
FORUM

The Cost of Career Equality: A Personal Response to *Academic Couples: Problems and Promises*

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I begin this review in Edmonton, Alberta, where my husband has been teaching for a year while I remained in my tenure-track position in Ohio. It has been one of the worst years of my life, perhaps best illustrated by a dream I had when we were making the decision for him to take this job a year ago: I dreamed that I was an autistic two-year-old alone in a large mansion. The picture of the isolation, loneliness, and abandonment I feared could not have been clearer; yet I did not give my husband an ultimatum to stay put (and unemployed) for my sake. This was not masochism on my part, but a decision based on the ethos of gender equality, which I have discovered cuts both ways; it would have been hypocritical for me to continue casting feminist aspersions on the stunted careers of women of previous generations if I had merely turned the tables and behaved like the reviled archetypal patriarch. The Christian ethos of “loving the other as oneself” was also a part of the equation; I knew how much I had gained from my own early full-time teaching experiences and did not want to deny him the same development. I’m happy to report that the year my husband spent in Canada was a productive and necessary one for him and his career growth; he gained new teaching experiences, new collegial and research connections, solidified his own sense of professional competence, and returned as a happier and more confident man.

Still, there was a high price for all of this: not as high as it could have been (some couples split under these circumstances), but high enough in financial, emotional, and even career terms. Even though my husband had a full-time job (the rewards of which were somewhat mitigated by the Canadian dollar exchange rate), every penny of his income and more was spent on moving expenses, separate living expenses, a dozen \$600 plane tickets for monthly visits, higher insurance rates, and of course telephone bills. The tangible reward we had hoped for—

in the form of a tenure-track appointment for him the following year (he applied nationwide)—did not materialize, to his disappointment and my shamefaced relief, as he's now living with me again. Most difficult for me was the feeling of being left high and dry with little social or emotional support as I continued ministering to the unceasing intellectual and emotional needs of undergraduate and graduate students in my program; I felt like a newly widowed single parent (if I had literally been one, the ordeal could have been even worse; or it could have been better having at least some form of family and public sanction for showing my grief). Unexpectedly—when is illness ever expected?—I needed surgery twice during the year and had to call on parents and friends for support. I slowly built a social life as a “celibate single” woman; with one exception, married friends only invited me over when my husband was in town (the one time I was *not* feeling lonely and might have enjoyed some privacy)! While my own parents were supportive, other relatives made snippy remarks about the fact that I was not living with my husband and expressed concern about our marriage. To cope with the separation, I threw myself into activities at my home campus, resulting in some valuable professional connections and information about my campus, but also in a sense of exhaustion and dissipated energies.

One of the most productive activities I engaged in on my home campus was co-organizing a forum on academic couples living apart. Both in the process of organizing the event and during the event itself, I learned that I was by no means alone with this situation—and also why this large group is so invisible. Many faculty members at my home campus have spouses or partners who are permanently employed in different states or even countries; a task force is currently preparing a survey to determine just what percentage of our faculty is affected. Those who are in a permanent commuting situation seem to have three main ways of coping: shortening one spouse's work week so that the couple can live together for four days a week (a solution only possible with a short commute or huge financial resources, and one that in effect “steals” faculty time from one institution); getting frequent grant-sponsored research leaves so that one person can join the other all year (a solution that is obviously good for research productivity and profile, but bad for the sense of connection and continuity at the home institution); or simply living separate lives and visiting occasionally. A group of people with such complex and demanding commuting schedules of one sort or another is obviously not in a position to form an effective mutual support group, though I think the process of “going public” with the problem can at least address this group's common feelings of oddity and isolation. For this group of people as a whole lives in double denial: their problems, which are clearly part of a social trend, are still

viewed as a “personal choice” by the surrounding community, and therefore the individuals affected attempt to cope in smiling, stoic silence: “It’s fine; we’re happy; we want to live this way; none of your business.”

How welcome, then, is *Academic Couples: Problems and Promises*, edited by Marianne A. Ferber and Jane W. Loeb, whose 323 pages confirm through sociological analysis what I already knew from personal experience: that our commuting lifestyle during the past several years has not been a perverse personal choice, but a widespread reality and even necessity of academic life in the 1990s. “One study has indicated that in more than half of all commuting marriages both partners are academics” (80).¹ This reality is certain to remain with us given women’s increasing academic achievement combined with an increasingly competitive academic job market. I will leave it to trained sociologists to discuss and perhaps critique the statistical sampling and interpretation methods employed in this volume; to the lay reader they seem responsible and valid. My interest in this volume is the objective, “big-picture” insight it provides into my own subjective, personal experience (and therefore into that of many others similarly situated). The wide academic audience to whom this collection of essays should appeal will find it well-written and readable; the main texts are generally free of disciplinary jargon, with details on sampling, regression models, dummy variables, etc. confined to the footnotes. The essays presented here address three main areas: 1) the history and social context of academic couples, 2) legal and institutional concerns about programs for hiring partners, and 3) data on the career success and scholarly productivity of academic couples.

Several chapters devoted to the history of women and couples in academia provide context for discussion of the present situation. Miller-Loessi and Henderson situate the appearance of academic couples within women’s entry into the workplace and educational institutions in general; this will be familiar territory to anyone with a knowledge of women’s history. They remind us that “the still-dominant image of the employed husband/at-home wife has never corresponded well to social reality. In this perspective, the increasingly commonplace phenomenon of both husband and wife working should not be viewed as a deviation from an established norm, but as a continuation of a long-term trend, albeit one that accelerated after the middle-1950s” (26-27). In “The History of Women and Couples in Academe,” Stephan and Kassis present case studies of five broadly representative institutions from 1860-1970; they find that there was wide variation in the employment of women. It is not surprising that an institution like Yale has always employed “proportionately fewer women than the national average,” but “what is surprising is that the college employed as many women as it did when

it did not admit women as undergraduates.” The case study of Agnes Scott College reminds us that “it was at women’s colleges that educated women were likely to make their mark.” Yet even at this school, “institutions have often hired men with Ph.D.’s ostensibly in an attempt to raise ‘quality’” (74).

The most surprising and encouraging article in this volume is Linda M. Perkins’ “For the Good of the Race: Married African-American Academics—A Historical Perspective.” Unlike nineteenth-century white society, “African Americans recognized the need for and largely supported the employment of women” because “the talents of all of its members were needed for the advancement and ‘uplift’ of the race” (81). While the employment of African-American women took place against a background of racism that did not consider them worthy or in need of the “protections” afforded “fragile and helpless” white women (81), the positive result was that there were fewer social obstacles to the employment of the “small but steady number of African-American women [who] were able to obtain enough education to move into the professional class and become teachers and activists” (82). In a fascinating historical overview ranging from the end of the Civil War to the present, Perkins provides summaries of the careers and marriages of over two dozen black women academics who successfully combined profession and family; many had children, and Perkins records only one of these marriages ending. To cite just one example, Fanny Jackson Coppin was principal of “a prestigious African-American classical high school, the Institute for Colored Youth” in Philadelphia from 1869 until 1903. She did not resign her job when she married a minister assigned to a church in Baltimore; instead, “the couple had a commuting marriage for nearly four years until Levi was assigned a church in Philadelphia. More than a century ago, the commuting marriage, now considered a new phenomenon, was accepted by them” (84). Interested readers could learn more about Fanny Jackson Coppin, as her memoirs are published.² So are those of Levi Coppin, Ida B. Wells, Sara Lawrence Lightfoot, and Mary Church Terrell. The other reports Perkins presents are based on interviews with the women in question or their descendents; she has recorded a valuable history for all Americans.

Obstacles to the advancement of African-American academic women included the increasing demand for Ph.D.s, beginning in the 1920s. Perkins cites a study that determined “that in the half century after the first doctorate was awarded to an African American in 1876, no more than fifty-one African Americans had earned this degree, and only four of this number were female” (87). Antinepotism rules also posed an obstacle beginning in the 1930s, nor were black colleges free from sexism, for instance in sex-based pay differentials. It is worth noting that, well into the twentieth century, the achievements of African-American women

were not detrimental to the black family. Margaret Morgan Lawrence, a medical doctor who married sociologist Charles Lawrence in 1938, noted in her memoirs that “her husband felt enhanced, not diminished, by her ambition” (91). This should be born in mind by current conservative crusaders on behalf of the African-American family such as Tony Evans, who believe that returning women to their putative “traditional” or God-ordained place is the answer to saving family life.³

Two articles (Miller and Skeen; Raabe) discuss the present situation of academic couples. Miller and Skeen address the personal experiences of “POSSLQs and PSSSLQs” (heterosexual and homosexual unmarried couples). Unfortunately their survey received such a small response rate as to preclude drawing any conclusions about these groups, but the anecdotes some of their respondents shared about social stigmatization and assumptions of the surrounding community will resonate with some married as well as cohabiting readers. In “Work-Family Policies for Faculty: How ‘Career- and Family-Friendly’ is Academe?,” Phyllis Hutton Raabe compares the existence of a dozen specific family-friendly policies at major corporations and at colleges and universities. She concludes that “Overall, in comparison with other kinds of employers, higher educational institutions are particularly advanced in providing child-care services, flexible and reduced work schedules, and adjustments to career paths, such as expansion of time to achieve tenure and tenure for part-time faculty” (222). She also notes, however, that large corporations are more likely than higher educational institutions to provide spousal job assistance, job sharing, and elder-care programs.

The legal issue is addressed most directly by Illinois law professor Elaine W. Shoben in “From Antinepotism Rules to Programs for Partners: Legal Issues.” The article is addressed to university employers who may have concerns about “the legality of university practices favoring or disfavoring spouses or other relatives.” Shoben correctly notes that programs for partners are in fact “a new form of nepotism.” The question of legality turns on whether the practice disadvantages a protected group and whether it is a “business necessity.” In reviewing previous legal challenges to nepotistic practices, Shoben shows that partner programs are different in nature: earlier practices of nepotism in trade unions often excluded anyone but relatives (usually sons and nephews) of current members; this had a “racially exclusionary effect . . . in unions that were historically all white” (227). In the case of partner preferences, a disappointed applicant passed over in favor of a spouse would have to show “that the effect of an employment practice is to exclude individuals disproportionately on the basis of race, gender, national origin, or age forty and over” (230). Current employees could also have a grievance if “one faculty

member was given a benefit in the form of a job for a spouse whereas another faculty member was not," which could result in a "claim of disparate treatment" (240). Shoben concludes that "there is a great deal of irony that partner preferences, which are especially beneficial to women, who formerly would have been excluded by antinepotism, may be challenged by civil rights laws if their effect is to advantage women disproportionately to men" (245).

In practice, the greatest hurdle to partner employment programs is not the potential for legal challenges, but the fact that the "power to recruit, hire, promote, and fire is among the most cherished of faculty prerogatives" (251). As Lilli S. Hornig points out in "Academic Couples: The View from the Administration," "any administrator appearing to interfere with the procedures of faculty recruitment and hiring runs the risk of being perceived by faculty members as restricting their right to determine who their own colleagues will be" (251). Nonetheless, administrative attention to the issue is imperative, particularly when considering recruitment and retention of female faculty; Hornig cites a 1989 Stanford study in which the "Provosts' Committee on the Recruitment and Retention of Women Faculty (Stanford University 1993) found that of their sample of faculty members who had left Stanford, almost one-third reported a spouse's employment situation as a primary factor in their decision to leave. Similarly, Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government had two out of three tenure offers to women turned down in a five-year period because of spousal relocation problems" (255). If these top-flight institutions in or near urban centers find that spousal employment is a retention issue, how much more important must this issue be at lesser-ranked or more remote institutions? Hornig notes that location and field may determine whether partner programs are necessary and/or feasible: at geographically remote institutions, partner employment may be a recruiting necessity in some fields. Fields such as the humanities, however, pose a problem because of the job shortages in these fields; "this has a disparate impact on women because they have been by far the fastest-growing population among recent humanities Ph.D.s" (257). Among the possible solutions Hornig discusses are shared positions, grant-supported positions for "trailing" spouses, part-time and non-academic employment, and family employment programs (two such programs are briefly discussed, those at Washington State University and Oregon State University).

Several articles address productivity and career standing among academic couples (Astin & Milem, Bellas, and Ferber & Hoffman). Most of the studies support Bellas' conclusion that "although having had an academic partner does not appear to add significantly to faculty productivity, neither does it appear to

detract from it" (177). Astin and Milem find significant advantages in employment status, academic rank, salary, number of publications, and reported family/marital stress for women with academic partners. Men with academic partners appear to fare less well in all of these areas than men with nonacademic partners. They conclude that "academic partners/spouses have more egalitarian arrangements overall" (141), resulting in a career boost for women and a corresponding penalty for men in such relationships. Marcia Bellas, however, using a different approach, concludes that for her "sample of Illinois faculty, the effects of having had an academic partner appear to be minimal" (175). But in her findings on commuter relationships, Bellas presents evidence consistent with the notion of the "(house)wife bonus" that accrues to men, namely, "that the greater the distance between faculty respondents and their partners, the higher the productivity for women but the lower the productivity for men" (164). For both sexes, "having had a partner with a Ph.D. in the same field translated into nearly five additional publications" (165). Ferber and Hoffman present the surprising finding that "the total number of years men had partners has a significant negative effect on the likelihood of their being at a research or doctoral university," but "contrary to what might be expected, none of the variables relating to partners or children are significant for women" (191).

All three of these studies concur that "personal relationships tend to have little effect on academic careers," though Ferber and Hoffman add that "this is particularly true for women" (193). It must be noted, however, that the women whose careers were examined for these surveys were women who in fact had/have academic careers of some kind, the "survivors"; not included were women who may have left academia for family reasons, whether by not completing a dissertation, never landing a job in the first place,⁴ becoming disillusioned with the part-time teaching to which spouses are often relegated, choosing not to live apart from partner or family, etc. Nonetheless, among those academic couples who do have both the luck and the gumption to make a go of dual careers for the long term, these studies indicate that neither such individuals nor their employers need worry that academic couples are any less competent or productive than either single or more traditionally paired colleagues; in fact, several of the early studies cited indicate a slight advantage for married women over single ones.

The bulk of this volume is academic and career-oriented. But as Ferber and Hoffman state, it is not always "possible to disentangle cause and effect.... we focus on the impact of personal arrangements on careers, but clearly careers also influence personal lives" (187). Studies are needed to address the personal side of the equation: the emotional and psychological impact of two-career partnerships on

the partners, their relationships, and on children (particularly when commuting is involved). Reliable studies on these questions could give us the evidence with which to argue even more forcefully for the necessity of programs for partners (or, on the other hand, to deflect the concern of well-meaning relatives). The volume will make informative reading for any administrator or academic concerned directly or indirectly with issues involving academic couples; in the present situation, that should be almost everyone in academia.

As a postscript on my own situation: my husband is now teaching part-time at my institution. I have intentionally not mentioned his full name, field, or department, since these situations happen across all fields, but let it be said that his department here has treated him quite well, accommodating his preferences for teaching assignments and showing him collegiality and respect. We couldn't be happier—unless he were teaching full-time, that is. Since my university now gets a “twofer”—my full-time work plus his part-time work—I figure we each make an annual salary in the low twenties, or the equivalent of a high school teacher with a B.A. For us, it is clearly the best personal choice at the moment, which is one reason why universities are still able to take advantage of a highly qualified, low-paid part-time workforce. ✨

Notes

¹ Perkins refers to the article by Sharon Hileman, listed below.

² There is also a book on Coppin by Perkins, listed below.

³ See, for example, his pamphlets “Marriage God’s Style” (<http://www.tonyevans.org/gdstyle.htm>) and “Portrait of a Godly Woman” (<http://www.tonyevans.org/gdlywmn.htm>).

⁴ Anecdotally, I recall a job for which I interviewed where I was told informally that another woman applicant had been passed over because she was pregnant and could not travel at a time convenient to the hiring department; a female member of this department concluded that the applicant “had made her choice” (i.e., pregnancy over career). I fear that this is not a isolated incident.

Works Consulted

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