

## **Developmental Aspects of Dual-Career Relationships: Reflections and Issues**

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*The concept of dual-career couples in student affairs and higher education, while not new, continues to be a growing phenomenon. These dual-career relationships present both professional and personal challenges and require regular adjustments. The authors discuss these challenges and adjustments from both a theoretical and an experiential perspective.*

Dual-career couples in student affairs, as in other professions, are becoming increasingly prevalent (Creamer, 2000). Presenting both professional and personal challenges, dual-career relationships require regular adjustments. Astin and Milem (1997) examined employment and career patterns and the stresses experienced by dual-career couples in higher education, and they discussed the evolution of dual careers and the interrelationship of professional and personal adjustments. One noteworthy finding was that dual-career couples with a common academic discipline reported less stress and more satisfaction in their professional and personal lives.

Dual-career couples with a common academic discipline are a growing presence in higher education. Creamer (2000) has noted, for example, that 35% of full-time higher education faculty members have a spouse or partner in the same profession. As a dual-career couple sharing a common academic discipline (counseling psychology and student affairs), we describe in this paper the challenges and adjustments of dual-career heterosexual relationships from a developmental perspective and discuss such relationships from both a reflective (experiential) and a theoretical basis. We propose that heterosexual dual-career relationships develop in a three-stage process across the lifespan, and that the stages – exploration, adaptation, and resolution – are interwoven with career development and personal development.

For purposes of this paper, we have used Cron's (2001) definition that a dual-career relationship is "present when each spouse is pursuing a career that (a) demands a high level of personal commitment, (b) requires a constant updating of knowledge, and (c) has a component of upward mobility" (p.18). We have

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focused our discussion on dual-career, heterosexual marriages, though, of course, many of the issues are relevant in other dual-career relationships. (See Miller and Skeen, 1997, for an excellent discussion of dual-career issues relevant to unmarried and to gay and lesbian couples.)

As a further caveat, it should be noted that basing even tentative hypotheses about dual-career marriages on the limited experiences of a few couples is problematic; there are so many situational determinants that affect relationships that controlling for all potentially relevant variables is virtually impossible. Therefore, our model should be recognized as being in an embryonic stage. Also, we describe the stages from the perspective of our 31-year marriage; we met and married in graduate school and thus embarked on both marriage and careers at the same time. Couples formed after the partners' careers are established or those whose marriages (and, perhaps, children) come long before both partners commit themselves to careers, clearly will have different developmental experiences from those we describe.

### Theoretical Model

Our model may also have limited applicability to dual-job relationships where both partners are employed, but only one has a "career." Our proposed theoretical model involves the stage of exploration, adaptation, and resolution.

#### *Exploration*

In our theoretical conceptualization, the exploration stage of dual-career marriages involves both partners in clarifying their individual and shared goals and values, and it requires regular employment of negotiation skills to resolve differences and conflicts. Reported sources of tension include initial job seeking strategies and decisions, the irregular and on-call hours often required of student affairs professionals, and the question of whether to have children. Partners seek to develop a balance between the demands of establishing their respective careers and of establishing their relationship.

The exploration stage is related to Super's (1963) exploratory stage of career development. In this stage couples seek to define their relationship, clarify the roles of their careers within the relationship, and determine the relative weights they subjectively assign to the relationship, their own career, and their partner's career.

Potentially one of the most contentious issues is the job seeking strategy the couple adopts. Wallston, Foster, and Bergin (1978) found evidence of both egalitarian and traditional patterns of job seeking among dual-career couples. They reported that the "I will follow him" strategy was partially myth; however, when this strategy was pursued, it was often out of necessity. That is, employers reportedly tended to meet the husband's employment needs first

and then add the wife to the entire package; at that time it was unusual for the reverse (i.e., “I will follow her”) to occur. To our knowledge, a more current examination of dual-career couples’ job seeking strategies has not been published.

The authors’ first job seeking experience was that the husband, who finished his doctorate a year before the wife did, looked for a job close to where the wife was finishing her internship in the university counseling center. The only professional position that fit this requirement involved a 45-mile commute to a regional community mental health center. Employment in a community mental health center was not his preferred job setting, but he viewed it as a temporary solution.

Our second job seeking effort fit the “I will follow him” strategy, in that the husband received the initial job offer to be the faculty coordinator of a student affairs graduate program. Soon after, the wife was offered a faculty position in psychology at the same institution. While neither perceived our jobs to be ideal, both regarded our situation as entirely satisfactory. Our conversations with many colleagues over the past 30 years have made us well aware of how fortunate we were, as many couples spend decades in situations where one or both partners is unemployed, underemployed, or unsatisfactorily employed.

Another issue requiring negotiation is the balancing of time as partners try to get their careers going. The issue can be particularly troubling for student affairs professionals, whose work is seldom confined to regular university office hours. As Hall and Hall (1978) indicated, dual career couples, at the exploration stage at least, have similar career stage needs. At this stage, each partner must develop new skills, make professional contacts, and gain broad-based experience. Accomplishing this usually means long hours, traveling, and a high degree of job involvement. For each partner, the job can become the top priority, which may threaten the relationship. For the authors, however, this was not the case. During much of our early careers, we went to conferences together, presented papers together, published together, and served as each other’s professional colleagues. In fact, many of our early presentations were on dual-career issues. In essence, we capitalized on the irregular hours, heavy time commitment, and professional development demands and found ways to use them to our advantage.

While our experience was mostly positive, we acknowledge that other dual-career couples may have more negative experiences. Some challenges include dealing with feelings of competition with one another, guilt or envy over unequal accomplishments, and feelings of loss of personal identity as the couple develops a shared professional reputation. Furthermore, rules about nepotism at an institution may limit employment or career advancement for

the trailing spouse when a couple moves because of one partner's promotion. This issue can be particularly problematic when the institution is located in a one-college town. Resolving these challenges may clearly strain the relationship.

A third issue requiring negotiation at the exploration stage is the decision about whether to have children. Hall and Hall (1978) have pointed out that young dual-career couples may possess little information about managing two careers or what lies ahead if they plan to have a family. Many have no plans and have not considered what they will do if faced with a conflict, a crisis, or a baby. The authors made a decision, after five years of marriage and in the profession, to begin a family. This decision was made with the realization that some aspects of our professional lives would change. We knew that we would have to take turns. This taking turns moved us into the second stage of our model, adaptation.

### *Adaptation*

In the adaptation stage, partners continue to negotiate a dual-career lifestyle. Issues that arise include how to handle family responsibilities, including household chores and child-care; how to maximize upward professional mobility; and how to compromise, that is, give up something to get something. The adaptation stage is related to Super's (1963) establishment and maintenance stages of career-development. Adapting to a new role, that of parent, requires additional flexibility. Each spouse strives to maintain commitment to career and spousal roles, while adding a parental role to the mix.

The effects of juggling work and family roles have been studied more often in women than in men, perhaps because women may be more likely than men to report that they modify career expectations in order to have time and energy for family (Betz, 1993). Cron (2001), in an extensive study of job satisfaction among women in dual-career relationships, found that job satisfaction was significantly affected by the quality of the wife's relationship with her spouse. Similarly, Roxburgh (1999) reported that the quality of an individual's relationships with co-workers also significantly affected job satisfaction. Reskin and Padavic (1994) compared women's and men's modes of coping with multiple roles and the time management skills required to meet both work and family responsibilities. They reported that women modify their standards for accomplishing work and family tasks and take time away from their own leisure pursuits in order to have time for essential tasks at work and at home.

The strain of role overload tends to be keenly felt in dual-career families and requires a reassessment of priorities by each spouse. Women may be especially likely to experience role strain. Sefton (1987) has pointed out that women with

high career aspirations must come to terms with values they may have been socialized with and with new belief systems. They must define for themselves what it means to be a dedicated professional, good mother, and committed spouse and must try to integrate these three roles in a satisfying and fulfilling new lifestyle. As Marshall (1997) noted, there are two theories about the relationship between women's competing work and family roles and their psychological well-being: scarcity theory and enhancement theory. The former suggests that competing roles have a negative impact on women because time and energy are limited, fixed resources. By contrast, the enhancement theory proposes that having more roles increases one's opportunity to experience fulfillment and social support.

Research investigating the two hypotheses has produced mixed results, but in general there is more support for the enhancement hypothesis, assuming that the woman has sufficient support from others, such as her spouse (Marshall, 1997). Thus, wives in dual-career couples who negotiate a system for sharing household roles that were once largely the sole responsibility of women are more likely to successfully adapt to role overload. As Barnard (1981) reported, the adjustment required for husbands in dual-career couples is to develop their nurturing qualities and learn to share childcare and household duties. As the authors have experienced, with the addition of children to the equation comes the need for each dual-career spouse to reassess upward professional mobility. Some dual-career couples make a conscious choice not to have children and to give their energies to the career, and this is increasingly recognized as an acceptable option by fellow professionals.

Raabe (1997) discovered much variability in educational institutions' policies to support the multiple roles of employees. She reported that while many institutions have highly supportive environments and policies, such as childcare services, flexible and reduced work schedules, and career path adjustments, they still lag behind major corporations in recognizing that "ignoring issues of diversity and of work/family balance can be hazardous to organizational health" (Parker & Hall, 1993, p. 151).

Career mobility is another issue that arises in the adaptation stage. A critical time for us came when the husband accepted an administrative position in another state with the hope that the wife could also find a position there. This hope was dashed, and the lack of a job for her and the high mortgage interest rates of the early 1980s resulted in the wife's staying in her existing faculty position. She stayed, keeping the two children with her and having almost sole responsibility for child-rearing and household management, while the husband made frequent weekend trips home. After a stressful and unhappy period, we reevaluated our priorities and made a renewed commitment to marriage and family, preferring to sacrifice career mobility rather than the marriage. We did

eventually find acceptable positions in the same town, and two years later we relocated again to positions in the same institution. What we learned in this adaptation stage was compromise: one has to give up some things to get others. The process of reassessing our priorities and the subsequent adaptation to that reassessment led us to the final stage, resolution.

### *Resolution*

The resolution stage involves self-reflection and the acceptance of the consequences, good and bad, of previous decisions. This resolution stage is certainly made easier if one has adopted Palmer's (2000) challenge of "Let Your Life Speak." By letting one's life speak, Palmer means that persons have lived lives based on internal values and not on external values. In essence, people have done with life what they wanted to do and not what someone else wanted them to do.

Some amount of resolution may be experienced following major decision points in the partners' lives, and the result may be a strengthening of the partners' commitment to the relationship or to their careers, depending on the decisions made. On the other hand, if the relationship ends, each individual may subsequently re-experience the earlier stages with new partners. When the resolution comes toward the end of active involvement in careers, it may involve similar dynamics to Super's (1963) disengagement stage of career-development.

It is also at this point that Erickson's (1963) "integrity verses despair" issue may be experienced. Each partner thus reviews the priorities and decisions made over the course of the relationship and the career. Each might ask questions such as (a) Have I had a stable and rewarding marriage? (b) Have I been the best parent I could have been? (c) Have I lived where I wanted to live? (d) Have I received professional recognition in my field? (e) Has my career been challenging? (f) Have I made the money that I wanted to make? (g) Have I enjoyed my colleagues? (h) Have I achieved my upward mobility goals? and (i) Have I balanced my family and career goals to my satisfaction? Resolving the issues raised by these and other questions requires individuals' taking responsibility for their own decisions and acknowledging that two people were making choices for two careers and one relationship. Some career and life goals that were not realized may be directly due to the restrictions of dual-career relationships.

Another issue that may arise in the resolution stage is potential stress when one spouse retires or begins to scale back before the other. The retiring spouse may resent that the other is still involved while he or she is not. McArthur (1985) contended that the challenge is for the retired or scaled back partner to focus on personal development, community involvement, or political activity as a

replacement for the previous task-oriented work ethic. Our experience has been that the wife's upward mobility and career advancement has come later in her professional life (after the children went away to college), as the husband, who is eight years older, began scaling back. This pattern has had some advantages: it has allowed the wife to fulfill some career aspirations, the husband to pursue some avocational interests, and the family to have a secure income.

Sefton (1987) has described the resolution period as ideal because dual-career couples may experience fewer demands from both career and from family. There is sufficient career involvement to provide fulfillment, and there is sufficient freedom at home to allow for the renewal of spousal intimacy.

### Conclusions

Since dual-career relationships are a frequent phenomenon among student affairs professionals, the authors have sought to share their personal experiences and offer a theoretical framework. An obvious next step would be to investigate the model, focusing on determining whether the hypothesized stages have utility in describing the development of dual-career relationships and whether the model may be extended to other couple relationships, such as dual-career gay and lesbian relationships or dual-job relationships.

We agree with Hall and Hall (1978) that the success of a dual-career relationship requires a mutual commitment to both careers, a willingness to be flexible, the ability to cope with conflicts, high energy, the ability to manage time effectively, and, finally, competency in one's career. This career competency is often overlooked. One must develop accurate self-knowledge. Each partner must know how to set goals, plan effectively, and solve problems; and most importantly, be willing to share this competency with one's partner. Couples who are able to sustain their relationships and their careers are those who balance their commitment to their own career goals with an equal commitment to the partner's career goals and needs.

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