

Loaded questions

Faculty search committees ask many questions of job candidates. But some questions are off-limits.

By Rajendrani Mukhopadhyay



In January, Deborah went on an interview for a tenure-track faculty position at a large, state-run research institution. The two-day interview kicked off with dinner at a restaurant with the department chairman.

As Deborah, a cell biologist who asked that her real name not be used, and the chairman were settling down at the table, the chairman asked her a question. "He asked me whether or not I was in a relationship," says Deborah, who at the time was a post-doctoral fellow with a career-transition grant from the National Institutes of Health.

Taken aback, Deborah revealed that she was married. Then the chairman asked what her husband did for a living. "I gave a very generic answer that my husband's career wasn't really a factor and (that) he was very supportive of me in this important time of my career," she says. "But (the chairman) didn't get my attempt to lay off the conversation. He just persisted with 'No, no, no. What does he do?' It seemed very odd for that to be our first conversation" of the interview.

In May, a paper in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* reported results from a survey of people who had received NIH career-transition awards between 2006 and 2009. Of the 1,066 respondents, 22 percent of the men reported perceiving or experiencing gender bias in their careers. In contrast, 70 percent of the women did.

According to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 makes it illegal to discriminate against a person on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin or sex (the last one includes pregnancy, gender identity and sexual orientation).

As questions about marital status, as well as the number and ages of children, are frequently used to discriminate against women, they can violate Title VII. Even asking about a

spouse's name or employment status and child-care arrangements during an interview could be presented in court as evidence of intent to discriminate.

During a recruiting visit at another university, Deborah attended a dinner with several people, including the chairman of the search committee and a woman from the department head's laboratory. Deborah recalls quietly listening to the conversation about their families. When there was a pause, "the woman turned to me and said, 'Based on our conversation, I take it you don't have children,'" Deborah says. "I looked around, expecting someone to change the subject, but everyone was staring and waiting for my answer."

Put on the spot, Deborah says, she felt obligated to reveal that she didn't have children. "It was very awkward," she says. "I was hoping someone was going to fish me out of that situation, but that never happened."

At times, the questions to female job candidates are outright in their biases. "My first interview for a tenure-track position was at a top-10 university," says Talia, a biochemist with tenure at a state university who requested her real name not be used. "The first day went really well."

However, on the second day, a faculty member pulled out Talia's CV and noted that she had attended a women's college. Talia recounts, "He said, 'Do we have to worry that you are going to be some bra-burning feminist who will make trouble in faculty meetings?'"

And sometimes the questions are insensitive. In February, the story of molecular biologist Jason Lieb's resignation from the University of Chicago broke. Lieb resigned after the university recommended he be fired for sexual misconduct with female graduate students.

Catherine is a postdoctoral fellow with an NIH career-transition award who asked that her real name not be used. She earned her Ph.D. at the

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University of Chicago in the same department as Lieb but under a different adviser.

During a job interview shortly after the story broke, a male faculty member at the recruiting institution “asked me if I knew Jason Lieb,” she says. “I said that he was in the department while I was there or something like that. It was obvious I didn’t want to talk about it. The person continued to press for details and really wanted to know about this guy. I felt it was an inappropriate conversation to have with anyone (during an interview), but especially with a woman when the man was found to be having inappropriate sexual conduct with female graduate students.”

Deborah, Catherine and Talia say their experiences with illegal and inappropriate questions make the institu-

tions stick in their minds and not in a pleasant way. It’s not surprising. For some women, such an experience can be the final straw.

“We asked people who withdrew from (job) searches before or after an offer was made and found that women were likely to do so because they had been asked these questions,” says Abigail Stewart, a professor of psychology and women’s studies at the University of Michigan. She was the senior author on the JAMA paper and the director of the university’s ADVANCE program.

The goals of the ADVANCE program, established in 2001 by the National Science Foundation, are to retain women in academic science and engineering careers and make academic institutions more gender-equitable. While more and more women are obtaining doctoral degrees in science, technology, mathematics

and engineering, they remain significantly underrepresented in almost all positions at academic institutions.

Stewart and others involved with ADVANCE say they aren't aware of any studies of candidates being asked illegal questions during job interviews. But, Stewart says, "We all know of these questions, from having been asked them, having colleagues ask them in our presence, and from students coming back from interviews telling us they were asked them."

Beth Mitchneck agrees that these incidents, although not rigorously tracked, happen frequently. Mitchneck, a faculty member in the University of Arizona's geography department, worked at the NSF for several years to spearhead ADVANCE. She says, "For the people who say, 'I can't believe this is still happening,' their heads are still in the sand."

Caught in an uncomfortable position

Many candidates know what can and cannot be asked of them during interviews. But no matter how aware candidates are, they often feel trapped when asked illegal questions.

"You have the right to call that person out and say, 'That's an illegal question. I don't want to answer that.' But, realistically, how you answer that question determines what happens next," says Alexandra Tracy-Ramirez, an attorney with the law firm HopkinsWay who works with individuals who have experienced harassment or discrimination.

"If you point out that this person is potentially engaged in illegal behavior, that could signal that you're some sort of troublemaker, because you know your rights and responsibilities and may next want to know how much people make so you can fight for pay equity," says Tracy-Ramirez. "But if you do answer, you don't know where that information is going to go or how it's going to be used."

Deborah says objecting to illegal questions was not feasible for her. "It's such a competitive job market," she says. "In my head, I wanted to tell them I wasn't comfortable talking about something personal, but I ran the risk of sounding cold, unapproachable or not willing to play ball."

Departmental culture and due diligence

Academia doesn't have a common set of guidelines or training on hiring best practices and how to avoid biased or discriminatory questions.

"There's a lot of flexibility in how the whole (hiring) process gets structured from department to department and from institution to institution," says Heather Metcalf, director of research and analysis at the Association for Women in Science. "I've seen departments that have really great written policies and guidance documents ... I've seen the 'we have no written policy at all, no kind of guidance, it just happens' (approach)."

Often, it's the head of a department who decides how much effort a department will put into learning about recruiting best practices. The department head might, at minimum, require members of the search committee to attend a training session. However, not placing more attention carries the risk that the department isn't fully aware of how discriminatory questions and biases can crop up during recruitment.

Plus, discrimination laws are complicated. The EEO rules are just the beginning. There's the American Disabilities Act and equal pay laws at the federal level. States and institutions have their own policies regarding what constitutes discrimination against a member of a protected class.

Besides overt discrimination, there are implicit biases that stack against certain candidates. "Everyone has biases, whether they like it or not,"

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says structural biologist Karen Allen at Boston University's chemistry department.

The culture of the department determines how much attention is paid to biases and whether department members are actively creating an environment to mitigate biases over the long run. Everyone interviewed for this story agrees that mitigating people's biases is extremely difficult.

"I'm chairing a high-level, important search committee for my department. Even though I have tried very hard from the very beginning to make it as little of a gendered process as it possibly can be, people are people," says Mitchneck. "When it came down to the actual interviews, the way the people were talking about the candidates was still based on gender. It's so intransigent."

One way to reduce the creep of biases and discrimination is to make sure that the people on a search committee have different backgrounds and perspectives. Allen says, "The best way to avoid bias is to have a mixed group of people on the committee."

She also urges people to think deeply about why they like a particular candidate and to make sure they are not resorting to assumptions and stereotypes.

"You have to make your decisions based on facts. That's a really important thing," says Allen. "When someone on my committee says, 'This guy is great!' I ask, 'Can you please explain why he is great? What makes him great? Is it the number of publications? Is it the proposal? Is it the area that he is suggesting working in?'"

It's not all casual

In the winter of 2014, Alexis Webb went to a small liberal arts college to interview for a science faculty position. Webb, who has a Ph.D. in neuroscience and has completed a postdoctoral fellowship, was looking

forward to learning more about the department during a dinner with several female faculty members. Instead, the faculty members "all sat around talking about what their experiences were like, whether they were married and had family, whether they were single at the time they joined the faculty and what dating in the small college town was like," she says. "I felt, to engage in the conversation, I had to talk about very personal aspects of my life with people who were also evaluating whether or not they wanted to hire me for the position."

This incident drives home the point that women as much as men can be part of the problem. "I find a lot of times that women automatically think they cannot be sexist, that they can do no wrong when interacting with other women," says Jennifer Ross, a biophysicist at University of Massachusetts, Amherst, who writes the blog *Woman of Science*. "That's absolutely not true."

Candidates and hiring managers interviewed for this article report that the illegal and inappropriate questions tend to come up during the social moments of campus interviews, such as meals and receptions. Candidates know that anything they say at any time could get noted in their applications. But social events during recruitment visits are intentionally more casual than sit-down interviews, and faculty members often ask personal questions as they might at gatherings without job candidates.

"Even the people who would never say anything related to personal lives in the interview context can slip up because we convolute social interactions with the interview," says enzymologist Carol Fierke at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, who is also a graduate school dean and a vice provost for academic affairs.

And, yet, the more casual moments of an interview are critical. After all, faculty hiring is different from most

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Five don'ts for introducing a female speaker (and why this matters)

Janina Dill recently wrote a blog post on why it's important to pay attention to how female speakers are introduced. Dill is an assistant professor at the London School of Economics and a research fellow at the Center for Ethics, Law and Armed Conflict at the University of Oxford in the U.K. The post originally appeared in May on the world politics blog "Duck of Minerva." The post has been excerpted here and edited for length:

"She may be a small person, but she has big ideas," states the panel chair by way of introducing one of the most impressive senior scholars in security studies. At a recent conference, a more junior panelist's contribution is prefaced with the chair's observation: "It is hard to believe that such a fragile woman should be an expert in this topic!"

Avoiding gender discrimination when introducing speakers/lecturers/panelists should be as easy as a wink. Why then is the unequal treatment of women in just that situation about as likely as a flood of anxious emails from students the week before an exam?

Panel chairs often fail to paint the picture of a competent professional, instead lingering much longer than in the case of male speakers on the women's physical attributes, age,

country of upbringing, family situation and so on. Even well-meaning, jovial endorsements of a woman's nonprofessional attributes — "how nice to see X, Y, Z in a discussion of such a serious topic" — can be distracting at best. At worst, such comments outright undermine the speaker.

So here are five don'ts when introducing a female speaker:

1. Don't mention her looks. That includes her stature. It doesn't matter whether it is a compliment or not. Just don't do it! Really, please don't!

2. Don't mention her age or gender. It is quite possibly obvious and definitely irrelevant.

3. Don't mention other pieces of information that would be useless in determining whether listening to her will be more or less intellectually rewarding than scanning Twitter for the latest celebrity feud.

Those irrelevant pieces of information include, but are not limited to where she grew up and how much you like that country, what profession her father had and how that may have sparked her interest in the topic, or that you think her alma mater has a great sports team. It distracts from her professional standing, and you will almost certainly mention those things at the expense of passing on more relevant informa-

tion to the audience, the kind that you will likely convey about the male speakers on the panel.

4. Don't use double standards. If you call every other speaker by their academic title, it is probably a bad idea to leave out hers. If you call every other speaker by their first and last name (or just last name), you can safely assume that reducing her to her first name will sound odd.

5. Don't call her "Miss." If she does not have an academic title, the go-to alternative is obviously "Ms." For pertinence of information given the context, her marital status is in a category with her shoe size and her favorite Muppet.

The reason this issue deserves attention is not that this is the only/worst form of gender (or other) discrimination out there (obviously not by a long shot) or because everyone who ever called a female speaker "Miss" is a despicable misogynist. If they were, it would be easier to snark back right there and then. Not introducing female scholars as if they were either slightly suspicious anomalies or much appreciated diversions to lighten the mood and improve the decor is crucial because it is one among few steps on an otherwise extraordinarily difficult path to gender equality that is easy to take.



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other types of hiring in that a department is hiring a person potentially for life. So, Fierke says, the more casual parts of an interview are important for gauging if a long-term partnership might be possible. This is also why having a conversation with all of the faculty members about “the questions that derail the recruitment process” is an important one, she says.

Even someone who is not on the search committee but who has a chance to chat with a candidate has to be mindful. Everyone at an institution involved in a campus interview, directly or indirectly, is “acting as a representative for the institution,” says Tracy-Ramirez. “If they have engaged, even unwittingly, in discrimination, and someone does find that it was highly offensive and wants to seek some sort of remedy for it, then it’s the institution that’s responding, not the individual.”

One way those who ask illegal or inappropriate questions defend their behavior, Tracy-Ramirez says, is by saying something along the lines of “I just wanted to get some information and make sure the person was a good fit.”

But the notion of “good fit” itself is problematic.

As Ron Friedman, author of “The Best Place to Work: The Art and Science of Creating an Extraordinary Workplace,” explained in an article in the Harvard Business Review last year: “The idea holds intuitive appeal: When employees share similar attitudes, they’re more likely to get along, and more likely they are to produce. Right? Not necessarily. There’s a point at which too much similarity can stifle performance. For one, similarity fosters complacency. We get stuck doing things the way we’ve always done them because no one is challenging us to think differently. Similarity also breeds overconfidence. We overestimate the accuracy of our opinions

and invest less effort in our decisions, making errors more common.”

Just don’t ask

Getting faculty members to stay away from prying personal questions is difficult.

A decade ago, Fierke, Stewart and others, funded on an ADVANCE grant to the University of Michigan, began to raise awareness of how personal questions or even casual conversations about personal lives affect female candidates. For example, a female candidate might interpret questions about her family life as a surreptitious investigation into her true dedication to the job.

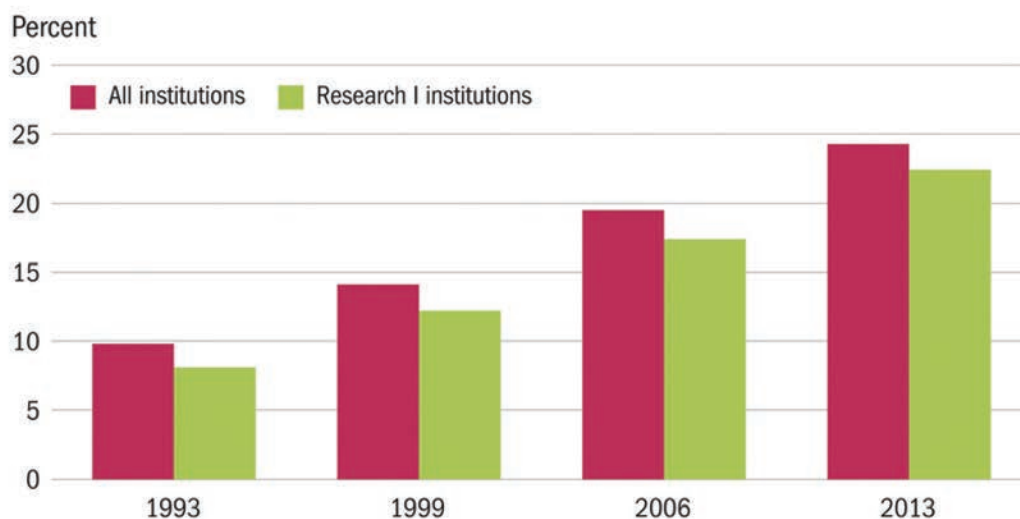
Fierke and colleagues first tried listing the topics that should be off limits during job interviews, such as marital and family statuses. “We got a lot of pushback from the faculty,” says Fierke. “For instance, in a place like Ann Arbor, faculty feel that one of our selling points is that we are a great place to live and to raise a family.” When people bring this up with candidates, she says, “They feel this is being social and being friendly.” Fierke and her colleagues have been trying to convince colleagues that those conversations, no matter how well-intended, can backfire.

Importantly, revealing personal details can hurt women more than men in terms of competitiveness.

“We know men who have families are valued” for having families, says political scientist Sara Rushing at Montana State University, who is a co-director of the university’s ADVANCE program. “For women who have families, people worry that their attention will be divided.”

Discrimination against mothers has been well-documented. For example, in a 2014 paper in the American Journal of Sociology, researchers at Cornell University found that applications from mothers were evaluated less favorably than applications from

Women as a percentage of full-time, full professors with science, engineering and health doctorates, by employing institutions: 1993-2013



NOTE: Criteria for research I institutions based on 1994 Carnegie classification.

IMAGE COURTESY OF NSF
WOMEN, MINORITIES, AND PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES IN SCIENCE AND ENGINEERING: 2015 (WWW.NSF.GOV/STATISTICS/WMPD/)

women without children as well as men with and without children. The authors noted, “To the extent that mothers are believed to be less committed to the workplace, we argue that employers will subtly discriminate against mothers when making evaluations that affect hiring, promotion and salary decisions. We do not expect that fathers will experience these types of workplace disadvantages since understandings of what it means to be a good father are not seen in our culture as incompatible with understandings of what it means to be a good worker.”

The other extreme isn’t helpful either. “We’ve had job candidates say things like, ‘My partner is a doctor, so is there a good hospital in town?’ And people go, ‘I can’t answer that!’” says Rushing. “You have to explain that, no, you actually can answer that question if a candidate brings it up.”

This is a point that both candidates and hiring committees need to know: If a candidate volunteers personal

details, those personal details can be used as discussion points during an interview.

One tactic that people at the University of Michigan’s ADVANCE program have found to work is to build an understanding among faculty members of what a candidate thinks and feels when posed with a supposedly innocuous personal question.

The ADVANCE team takes images of a male interviewer and a female candidate. They place speech and thought bubbles to describe what the interviewer is asking and thinking when posing a personal question, such as whether the candidate has children, and thinking about what child-care arrangements can be made to accommodate the candidate. Then they use speech and thought bubbles on the female candidate to show how differently the candidate is interpreting the question and feeling that her professional passion is being judged to take

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a back seat to parenthood.

The speech-and-thought-bubble approach “seems to be much more successful,” notes Fierke. She says the approach allows people to understand that the questions about marital status or children, no matter how they are presented, aren’t perceived the same way by the candidate. Those questions tend to mar the candidate’s experience with the department, and the result can be “a de-recruitment,” says Fierke.

Another way to help candidates figure out if an institution and a town will meet their needs is to bring in a third party. Rushing says MSU has had success with its family advocate program. The advocate “meets with all the on-campus job interview candidates. We email the candidates in advance, and we let them know that they’ll be having a meeting with a family advocate that is confidential and completely independent from the search,” she explains.

Candidates use this 30-minute segment of their interview to learn about how the university supports work-life balance and ask all the questions that they can’t ask members of the search committee. “The family advocate has no interest in who’s getting hired in this search. Often we don’t even remember what search they are part of!” says Rushing, who is one of two family advocates on campus. “We can tell them about dual hiring in Montana State. We can tell them about our modified duties for faculty for family caregiving. We can tell them about our tenure extension policies. They can ask all the questions that they are perhaps not inclined to ask members of the search committee: What are the real estate prices like? What’s it like to be gay in Montana?”

Rushing says the family advocate position helps search committees as well. “If they are at all uncomfortable, they can just say, ‘This is a great place to work. We have all these great work-life supports, and when you talk to

the family advocate, you’ll get to learn about what they are,’” she says. “They know that information is getting through, but they don’t have to be in charge of conveying it.”

The spouse issue

Without fail, everyone who was interviewed for this story brought up the issue of a candidate’s spouse. Figuring out if a candidate has a spouse who also requires a job at the institution is one of the biggest hurdles faced during hiring. After all, “83 percent of women in STEM have partners who are academic scientists,” notes Rushing.

But in trying to find out if there’s a spouse involved, hiring committees can end up asking an illegal question. Unfortunately, there is no way for a candidate to gauge whether having a spouse is a help or hindrance to the hiring process. For example, Ross is certain that when she and her husband were interviewing for faculty positions 10 years ago, one institution bypassed her for another woman who didn’t have a spouse who needed a job. So broaching the topic of a spouse is an awkward dance between the candidate and head of the department.

Heads of departments who were interviewed for this story do not condone any personal questions on the first campus interview. However, “the tables turn for one or more top candidates when they are brought back a second or third time and it’s made clear to them that the department is really trying to evaluate them for fit and meet their needs,” says Charles Brenner, who chairs the biochemistry department at the University of Iowa Carver College of Medicine.

Brenner and William Guggino, the chairman of the physiology department at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine say that at the subsequent stages of the interview process, if the candidate is still in the running, they shift into courting

mode and try to woo the candidate. The heads of departments need to know if there is anything they need to do to make potential new hires feel welcome. To find out what a new recruit needs, say the department heads, the most logical thing to do is to ask an open-ended question.

"I'll often ask candidates, 'Is there anything that's unusual about your situation that I need to know and that will take me time to put together?'" says Tricia Serio, who chairs the molecular and cellular biology department at the University of Arizona. "Some people will tell me, 'I need this large piece of equipment.' That will require me to try to get resources from the university. Some people tell me, 'I need a job for my spouse.'"

Although Brenner, Guggino and Serio say they prefer to find out sooner if they need to wrangle with another department to accommodate a spouse, it is wrong to ask the candidate about a spouse during the first interview.

However, a candidate can voluntarily bring up the need for a job for a spouse during the first interview. Heads of departments interviewed for this story say they appreciate being told early in the process if they need to find a position for a spouse. "By waiting to reveal that information, it makes it harder for the chair to actually try to do something," says Serio. "A lot of people are hesitant to mention their spouse because they think they won't get the offer because their situation is more complicated. I always tell people if that's the case then it's better for you as well to know that early on."

More aware

Biases and discriminatory moves aren't limited to the campus interviews. (See box on "Five don'ts for introducing a female speaker (and why this matters).") Biases and discrimination can pervade the entire hiring process.

Rushing uses the job ad as an

example, noting that there is a craft to writing a job description so that it doesn't favor one gender over another. "Women apply when they are 90 percent qualified for a job. Men apply when they are 60 percent qualified," says Rushing. "If you pack your job ad with qualifications, you're not going to get a lot of women."

Then there is the art of interpreting job applications. Rushing says, "You have to understand that women may not toot their own horns in the same way as men. When you read letters of recommendation, you have to understand that the language used to assess a woman may be different from the language used to assess a man. That's the problem with the letter writer, but it's something for which the committee can control."

Experts interviewed for this story do say that with a bit of effort, inappropriate and illegal questions can be prevented. That way, people like Deborah won't encounter such questions at three different institutions out of 10 campus interviews.

The third time, Deborah had gone to the restroom. When she was at the sinks, she was joined by a female member of the search committee, who began to ask her if she had a boyfriend or a husband and what he did for a living. Deborah was unsure if the woman was being friendly or interrogating her to figure out what kind of package the committee would need to put together to hire her.

But Deborah is putting all that behind her. Starting in the fall, she will set up her own research group at a large, private academic institution. And no, it isn't one of the institutions where she was asked about a husband and children.



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