PROFESSION

Scientist Couples Do the Two-Job Shuffle

"Juggling science and family can be a chore, especially when both partners are scientists"

By **Myrna E. Watanabe**

Maria Sippola-Thiele journeyed from her native Finland with the goal of obtaining her doctoral degree in biochemistry at the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey (UMDNJ) and then returning home. But she met Dennis Thiele, a graduate student in microbiology, and her life took a different course. "He changed my plans to go back to Finland," Sippola-Thiele says. Her husband started his postdoctorate training at the National Cancer Institute (NCI), and Sippola-Thiele soon followed him there. But their next jobs would take them on separate paths, forcing her to make a decision. "Dennis was hired to begin an assistant professorship in University of Michigan," Sippola-Thiele relates. "I had slightly less postdoctoral training than Dennis."

Her decision was to stay with Thiele and change her career plans. Sippola-Thiele earned a master's degree at the University of Michigan School of Business Administration and she and her husband remained a two-scientist couple—but with a twist. Sippola-Thiele is now an assistant director of technology transfer for the U of M Medical School in Ann Arbor. Many two-scientist families have to make the choice of who will pursue research, and who might seek an alternate profession. Some couples struggle to secure level positions in the same academic region. Couples with children have to juggle their offspring's' needs with their own highly demanding careers. Often, one partner has to make sacrifices.

The Benefits

Despite such trials, most two-scientist couples report satisfaction with their choices, according to Harvard University sociologist Gerhard Sonnert. He has studied hundreds of couples who, like the Thieles, have completed prestigious postdoctorates.[1] "We expected them to be more negative, but there were also a lot of people who had positive things to say about how marriage affected their careers," explains Sonnert, also a research associate in Harvard's department of physics.

Sonnert notes that women scientists are more likely to marry other scientists than are their male peers, and when they do, they often marry a slightly older man, so each partner has a different stake in change or stability. The husband may be ahead of his spouse in the training pipeline and the wife may not be ready to join him when he is ready to move on. "Once the husband graduates, he might go off to a postdoc and the wife is restricted by that earlier choice when it come to time to [do] the postdoc," Sonnert says. "The women tend to follow the men more."

But the wife can benefit from her husband's experience. "We can give

each other advice—probably more [my husband to] me than the other way around, because he's more senior," says Katja Simon, a senior postdoc in immunology at the Institute of Molecular Medicine, Oxford University. Her husband, Quentin Sattentau, is an HIV virologist at Imperial College, London.

Some partners can also even out the sacrifices each person makes. Conservation biologist Bill Weber and his wife, ecologist Amy Vedder, couldn't find graduate schools in the same location after both had graduated from Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania, so they joined the US Peace Corps and taught in Zaire (present day Democratic Republic of Congo). There, they both decided to study gorillas, and further complicated the dual-career choices. Vedder was later accepted at the University of Wisconsin (Madison) and Weber followed her. "I [initially] went to work in Madison at a home for young retarded men." A semester later, Weber enrolled in the same university.

The problem in the United Kingdom is more one of actually *finding* two jobs at the same place. "It's tough to find two jobs simultaneously at one university," Sattentau says. He commutes an hour each way by train to his London lab, while they live in Oxford, near Simon's lab.

For geneticist Maria Leptin and her husband, immunologist and geneticist Jonathan Howard, the commute between labs takes just a few minutes. They both work at the Institut für Genetik, Cologne, Germany. But they've never before enjoyed such togetherness. Until both moved to Cologne, they had a unique, two-country relationship. Leptin, who met Howard while she was a postdoc at Cambridge University, took a position in Tubingen, Germany that was "too good to turn down." Howard remained in Cambridge.


Richard and Elicia Williams-King

US couples also face problems finding same-city jobs. Richard King, a physician, is completing a doctorate in neuroscience at the Baylor College of Medicine MD/PhD program, and will start his residency at Harvard University. That means his wife, Elicia Williams-King, must find a new site for her own residency in the Cambridge area; she had previously been fortunate to be accepted at Christus St. Joseph's Hospital in Houston, Texas. "Hence begins the compromises," King says.

Personal Sacrifice

Science for two can require more than compromises. It may prompt personal sacrifice as well. "We as a couple made a conscious decision that family and our lifestyle, if at all possible, would come first, and our profession would come second," says Sattentau. "We took less ambitious jobs than we would have done, jobs where we would not have to work long hours," Simon continues. Sattentau travels less frequently than he did before their marriage. "I cut that back to the bare minimum," he remarks. The couple shares the burden of working late. "One of us gets home early one day and the other the next day," Sattentau says. Vedder gave birth to the couple's two children in the United States, but

brought them to the field in Africa. "There were very serious concerns about whether Amy could do field work with two kids," Weber relates. "She was doing transects of the forest with our youngest on her back." Their older son had a nanny and a French preschool. Once they returned to the United States, they traveled extensively, often separately. "We haven't been able to split our roles in any traditional way," she says.


Jin-Ae Lee and Ik Kyo Chung

Algologists Jin-Ae Lee of Inje University, Kimhae, Korea, and Ik Kyo Chung of Pusan National University, tried to limit their journeys to a single day when their children were young. "It was very difficult for both of us to travel for a long period of time," Chung says. As the children got older, they joined their parents at scientific meetings. Now, the two researchers say, their son, who is in a US high school, and his sister, in medical school, are "proud of us and [they] enjoyed small presents from trips."

Leptin and Howard's son spent alternate two weeks in the United Kingdom and Germany, giving one parent freedom. But after five years of separation, they both took positions in Cologne, and their child got to live in one place all year. "What was hard ... was setting up house together for the first time in our lives," Leptin relates.

Despite complicated relations, two-scientist marriages can provide benefits. Partners can use each other as sounding boards. "Even if they were not totally in the same field, they could discuss [their work] at home, too," Sonnert says, "And have somebody with a fresh perspective look at it." They can work together on the same projects—Weber and Vedder gave birth to a book, as well as to two children.[2] Says Vedder, "One thing that's nice in our careers, is that they are very complementary."

Myrna E. Watanabe (mew@99main.com) is a freelance writer in Patterson, NY.

References

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2. B. Weber and A. Vedder, *In the Kingdom of Gorillas: Fragile Species in a Dangerous Land*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001.

Previous | Issue Contents | Next

1 2 3 4 5

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Back to top