but I felt even more shame that maybe I was not a 'serious' academic after all (see Johnston 2007 on lesbians feeling both pride and shame coming out at gay pride parades).

Most of the senior women geographers I knew and admired — my role models — did not have children, or at least if they did, they did not make public this part of their lives. They had entered the academy at a time when there were still huge constraints on women and many I suspect felt they needed to forgo marriage and motherhood. These women, it seemed to me, were entirely committed to their work and I admired them for it. I too wanted to be productive at work (not always juggling) but I worried that

## 24 *Maternities: Gender, Bodies and Space*

having a second child would prohibit this. It seemed I could still 'get by' doing two jobs — being a mother and an academic — with one child but I wondered if my familial responsibilities with two children would possibly curb my professional opportunities. I was aware of the structural conditions that would impact upon my attempts to combine academic work and motherhood and yet still I chose to get pregnant for a second time (see Monk 2001 on 'the personal and professional lives of women geographers'). In my less confident moments I thought perhaps I had made a foolish decision and that women in my generation who grew up in the 1960s and 1970s could not 'do it all' and 'have it all' after all!

My experience of coming out as pregnant to my chairperson and colleagues at the University made me wonder about other women's experiences in other workplaces. How similar or different were they to my own? In the next section of this chapter interview data are presented from a study of some first-time<sup>3</sup> pregnant women who live in Hamilton, New Zealand.<sup>4</sup>

### PARTICIPANTS IN THE STUDY

The data presented in this chapter, and the following chapter, were derived from 19 first-time pregnant women who were recruited from Hamilton, New Zealand to participate in the project (see Figure 2.1). These participants responded to an article on the proposed research published in the local newspaper (*Waikato Times*, 6 November 2002). The newspaper article (which was accompanied by photographs of four pregnant celebrities — 'singer Celine Dion, Italian glamour model Nina Moric, girl-band singer Nicole Appleton and actor Demi Moore') called for participants explaining that I had conducted research ten years ago on first-time pregnant women in Hamilton and found that many women hid their 'bump' in public or withdrew from public places altogether. The article explained that I was keen to ascertain whether celebrities parading their pregnancy in public had changed Hamilton women's attitudes towards revealing their pregnancy. The questions did not focus solely on women's experiences of telling their employers and co-workers that they are pregnant (the focus of this chapter) or maternity wear and body image (the focus of Chapter 3) but covered a range of topics. For example participants were also asked about the activities they had continued, reduced or stopped during pregnancy and places and spaces they occupied during pregnancy.

Of the 19 pregnant women who were interviewed, one was at secondary school, one had recently quit her job as a café worker, and the other 17 were still employed in a variety of occupations including two primary school teachers, natural therapist, occupational therapist, dairy (small local grocery store) sales assistant, marketing communications manager, public sector (government) scientist, university lecturer, radio announcer, surgical claims insurance assessor, personal assistant, office worker, insurance com-

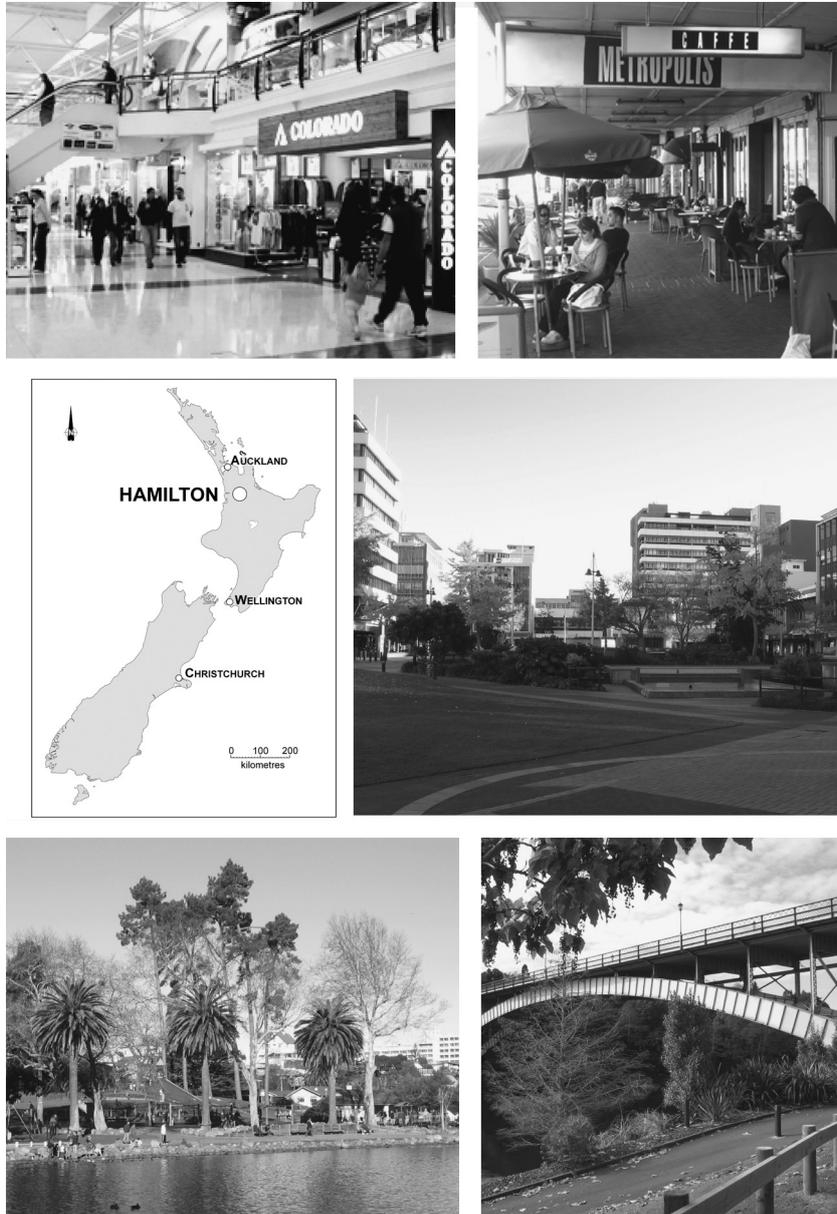


Figure 2.1 Photomontage of Hamilton, New Zealand. Source: Photographs by Betty-Ann Kamp.

pany claims clerk, home loans consultant, registered nurse, street performer and family support worker (see Appendix for more details about the methods used for data collection and analysis for this chapter and for a list of the participants who were interviewed). In addition to drawing on this interview data I also draw on relevant information on disclosing one's pregnancy at work from various websites, women's magazines and daily newspapers.

## DISCRIMINATION AND DISMISSAL

It is difficult, if not impossible, to ascertain exactly how many pregnant women in various countries around the world engage in paid employment. In New Zealand (where I live) there is no statistical information on the number of pregnant women who work in paid employment each year (Collins 1995). It is possible, however, to make an educated guess. Sharon Collins (1995: 7) suggests 'Over 14,000 women in the New Zealand workplace are likely to become pregnant in any one year.' While this is only a general indication it demonstrates that pregnancy at work is an important issue for many working women (see Brown 2000 on employment during pregnancy). In any given year there are likely to be many thousands of women confronting the issue of telling their boss and co-workers that they are expecting a baby. While for some women this may be a pleasure, for others it is problematic.

At least half of the participants in this study were apprehensive about announcing their pregnancy at work partly because they feared exposing personal information about themselves and partly because they feared discrimination, and even worse, dismissal. Olivia, a Nursery Plant Sales Assistant, aged 32, decided to 'pluck up the courage' to tell her boss quite early on that she was pregnant because the work she was doing was physically strenuous and she wanted to reduce the number of hours worked. Olivia's job in 'dispatch' involved her receiving orders, riding a motorbike and a trailer around the nursery, picking up heavy potted plants and trees, putting them in the trailer and unloading them. Olivia explains:

When I initially told him ['the boss'] I was pregnant, he said 'oh, that's fine, that's really good.' But then he said another girl that was pregnant, in dispatch, worked right up until she had the baby but I found out later that she didn't. Like, he thought that she did, but it was a while ago and he just thought that she did but she didn't. And then I asked to take Fridays off because I was just so tired. I'd just come home from work and just cry because I was so absolutely knackered. And so I said 'I've just got to take Fridays off' and they said that was okay, but, like even, because we have to get the trucks out like on the, say Tuesday, Wednesday nights, sometimes it would be overtime. And I'd

still like be there, they wouldn't come and say to me, you can go home at four thirty, I'd just have to stay on and do it.

Olivia felt pressure from her boss to work right up until her due date because this is what another 'girl' at work did. She also felt pressure from her co-workers to work overtime even though she found the work to be extremely exhausting now that she was pregnant (especially towards the end of her pregnancy). Olivia experienced increasing problems with her sciatic nerve and was not able to keep doing heavy lifting but she felt pressure to keep working the same number of hours:

It's just that we were just getting busier and busier at work as well, you know, like spring and bedding the plants in. And I just, also my stubbornness as well, you know, for the money and stuff like that too, but, you know you feel like you don't want to let the team down. Same with going home at four thirty, I felt I couldn't because I've got to leave my friends working.

Olivia, in order to keep doing her job, needed some special consideration. Her job was strenuous and so she needed to be able to work fewer hours but then felt by doing so she would let down 'the team' and her 'friends'.

In New Zealand the Human Rights Act 1993 covers women against unlawful discrimination on the grounds of sex and this includes the 'condition' of pregnancy. Despite some dismantling of barriers to equal participation in paid employment for pregnant women and despite it being illegal under the Human Rights Act to discriminate against a worker on the grounds of pregnancy, pregnant women continue to be treated as unwelcome intruders and burdens in some workplaces. The normative subject in most workplaces is an individuated subject. When women become pregnant, however, the entity they call the 'self' fractures and the individuated subject becomes at least two.

Like Olivia, Jennifer, a 32 year old scientist, was also worried about letting down the team. She thought that she would be treated differently once she told her boss and co-workers that she was pregnant. Jennifer says:

With work it was extremely difficult in the early stages — up until probably 18 weeks, until I started to show, because it was my secret. And I was really scared that I'd be treated differently, such as 'oh, she's on her way out, she's leaving, her attitude to work has kind of changed, or we won't give her interesting projects because she's only got x amount of months [left]'. Basically being written off is what I was afraid of.

Jennifer's workplace is highly masculinist and she was afraid of being thought to be no longer completely committed to her job (see Massey 1996

28 *Maternities: Gender, Bodies and Space*

on gender constructions in the UK's 'high-tech' industry). Jennifer was finding work a 'struggle' but did not feel comfortable sharing this information with anyone because she feared that it might undermine her reputation for hard work. In a sense Jennifer feared that her pregnant body might queer her workplace and her, and therefore she remained in the closet until her pregnancy began to show. Jennifer says:

You don't want anyone to know how much you're struggling through the day, because you don't want to be observed, especially by the males, you don't want them seeing you, thinking 'oh well, oh yeah, she's slacking off' or ... when you've always worked long hours and gone the extra mile you don't want the attitudes to change towards you.

It can be particularly difficult for women in highly masculinist workplaces to tell their employer and co-workers they are pregnant. Linda McDowell and Gill Court (1994: 737) in a discussion of merchant banking in London refer to bodily imagery such as 'having the balls to pull off a deal' (also see McDowell 1995, 1997). They also make reference to the successful traders who are sometimes referred to as 'big swinging dicks'. This leaves *all* women in highly masculinist workplaces in a complex and difficult subject position but during pregnancy women are even more likely to find themselves caught in a difficult position because it forces something of an end to the 'masculine masquerade' (McDowell 1997: 197). McDowell (1997: 197) argues that some women, especially younger rather than older women, attempt a 'masculine masquerade'. Pregnant women tend to be coded as 'more feminine' than women who are not pregnant thereby heightening the challenge of being an 'honorary man'. Pregnancy is the ultimate marker of femininity. McDowell (1997) argues that being an honorary man is doomed to failure. Being pregnant disrupts even further women's attempts to 'be one of the boys' because it draws attention to women's female gendered and sexed embodiment.

This notion is reiterated in Faye Brown's story reported on the Internet (see Pinky-mychild.com, 2005, available <<http://www.pinky-mychild.com/features/pregnancy/keeping.html>>, accessed 20 June 2005). Brown is a mother of three and director of a clothing label — Motto. She felt that she needed to stay closeted at work as long as possible. Brown speculates that the perception of pregnancy as fatness can have repercussions for a woman's corporate image (see Earle 2003; and Chapter 3 this volume). She explains 'from our culture and from advertising, there are misconceptions that "fat equals lazy" and breasts are equated with homeliness, rather than efficiency.' Brown concealed her first pregnancy for as long as possible. She says:

I didn't want to be seen as not being capable, but it was more about where I came from. A lot of women have had to think like a man to make it. Working alongside men, we've taken on the persona that says,

you have to have balls to make it with the boys — and where does that leave pregnancy? (Pinky-mychild.com, 2005, available <<http://www.pinky-mychild.com/features/pregnancy/keeping.html>>, accessed 20 June 2005)

Joy, a 27 year old office worker who I interviewed took maternity leave at 34 weeks pregnant. Joy experienced a miscarriage with her first pregnancy and so did not tell people, including her boss and co-workers, that she was pregnant until the second trimester when she was beginning 'to show'. She explains: 'At about twelve weeks we started telling people. We kept it a lot more of a secret this time round so that there weren't so many people disappointed if it [miscarriage] happened again.' By the third trimester of Joy's pregnancy she began to feel that she was less valuable to her employer because of a reduction in her attention span. She expresses concerns about becoming a burden in the workplace rather than a productive worker. Joy says:

I've found my attention span has dropped dramatically. I just find myself, when I was at work it was like 'come on, I've got to finish work because otherwise I'm going to be so useless to this company!' [laughter] They're going to sit there and go 'why are we paying you?'

In this instance it was not Joy's employer or co-workers who judged her performance at work but rather Joy herself who judged her own behavior (see Foucault 1977 on self-surveillance).

Ainsley, a performance artist, claims that when she told her co-workers she was pregnant 'they thought I was joking [chuckles]'. She continues:

I said 'look, it's not going to change my job at all, I won't let it' and yeah, that's it basically. No one has ever sort of gone 'oh but you'll need time off and you'll need to do this now that you're pregnant.'

However, being pregnant did change Ainsley's job. Contradicting her earlier statement later in the interview, Ainsley says that since becoming pregnant her centre of balance has changed and she now feels more clumsy and has therefore stopped stilt-walking. She adds: 'besides, I'd look bloody stupid up on stilts trying to wear some of those skimpy little tight outfits'. Ainsley, unlike Joy, was not concerned about her changing role at work. She easily took on the role of 'crew instead of cast for a change' and made costumes, organized events and so on. She says 'my not being able to perform leaves more work open for them really.'

Interestingly, all but one of the participants noted some change in their mental capacities since becoming pregnant. Pregnant women are widely thought to exhibit behaviours which could be considered 'hysterical', in particular, becoming 'overly' emotional, not being able to think rationally

and frequently forgetting things (Longhurst 1997). This is not to say that women 'really' do become more emotional, irrational and/or forgetful during pregnancy (it is not some kind of biological given or truth) but neither is it to say that it is just something that is said by or about pregnant women. Rather, changes in body image and material form come from social, psychological and material sources. Body image and material form are inseparable and mutually constituted.

Perhaps more importantly it needs to be noted that hegemonic discourses function to keep in place particular societal arrangements. The discourse that pregnant women tend to be 'overly' emotional, irrational and forgetful functions to discourage and/or exclude women from certain spaces, such as some work spaces, on account of their supposedly 'natural' 'condition'. Historically, people deemed incapable of engaging in rational public discourse such as indigenous people, women, and those who are intellectually and/or physically disabled have been excluded (and to some degree still are) from spaces of power.

Such groups were (are) considered too bound to their bodies, too dissipated in their intellect to be able to engage in independent thought and action. Their 'differences' disqualify them from stepping 'objectively' and 'dispassionately' into the public sphere and engaging in 'public affairs'. (Longhurst 1997: 38)

The discourse of women becoming overly emotional, irrational and/or forgetful during pregnancy can be particularly problematic for pregnant women engaged in (paid) work because workers are usually expected to function as fully individuated and rational subjects who have consummate control over their mental functions.

Ainsley says that her brain is:

just fucking mush — forgetful and clumsy and just mush really ... I go through insane periods where I just can't remember people's names ... just completely blank. I feel like a complete dickhead.

Nia worked as a natural therapist. She says, 'I've suddenly gone to mega slow mode, and I think really slow, and talk really slow, and I forget words, names, everything'.

Diana, a marketing communications manager, aged 32, when asked about her capacities at work, tries to articulate the complexity of separating her 'true' feelings from culturally constructed notions of pregnancy. She states, 'I don't feel stupider, but I have, I do forget a lot of stuff. I thought it was just an Old Wives Tale, but it's true!'

Women continue to be discursively constructed as forgetful and having reduced mental capacities during pregnancy. These discourses of forgetfulness are inextricably entwined with the physiological changes of pregnancy.

Some medical research goes so far as to postulate that the brain actually shrinks during pregnancy.

If a pregnant woman is easily forgetful or has difficulty concentrating, British researchers think they know the reason why — the brain has a tendency to shrink late in pregnancy, suggests a report in *New Scientist*. ... It may take up to six months for women to regain the loss in brain size, according to Anita Holdcroft, an anaesthetist at the Royal Postgraduate Medical School in London. (Pregnancy shrinks brain, 2006, available <<http://www.personalmd.com/news/a1997011304.shtml>>, accessed 29 September 2006)

It is not only medical discourse that reinforces the notion of pregnant women as forgetful but also parenting discourses (see, for example, *A healthy me: forgetfulness*, 2000, available <http://www.ahealthyme.com/article/bcrefcap/100322064>, accessed 10 August 2005).

Being constructed as lacking in mental capacity can be especially problematic for women who are expected to be highly intelligent and articulate, for example, university lecturers. Carla, a university lecturer aged 43, was 30 weeks pregnant at the time of interview. She worked up until a few weeks before her due date but felt the need to keep conveying a professional image at work. She was concerned that being pregnant might be read by some, mainly her students, as being unprofessional. Carla carefully 'managed' how she dressed so as to not reveal her pregnancy to students for as long as possible. She claims:

I managed it — I mean I was much more careful about my appearance at work than outside of work ... just because I mean when I was teaching I just didn't want students sort of fixating on the fact that I was pregnant ... I thought, and I said, 'yeah well I was worried that students especially would have a different reaction' and so most of them I don't think were aware that I was pregnant until after the semester ended, so I was really careful in that regard. It wasn't like I cared that much in terms of other people in the department, I was really more worried about maintaining this professional image ... I was much more careful about it at work, and then I'd be home on the weekend and I'd be going out dressed in fitting clothes and think 'oh what if some of my students are there, they're going to know I'm pregnant.'

Denise, aged 29, worked as a personal assistant for a senior woman. Denise decided to tell her employer before any of her colleagues so that she did not hear the news through the office grapevine (common advice offered on many Internet sites is tell your employer the news directly because this will appear more professional than him or her hearing it from a co-worker). Denise felt that her employer would appreciate knowing early on to allow

32 *Maternities: Gender, Bodies and Space*

as much time as possible to make arrangements for her absence. Denise's employer took the news well and was supportive.

This was not the case, however, for Diana who worked as a Marketing Communications Manager. Diana found her colleagues to be generally supportive but her employers were not. They attempted to terminate her employment. Diana explains:

Generally work people are, it's quite cool because, you know 'you're pregnant, its really great!' But yeah ... because my position's a key one they [Diana's employers] wanted to replace me full-time. I still wanted to work during my pregnancy. I still wanted to go on maternity leave and they said 'you can't, we have to terminate your position'. And I said 'you can't say that to me!' That's destructive dismissal. I just went and found out exactly what my rights are and told them 'you can't do that, it's destructive dismissal, if I meet the criteria, which I do, you have to allow me maternity leave' and so ... the marketing manager couldn't replace me full-time, she had to find a part-time replacement, so then I said 'no you don't, that's not going to suit either' so we sorted it out in the end.

Diana experienced what is probably one of the worst possible outcomes when she came out to her employers as pregnant. They attempted to terminate her position.

Lana, aged 19 and 30 weeks pregnant at the time of interview also found telling her employer difficult. Her boss also tried to terminate her position. Lana explains in detail:

I was working in a café but I had an argument with them over being pregnant, so I just walked out. Because I worked there all year, and they like, you know, we got on well, then they wanted to take me further, like they took me on a coffee training evening and then they wanted me to go to a foods based evening and things like that. But when I told them I was pregnant and I would be leaving work just before I was due they didn't like that and they said 'well, you've got to get rid of it'. And like, I don't believe in that, so I thought, you know, I've just got to put up with whatever comes, you know? They made, they came up with, like, scenarios like you're too young, you're not going to be able to cope, no-one's going to help you ... because at that time I wasn't on talking terms with my parents, so I didn't have their support. But then, I thought that I'd rather have their support and no job than a job and no support so I quit my job and I went back home. So I'm just on a [unemployment] benefit now.

Lana's employer's response 'you have to get rid of it' seems inappropriate. Even though Lana appeared to have been doing well in her job, her employer

and co-workers (she says 'when I told *them* I was pregnant') saw fit to offer unwelcome advice. Lana sought other employment but was unsuccessful.

I tried getting a new job, but no, you can't get a job anywhere, like, I am so bored now, like, because I haven't worked for so long ... nobody said it, but they just said, 'oh, no there's no work here, you know'. Because you know, I tried like almost every little town around where I am living — even Pak'n'Save, and Woolworth's [chain supermarkets] and all those jobs, but it was just 'no' so I just worked with my dad for the while, just on the farm, because we live on a farm, and then just get the benefit [welfare].

As a reasonably 'young mum' (see Chapter 8) Lana troubled the discourses of 'individuated worker' *and* 'good mother'. Consequently she was dismissed — metaphorically and literally.

Camille Guy (1992: 33) reports in the *New Zealand Herald* that women often report that they have been dismissed once their employer learns they are pregnant.

This dismissal of pregnant women is despite the fact that in a major study conducted in the United States on four states by the Families and Work Institute in 1988 it was found that 'the vast majority' of supervisors noted that pregnancy had no adverse effects on job performance. (Guy 1992: 33)

It is near impossible for women to find temporary jobs for the remainder of their pregnancies.

Another participant who also considered herself to be a 'young mum', Mihi, is of Samoan origin and aged 17. She was still at school when she became pregnant and decided to remain closeted to all except some close friends and a few teachers. While teachers aren't exactly employers and fellow students aren't exactly co-workers, clearly there are some institutional parallels. Mihi figured that she would be able to 'get away with' not disclosing because by the time her pregnancy would be clearly evident she would have completed her exams and her final term. She told me:

Nobody at the school knows, well, my close friends do but I told them not to make it public news because of the reaction. Older people understand but people my age don't. Yeah, just so I felt more comfortable, like, not being there, not showing it, and not having people question me about it ... I just haven't told people.

In many instances pregnant bodies at secondary schools and at work disrupt ideas of what it means to be a 'good' student or a 'good' employee. However, as McDowell (1997) argues so persuasively it cannot be assumed

### 34 *Maternities: Gender, Bodies and Space*

that disembodied, asexual, rational, masculinity is still a requirement in all professional occupations. McDowell explains that too often studies of gender in the workplace assume or take for granted women's inferiority.

The ways in which multiple gendered differences become important in the culture of organisations and the ways in which these change are thus not investigated and the stories told are too undifferentiated. Instead of looking at how workplace interactions themselves gender women and men in multiple ways — some less, some more acceptable than others, some appropriate to one type of work or site of work and some, perhaps quite other ways of being female and male, to another type or site or work — the dominant model of disembodied rational masculinity that used to be so important in professional occupations is taken for granted. (McDowell 1997: 156)

To end the story of women coming out as pregnant at work here, therefore, would be amiss. Of the 19 women interviewed approximately half reported receiving positive reactions from their employer and co-workers when they announced their pregnancy. It is to these narratives that I now turn.

#### AFFIRMATION AND APPROVAL

At least three of the interviewees reported working in 'pregnancy friendly' workplaces. Bronwyn, an occupational therapist aged in her 30s, comments:

They [her boss and co-workers] were really supportive and when I left they gave me all these little presents and stuff and one of the ladies that I've had some on and off times with — everyone does, she's just one of those people — she snuck in on the last day and gave me this present and I heard her saying to the boss 'Oh [Bronwyn] is leaving in two days' and she sounded quite mournful ... and she brought me this present. It was quite sweet.

Occupational therapy is a largely female-dominated occupation. So too is primary school teaching. Kate received numerous affirmations from her employer, colleagues and students in the primary school where she works. Kate explains:

Some of them are quite neat because they give me hugs and things. One little girl, she gave me a hug and said 'we're hugging your baby!' That was really cute. But it surprised me how knowledgeable they were actually, like I took in my [ultra-sound] scan [of the baby] once, and they've obviously, a lot of them have seen their own scans. Yeah, so that's sort of neat.

Cathy also works in a female-dominated occupation. She is a registered nurse and works in an emergency department. Cathy was one of six women who were pregnant at work. It is perhaps not surprising that in female-dominated occupations, employers and co-workers are more used to working with pregnant women. Cathy notes: 'There's six of us at work that are pregnant — six girls at work — so we all have these discussions about what we can and can't do'. Cathy said her boss had been 'pretty good' when she told her she was pregnant.

She just says you should keep up with exercise and that sort of thing because I think with my job you have to be quite fit because you're on your feet for eight and a half hours a day and you're walking around a lot and she just said to me 'if you want to keep working as long as you can, just keep fit and healthy and stimulated'.

Sometimes, however, support and advice, especially from co-workers, can extend beyond the bounds of helpfulness. Cathy, for the most part, felt supported at work claiming 'on the whole everyone's been really good' but comments 'some people I work with have tried to wrap me in cotton wool a little bit'. Joy, the previously mentioned office worker, went as far as saying that her co-workers seemed to think she was an 'incubator'.

They [co-workers] were concerned about the baby, not about me. But they were concerned about me because I was the incubator for the baby, so yeah. It was, yeah, it was very much 'how's the baby?' and some of them didn't even ask how I was. At least my friends asked how I was.

Joy also made the point that she receives a lot of advice from co-workers. People who she had hardly even said hello to in the past suddenly sat with her in the tea-room in order to tell her stories about when they were pregnant and to offer advice. As I have argued elsewhere (Longhurst 1999), pregnancy is an important 'rite of passage' and one facet of this rite of passage is pregnant women giving, and more usually, receiving advice (women who are pregnant for the first time are especially likely to receive a great deal of advice). This advice comes from a range of people including employers and co-workers. The advice often focuses on topics such as diet, exercise, birth, medical procedures, lactation, how to care for a newborn baby and how to raise a child.

Although this battery of advice is to an extent welcome and regarded positively, many pregnant women also experience a sense of being under surveillance, and of being regarded as vessels for a fetus whose well-being is the primary object of the advice-givers. (Longhurst 1999: 78)

### 36 *Maternities: Gender, Bodies and Space*

Being in a female-dominated workplace doesn't necessarily guarantee that disclosing a pregnancy will be 'easy' and that just the right amount of support/advice (not too much, not too little) will be forthcoming. Nia, aged 26, works as a natural therapist, a female-dominated occupation. She was uncomfortable telling colleagues that she was pregnant not because she thought they would assume her to be less competent at her job but because she felt that being pregnant positioned her as an overtly sexual being. Nia explains, 'I felt a bit self-conscious that there was probably, there might be people thinking, like, sexual things about me, or thinking "oh, she's had sex!" or something like that.' Nia's feelings of embarrassment about disclosing her pregnancy extended beyond colleagues to family:

Also when I had to tell my family that I was pregnant, I felt quite embarrassed, because it was pretty obvious that I would be, but, having sex and that. But, I felt kind of embarrassed to tell them, especially my granddad.

### CONCLUSION

What is evident from the narratives presented in this chapter is that women's experiences of coming out as pregnant at work vary considerably depending on the type of work they do, the culture of the workplace, the relationships they have with their bosses and co-workers, their feelings about their pregnancy, and various other aspects of their subjectivity. By and large, however, it seems that coming out as pregnant in female-dominated workplaces does not cause as much 'gender trouble' or queer the workplace as coming out in highly masculinist workplaces.

Coming out of one closet can prompt a perceived need to enter another. Coming out as pregnant at work often means that pregnant women are then expected to behave in particular (maternal) ways. They may feel that they need to modify, change, or hide certain behaviors that fall short or exceed these expectations. Others monitor their behaviors but pregnant women also discipline themselves in what are seen to be appropriate ways.

Many discourses on pregnancy and workplaces are underpinned by liberalism and focus on equal rights and discrimination. For example, the BBC News in the United Kingdom on 1 September 2003 reported 'A series of pregnancy discrimination "horror" stories has prompted the first ever investigation into the way pregnant women are treated at work.' The Equal Opportunities Commission planned to launch a 17-month inquiry because it had received more complaints about the subject than any other issue. In the United States women who combine career and motherhood are said to be on the 'Mommy Track' (unlike 'career-primary women'). Guy (1992, 33) explains:

A *Harvard Business Review* article suggests employers classify women according to which track they are on, clearing any artificial barriers to career promotion for the single-minded women and offering flexibility to the Mommy Trackers. The article sparked fierce debate, especially over who decided which women were on which track and why men were exempt from such conflicts.

No doubt such discrimination against pregnant women does exist. Some pregnant women, however, report feeling included and even affirmed in their workplaces. Women's experiences of announcing their pregnancy at work vary enormously depending on a myriad of factors including the culture of the workplace. In other words, there is no one model that fits all in relation to disclosing one's pregnancy at work.

But perhaps even more importantly, the point needs to be made that the politics of equality and inequality, inclusion and exclusion can only go so far in explaining pregnant women's experiences of workplaces. Rather than understanding pregnancy in the workplace through liberal feminist discourses, this chapter has drawn on the notion of the closet, as articulated in queer theory, to provide a different lens through which to view pregnant women's experiences in workplaces. Coming out as pregnant is a gendered performance. Women 'do gender' and 'do pregnancy' differently in different workplaces. A mode of enquiry that focuses on notions of queer has the potential to open up attitudes towards pregnancy as a bodily 'condition' that tends to be marked as different.

To state the obvious, not all workplaces are the same. Some workplaces are highly masculinised, some are highly feminised, many combine elements of both. Neither workplaces nor men and women fit into neat and tidy binary categories. Instead gender is performed in multiple ways in a range of different workplaces. Sometimes women carry out feminised roles in highly masculinised workplaces and vice-versa. Workers engage in complex embodied performances that transgress gender categories. Work itself and workplace cultures are continually in flux. Although it is often the case, it cannot be taken for granted that coming out as pregnant will be difficult or nerve-racking for all women in all workplaces. In more feminised workplaces women can be revered for becoming pregnant. Elspeth Probyn (2000: 61) argues 'the lines of force that regulate and actually produce us are always in motion; [so] that the entity we call ourself is equally always in motion'. Coming out as pregnant at work marks a point when the entity we call ourself is in motion. Like for lesbians, gays, bisexuals and others who come out of the closet about their sexuality, it will more than likely simultaneously involve pride and shame (Johnston 2007).