

Love in the lab:
Women scientists and engineers married to or partnered with other scientists and
engineers

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Abstract

Large numbers of women scientists are married to or partnered with other scientists. Indeed, women scientists are disproportionately affected by these relationships because they are more likely than male scientists to be partnered to another scientist. Furthermore, women scientists indicate that work-life balance and living in a dual career couple make up some of their largest stressors. Up until now, most research examining the marriages of scientists has considered hiring issues and collaboration, but little else. Because of the prevalence of relationships between scientists, asking additional questions about the impact of these relationships on the individuals involved in them and how they affect the scientific community more generally is important. Indeed, examining intimate relationships between scientists may help to determine ways to improve the situation for women scientists and engineers. Why do so many of these relationships form? How do such relationships affect scientists in the workplace and in their home lives? What can we learn from these relationships about the way that science is practiced? How do these relationships speak to the blurring of boundaries between personal and professional lives? This paper will discuss initial results from qualitative interviews with academic women scientists and engineers married to or partnered with other scientists and engineers. The interviews consider issues such as how relationships form between scientists, the role science plays in scientist couples' home lives, the role their partners play in the scientists' work lives, and how being in such a relationships affects couples both in their department and their field.

Introduction

Studying women scientists and engineers married to or partnered with other scientists and engineers is important for two reasons.¹ First of all, a fairly large proportion of female scientists marry or partner with other scientists. Approximately 70% of female physicists are married to other scientists and 80% of female mathematicians are married to other mathematicians (Gibbons 1992). Secondly, women scientists indicate that work-life balance and living in a dual career couple make up some of their largest stressors (Rosser 2004, Ivie, Czujko, and Stowe 2001). Despite the fact that so many of these relationships exist and that work-life balance is such an important issue for women in science and engineering, little is known about relationships between scientists and engineers. For the most part, the existing literature provides us with statistics about the presence of marriage between scientists and hiring practices involving dual career couples, but has not looked in depth at how marriage to another scientist affects a scientist's personal and professional life. Why do so many relationships form between scientists? What sorts of implications do these relationships have for the

¹ Although my intention is to look at both marriages and partnerships of scientists and engineers, almost all of the existing literature focuses exclusively on marriages (Miller & Skeen 1997). While there are likely many similarities between marriages and partnerships, clearly not everything known about marriages should be generalized to all partnerships. Furthermore, it is difficult to learn about partnerships because of the high proportion of women scientists that are married.

scientists in them? What can we learn from these relationships to change the way that science is practiced?

Scarce information about dual career couples in the sciences exists. Primarily, there are some statistics about the prevalence of these relationships, information about the problems that such couples face when they are looking for jobs, and studies of couples' rates of collaboration. Although the information on the job situation for dual career academic couples and dual career couples in science, more specifically, is quite extensive, other information on these sorts of couples is sparse. Indeed, Sweet and Moen (2004) argue that little is known about the experiences of academic couples other than how to achieve and sustain two successful careers.

My research uses qualitative interviews to help to expand what we know about these couples to include scientists' day-to-day lives in relationships with other scientists, rather than documenting their existence or large life events, like job searches. Among the questions I am interested in are how these relationships form, the effects that they have on scientists' professional lives, and the effects that they have on scientists' personal lives. In addition, I am interested in what scientists see as being either positive or negative aspects of being in a relationship with another scientist. These sorts of questions have not been addressed at all in the existing literature.

The research that I have started looks at these questions. I have recently completed interviews of women scientists and engineers partnered to other academic scientists and engineers within a large, northwestern university system. Informal, in-depth interviews were used in order to illuminate the issues that arise in the day-to-day dual career couples in the sciences. In particular, I focused on ways that being in such relationships affects both women's personal and professional lives. This paper looks at initial results from these interviews.

Lit Review

The phenomenon of marriages between scientists is not new. After all, Marie Curie, the only female scientist that most people can name, married scientist Pierre Curie and shared her first Nobel Prize in 1903 with him. In the nineteenth century, collaboration with a mate was a way for women to enter the sciences unobtrusively (Ogilvie 1989, Creamer 2001). These early scientist-wives were often able to hold jobs at the same universities as their husbands; however, their positions were often of low prestige and low pay (Rossiter 1982). By the beginning of the twentieth century, however, it was difficult for married women to find jobs because of anti-nepotism rules (Rossiter 1982, 1995, Tolley 2003).

Marriages and partnerships between scientists continue to be common today and continue to face some of the same difficulties. Indeed, looking at the existing literature on marriages and partnerships between scientists, two things become clear. First of all, a fairly large population of scientists are partnered to other scientists exists. Secondly, there are large gaps in our knowledge about these relationships. Approximately 70% of physicists marry other scientists and 80% of female mathematicians are married to other mathematicians (Gibbons 1992). Overall, more than sixty percent of women with PhDs in science have husbands with PhDs in science (Sonnert & Holton 1995). Xie and Shauman (2003) also found that women in the sciences are much more likely to have spouses with science PhDs than men in the sciences. Furthermore, these rates of

marriage are much higher than what is found in other disciplines; across the academy, 35% of men and 40% of women are married to other academics (Wolf-Wendel, Twombly, & Rice 2000). Many other studies document similar findings (Nerad 2004, Haraway 1989)

Because the proportion of women married to men is higher than that of men married to women, the issue of marriage between academics becomes a women's issue (Nerad 2004). Similarly, marriage and children are associated with higher rates of full time employment for male scientists, but lower rates for female scientists (Long 2001). Moreover, in her work, Sue Rosser (2004) has found that women scientists consider balancing family and career, including the two-body problem, to be their most significant challenge. Similarly Ivie, Czujko, and Stowe (2001) found in their survey of women scientists worldwide, that when asked about negative effects of their marriages on their career, many women cited the difficulties of the two-body problem. This speaks to the importance of this research as women scientists point to family issues as their most significant challenge in their careers.

Science has been referred to as a "greedy institution" because of the total commitment that it requires from participants (Grant, Kennelly & Ward 2000). The high rates of marriage between scientists may be a symptom of this because, through these marriages, science bleeds over from scientists' professional lives and into their interpersonal relationships. Scientists married to or partnered with non-scientists, on the other hand, cannot talk and share their work as easily because of the complex and jargoned nature of science, which makes it hard to communicate about with other scientists (Gusterson 1996). Furthermore, marriages to other academics give women an advantage over single women because of their greater access to academic networks, information, and social support (Astin & Milem 1997).

Some research has been done considering the situation that dual career couples currently face within the academy generally. For example, studies have examined whether universities have policies for recruiting and retaining dual career couples and the effects of these policies (Wolf-Wendel, Twombly, & Rice 2000). Finding two jobs in the same location can be particularly difficult for academic couples (Wolf-Wendel, Twombly, & Rice 2003). Other research has found similar patterns when looking at scientists more specifically (McNeil and Sher). Others criticize the practice of hiring couples, viewing it as a new form of "affirmative action," which creates a buddy system that disrupts the university's meritocracy (Wilson 2001).

Research has also been done that considers the productivity of academics in partnerships. This research has found that partners collaborate in different ways, both short term and long term, and that they benefit from the feedback that they are able to receive from their partner (Creamer 1999). Research by Bellas (1997) has suggested that those partnered with another academic tend to have more collaborations than other academics – both with their partners and with other collaborators. Others have considered the situations that unmarried academic couples, of the same sex and opposite sex, have faced (Miller & Skeen 1997).

Furthermore, it is important to study relationships between scientists because of what it can tell us about the scientific workforce more broadly. For example, being partnered with another scientist may help boost one's own career due to the benefits of these relationships. The high number of women in the National Academies of Science

married to other members of the Academy suggests that such a pattern may exist (Wasserman 2000). Is this success due to the support that they receive from their partner at home? Or in the workplace? Is it somehow being better integrated into the scientific community because they have a partner in the sciences? Answering these sorts of questions may suggest ways that we can help other scientists achieve greater success in their own careers. Ultimately, this may help to increase the proportion of women, and diversity overall, in the sciences.

Despite the fact that a large proportion of women scientists married to other scientists, little is known about these relationships. Indeed, the research on academic couples focuses on how to achieve and sustain two successful careers (Sweet and Moen 2004). Similarly, the literature on couples in the workplace more generally has been criticized for not considering how the relationships affect couples personally (Mainiero 1993). Indeed, the research on couples fails to consider issues such as the reasons that these relationships are so common among scientists and the ways that these relationships affect the personal and professional lives of the scientists in them. These are important questions because of the ways they will shed light on the structure of the scientific community in general and ways to increase the participation rates of women in the sciences.

Methods

As seen above, the existing literature on dual career couples looks at specific aspects of couples' professional lives focusing on issues such as collaboration and job searches rather than asking how these individuals interact with their colleagues and families on a daily basis. Qualitative methods, such as the in-depth interviews used in the research presented here, give us a tool to examine the interactions and relationships that are a daily part of scientists' lives. In-depth interviews are useful in that they are "capable of reconstructing and finding the compelling in the experiences of everyday life" (Seidman 1998, 105). Clearly, scientists' relationships are an aspect of everyday life that can be illuminated through such a technique. Utilizing informal interviewing, allows me to be responsive to the participants' concerns and learn what is important to them in their relationships (Patton 1980). Furthermore, using informal interviewing techniques rather than traditional formal interviewing techniques can help an interviewer to gain intimate information from their participants (O'Neill 1995). For all of these reasons, interviews with scientists about their relationships with other scientists may help us to understand why so many relationships form between scientists and the impacts they have on the scientists involved.

This study consists of in-depth interviews of academic women scientists and engineers partnered to or married to other academic scientists and engineers. Thirteen women of in different stages of their careers, in different fields, and with different backgrounds have been interviewed with open-ended questions.² All of the participants have been living with their partner for at least a year or have lived together for at least a year but are now living apart for reasons beyond their control such as having jobs far apart or dealing with family issues. I only interviewed women because of ethical issues

² I am still in the process of interviewing women and will ultimately interview between 16 and 20 women.

that arise when interviewing both members of a couple (Allan 1980; Valentine 1999; Bottorff, Kalaw, Johnson, Stewart, & Greaves 2005) and because of the unique issues that women in science face due to their under-representation among scientists.

A snowball sampling method has been used in order to contact participants. Because I have only contacted women within a single university system, and the size of this population is rather limited, some of the issues that typically arise with snowball methods, such as finding a biased sample (Welch 1975), have not been an issue. Participants have either seen an ad in a campus publication or have been sent an email invitation sent to lists of female faculty members. Women are given a choice about where to conduct the interviews: in their office, another campus location, or a location of their choosing. The majority of the interviews so far have been conducted in the women's offices, with a few exceptions. Three were conducted in various conference rooms and one was conducted in a local coffee shop.

Interview participants are asked a series of open-ended questions about their current and past relationships with other scientists. I developed the questions by consulting with a variety of individuals with backgrounds in science, education, and/or science studies. The interviews pursue a variety of issues related to relationships between scientists. The questions will explore the scientists' backgrounds, their past relationships, and their current relationship and its effects on various aspects of their personal and professional lives. The questions also the extent to which science is a part of their personal lives.

At the end of the interview, the women are then asked to fill out a one-sheet forming asking for demographic information. This form asks for traditional demographic information such as age and race, but also asks information more specific to the study at hand such as degrees earned, partner's degrees earned, job title, partner's job title, information about involvement with feminism and issues about women in science, and parental education and occupational information.

After the interview, all participants are sent a transcript of their interview and asked if there are any statements they would like to change or retract. Furthermore, at the end of the study, participants will be given a chance to comment on my analysis of the interviews. Doing both of these things helps to make sure that the participants feel that their story is accurately presented. Indeed, many feminist researchers have used similar techniques to keep their participants involved throughout the life of a project (Burt & Code 1995, Ambrose et al 1997). Getting feedback from participants is one way to ensure that, as a researcher, you are not presuming to speak for your subjects (Merrick 1999).

Initial Results

As of the writing of this paper, I have conducted thirteen interviews as a part of this project. All of the women have been employed at one of three campuses of a large, northwestern university system. The women range in age from their early thirties to 70, with an average age of 49. Most of the women have been in various physical sciences, with a couple of women in biological science fields and a couple in engineering. Seven of the women have worked in the same department as their partners. Among the six others, many worked in fields related to their partners. Ten of the women had tenure, the other women were either pre-tenure or not in tenure track jobs.

At this point, although I have not formally coded my data for analysis, I have noticed many themes throughout the interviews; I will discuss those themes in this paper. They include: difficulties with finding jobs together, the demands of a science or engineering career, a relationship with another scientist as something that “just happened”, being understood by their partner, and spending time apart from their partners.

In almost every interview with women who met their partners while at least one of them was still in graduate school, the women have talked about the difficulties that being in a relationship with another scientist presented during their job search. Many of the women spent time apart from their spouses during this stage of their career. For some of the women this is because either they or their partner finished up a degree while the other one took a job, for others it was because they could not find jobs in the same locations. Other women did not spend time apart from their spouses, but had a difficult time finding jobs together. Some institutions tried to hire a couple but offered to pay them less than they would two scientists who were not romantically linked. Other women found that institutions were willing to hire both them and their partner, but at lower-level positions than what they wanted. Ultimately, even if it took some time or the couple spent some time at jobs in different locations, the majority of the women that I talked to managed to find positions that were suitable for both them and their partners in the same locations. It seems although this is a huge hurdle for couples in the sciences, that often an acceptable situation can be found and the problem ceases to be an issue.

Also not surprisingly, many of the women talked about the time demands that an academic career in science or engineering requires. Indeed, many of them noted that because they are partnered with another scientist or engineer, they know that their partner understands the time and travel demands of a career in science or engineering. One woman, whose children had left the house, talked with excitement about “working like graduate students” again now that their children were gone. For other women, it seems to be more of a problem. Multiple women talked about their need or desire to have non-scientist friends and/or hobbies so that they could get away from science. Others expressed that their jobs leave them with little time to do anything other than work and raise their children.

The vast majority of the women said that when they were looking for a partner, they did not seek out a relationship with a scientist, but that rather, it just happened. One woman admitted that she did want someone who was “smart” and, when pressed, she admitted that, to her, being a scientist does help to make someone seem smart. Rather than provide information about what they were looking for in a partner, the women pointed to the fact that they spent so much time with other scientists, both during graduate school and afterwards. Not only did the women say they spent a lot of time at school or work, but many of them said that most of their friends were scientists, as well. According to the women, this meant that the only potential partners they met were scientists and explained how they ended up with a scientist.

Lots of the women talked about the fact that their scientist-partner “understood” them. Indeed, the word “understand” came up again and again with regards to the time demands of their career, their desire to spend long hours working, their travel schedules, the pressures associated with grant proposals, the way that they think through problems, and more. The women also talked about this as being one of the best aspects of being

partnered to another scientist. This need to be with someone who understands may speak to the large demands that are felt within academic science and engineering careers when compared to other sorts of careers.

The interviews also portrayed science and engineering as fields that, through either the hiring process or because of the need to complete field work, requires a certain amount of time spent away from your partner. Many of the women mentioned living apart from their partner at one point or another because of one of these demands. All of the women who brought this up said that this created difficulties for them and their relationships. Often, these difficulties were heightened by having children. Indeed, one woman mentioned becoming pregnant as a reason to end an arrangement wherein she and her husband lived two hours away from each other. Another woman mentioned having children as one of the reasons that she decided to scale back on her field work. A third woman described the times when her husband was at sea as “being a single parent”.

Although the women I interviewed came from diverse backgrounds, there were many similarities in their experiences. For the most part, the women seemed to be happy in their relationships and glad that their partner was also a scientist. The negative aspects of these relationships are the difficulties in finding jobs together and the time demands that a science career requires. Aside from that, however, the women felt as though their partners understood them and were able to support them in their careers. Their partners serve as resources for technical knowledge and networking and support them through the politics of being in an academic job. Not only that, but the women enjoy having common interests with their partners.

Discussion and Conclusion

An initial analysis of my findings from these interviews shows that there is a lot to be learned about couples in the sciences. Among the themes that have emerged in the data is that, as previous research has suggested, many of these couples face difficulties finding jobs in the same locations as their partners. Furthermore, many of them find that careers in science and engineering place large demands on their time and that having a partner with a similar career exacerbates this problem. Despite these drawbacks and the fact that the women report their relationship with another scientist or engineer as something that “just happened” rather than as something they sought out, these women report that they are overall happy in their relationships and that they appreciate being with a partner that understands their career and their passion for science.

Some of what I have found so far through my analysis of these interviews is not surprising. Almost every woman that I talked to, at one point during her relationship, faced problems locating jobs for both her and her partner in the same geographic location. As the literature on dual career couples suggest, this is a huge problem for the individuals in these relationships that needs to be addressed. Issues about hiring, however, only affect couples sporadically during their career. Furthermore, when I asked women about what they disliked about being in a relationship with a scientist, for the most part they talked about the difficulty of the hiring process and the time demands of their careers. For the most part, women were satisfied with their relationship and were able to point out multiple things that they liked about being in a relationship with another scientist. This seems to suggest that despite some of the drawbacks of these relationships, there are many ways that the positively affect the women in them.

Many have argued that research should have a connection to activism and in some way, serve as a catalyst for change (Naples 2003, Russell & Bohan 1999). Clearly, one way that the work presented here can create change is by informing policy concerning scientists and engineers. Others who do work on issues concerning women in science have made efforts to do this. For example, Etzkowitz, Kemelgor, and Uzzi (2000) make policy recommendations in their book *Athena Unbound*. The research I've presented here certainly has policy implications because of the issues these couples face regarding finding jobs and the large time demands of their careers, as discussed above. Policy needs to address these issues in order to make it easier for couples to find jobs in the same locations and to ensure that scientists' jobs do not require such long hours. Furthermore, because these relationships affect so many women in the sciences, looking at the issues that couples in the sciences face can help to find ways to improve the situation for women in science and engineering.

Although these interviews have pointed towards some common themes to the interviews, there are some limitations to this research. Namely, the majority of the women who volunteered to be interviewed about their relationships are likely in good relationships. Women, meanwhile, who are unsatisfied with their relationship would be unlikely to choose to participate in such an interview. This might mean that the women that I interviewed were less likely to experience things such as high levels of competition with their partner or feeling as though science plays too large of a role in their life.

My analysis on this dataset is far from complete. In the coming year, I will continue to analyze the interviews, with particular attention to the themes that I've highlighted in this paper. I will also pay more attention to the differences between the women's stories and look for differences across research fields or career stage. In the future, I will also look in more detail at issues like collaboration and the role of science in the couples' personal lives – themes that I have yet to formally analyze.

Clearly, even after my analysis of these interviews is complete, the research on this topic will be far from done. In addition to this qualitative project, I plan to utilize data from the 2000 US Census, the only dataset that has information about PhD scientists married to other PhD scientists, in order to explore these relationships. Using the Census data will show the differences in the prevalence in these relationships across many variables, including field of study, sector of employment, race, and age. Although, as pointed out above, there is some data about the prevalence of these relationships, there are still many questions that can be answered in that regard. I also hope to use what I learn from the interviews that I've conducted to develop a large survey that can be distributed nationwide to scientists and engineers, both male and female, across employment sectors. Such a survey would create a deeper understanding of these relationships and allow analysis across different groups of scientists.

This research may also be extended in the future to include information about friendships with other scientists or engineers affect the careers and personal lives of individuals in these fields. Particularly because so many women in these fields never marry and so many of the male scientists are married to non-scientists, it might be interesting to see if they receive similar benefits from friendships that women scientists married to other scientists receive from their husbands.

The research described in this paper is the first part of a larger project to look at the personal relationships of women scientists and engineers. These issues are important because of the large number of women scientists and engineers that are affected by them and because of the fact that we know so little about these sorts of relationships. As discussed above, by looking at these relationships, we can learn important things about the culture of science, as well as think about the implications of current policies. My initial results speak to the importance of work-life balance issues that are so important in science policy today.

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