Embracing the Dual-Career (Ad)Venture

By Kelly Dolezal

The potential hazards of being in a dual-career relationship had not yet sunk in for me until one wintery, central Illinois evening during my senior year of college. One of my female professors had organized a seminar concerning the challenges facing women in scientific research. “To you women, I have this advice,” she began, and we leaned forward, eager for what we assumed would be uplifting words. “You may one day grow to hate your spouse, but you’ll always have your education.” Her husband fumed in the back row, and they were divorced by the next semester. That spring, I joined my future husband at the graduate school where he was already a Ph.D. student, and solidified my partnership in a dual-career (ad)venture.

Risky Business for Women

Michelle Minitti, assistant director of the Center for Meteorite Studies at Arizona State University, and Rebekah Hines, a senior research specialist in the center, can list many dual-career couples in their department. Minitti concludes, “You should just go stand by the carpool spaces in PS-2, and every time you see a couple get out of the car, assume they work in [the School of Earth and Space Exploration].”

Like many couples in other fields, both of these scientists met their husbands at work and are dual-career. The increase in highly educated women in the scientific workforce has meant that the one-man show of the past is transforming into to what these women somewhat affectionately call the two-body problem – how to advance two careers connected through one relationship. However, women scientists are the ones most often affected: while 62% of married female scientists with Ph.D.s have a spouse with a science Ph.D, this is the case for only 19% of married male scientists (1). When these statistics are linked to the coupling trends of heterosexual women (i.e., relationships with men who are older, earn more, and have at least an equal educational background to them) the best financial and career decisions for the couple as a team may seem to be the advancement of the man’s career, not the woman’s (2).

Less Mobility

Although women scientists select partners with similar qualifications, they report that they often put their own careers second and move professionally more often to support their partners’ careers, often to the detriment of their own (3). Meg Streepey-Smith, an assistant professor of geology at Earlham College, took a leave of absence to join her husband while he finished his post-doctoral research. “I was having a baby and Chris didn’t have a job here. I wasn’t about to have a long-distance marriage with a full-time job and a baby. There were not a whole lot of advantages to that situation, except that I got to spend a year with my daughter, but taking a leave of absence from my job and leaving my home was very, very difficult for me.” Streepey-Smith was already established at her college, and she was able to resume her position at Earlham, where her husband now also has a tenure-track position. However, these geographic changes make it difficult to keep careers on track, and more women than men perceive their professional and geographic mobility to be negatively affected by their relationship (54% for women versus 41% for men) (2).

Commitment and Support

Despite these challenges, we keep our partners around for some reason, right? Being in a committed relationship, even if it is dual-career, brings a level of stability and emotional support that can allow more focus on a career than would be possible if choosing to continue looking for a partner. An understanding partner, and one who can respect the unique challenges that come with a scientific career path, can be the glue that holds together both a relationship and a career. Hines says, “We joke it’s not a job, it’s a lifestyle. You’re on call for the lab at odd hours, or you’re doing fieldwork for three months in the middle of nowhere. It takes a unique individual to want to do...”
that and to understand that their partner wants to do that. I think it’s easier to understand that your spouse has to [do these things] if you have to go through that yourself.

**Fulfillment**

For a generation of women who seem to have heard about the challenges of being a woman in science long before they’ve actually experienced them, not being dual-career was never an option. Streepey-Smith says, “I can’t say that I ever actually thought about the concept of ‘dual-career.’ Since I always had a career, and wasn’t very interested in people who DIDN’T have careers themselves, I suppose I never thought about it as something to be either worried or excited about.”

Jennifer Fewell studies ants and other social insects as a professor of biology at Arizona State University (ASU). She says being dual-career has given her and her husband, also a professor of biology at ASU, a “sense of equality in what we do,” and, while admitting that it might be easier if she was not an academic, she “just liked those ants too much” to let them go. For these women, being dual-career is not a choice, but a necessity.

**Intellectual Synergy**

Dual-career academics couples report that they share intellectual interests, discuss their work and career, and share professional networks for advancement more than other couples (2). Because they often met at work, their interests often overlap and complement each other professionally. Hines says, “There’s enough overlap that you can talk about each other’s day and understand it, but you couldn’t do what the other person is doing. There’s always something new to talk about and learn from each other.” Fewell echoes these sentiments, saying being dual-career has given her and her husband “intellectual synergy” and several collaborative projects. Hiring institutions recognize this synergy as well. Because the dual-career situation affects women more than men, institutions that wish to increase diversity can benefit from hiring these couples and this willingness can give them a competitive edge in the recruitment process (2).

**Worth the risk**

Now on the other side of my leap of faith, I feel lucky to have both a supportive and flexible partner and my degree in hand. As is the case with most dual-career couples I know, we are making our unique situation work in the best way for us. However, compromises are behind every success story, and some dual-career casualties have left their careers, or partners.

So, this can feel like a risky venture; indeed, you must bet on your ability to integrate both of your aspirations into a new, shared goal. To succeed, Streepey-Smith advises, “Know what you want, both individually and as a couple. What you want will almost certainly change over time, and though it sounds totally cliché to say this, you have to be able to communicate what you want without fear.”

Change is all part of the adventure. Sharing a life with someone requires communication, flexibility and plenty of good humor, just as a strenuous journey does. You and your partner’s careers may take more circuitous paths when tied geographically and domestically to each other than they would if you were single, but these new paths shaped by each other may lead to places you’d never have expected, but enjoy all the same. You get to celebrate two sets of career milestones together on your journey, and you discover new territory as the person you love grows and matures along with you. And yet, the grandest adventures can also be the most daunting. Bethany Cutts, a newly hired assistant professor at the University of Illinois in the Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Sciences, and her boyfriend Adrian Smith, a postdoctoral insect biologist at the same university, have just embarked on their dual-career journey. They’re a little nervous about the future, but optimistic. When asked what new dual-career couples should consider, Bethany says, “Just do your best to manage that triangle of being together, being employed, and living in a place you like.” To Adrian, she adds, “But you’re the biggest point, you’re like the obtuse angle.” And for those of us who feel this way about our partners and careers - boldly prepare for our uncharted futures and embrace the dual-career challenge.

**References**


Kelly Dolezal earned her Master's degree in Microbiology at Arizona State University and is currently a research specialist in an ant genetics lab there. She looks forward to creatively combining her interests in research, teaching, and writing in her future dual-career plans. Having participated in the Central Arizona chapter since 2009, Kelly officially joined AWIS in 2011. In the next AWIS Magazine issue, look for the Dual Career Couples Column on dual-career negotiations and love songs