

MARRIED WITH THE SAME JOB

Charles E. Pettijohn, Southwest Missouri State University

Linda S. Pettijohn, Southwest Missouri State University

ABSTRACT

In previous generations, two-career couples were relatively scarce. However, such a situation is now rather common place. In fact, it is somewhat common for the career couple to work for the same organization. However, the situation in which the couple works for the same firm, with exactly the same job is still something of a rarity. Nevertheless, this is exactly the situation many in academia face in today's work environment. While one might argue that the "couple-in-the-same-job" challenges are significant in all cases, such challenges are magnified in the world of academics. This research explores the challenges and opportunities regarding employment of couples in which both members of the couple occupy identical positions in the university environment. Specifically, the paper examines the perspectives of both the couple and the administration as they attempt to maximize the advantages while simultaneously minimizing the challenges of working with and as a "same job couple." Suggestions are given to both couples and administrators regarding effectively working in this challenging, but potentially satisfying situation.

INTRODUCTION

What could be worse than life with the Bundy's you ask? What if the mythical Al and Peg Bundy of "Married with Children" had shared not only their family lives, but also their careers? What if they not only had the same careers, but they worked in the same job, for the same supervisor, with the same associates? For Al and Peg, such a situation probably could have spelled further disaster, but perhaps not. . . . In academe, many dual career couples work for the same university. Sharing employers is nothing too new in our society. Working for the same employer may prove advantageous for many couples. For example, they may be able to car pool to work, work approximately the same schedules, have similar holidays and vacation policies, and operate under one fringe benefit system. However, what happens when not only the employer is shared, but the job, boss, peers, subordinates, and all other aspects of the job are shared?

What if the two life partners are also career partners? Does familiarity breed contempt? Can the relationship survive with both individuals doing the same job, working in the same department, working for the same manager, working with the same peers and subordinates, competing for the same resources, arguing over company policies, etc.? Can the employer's department survive the potential battle over relationships? The purpose of this article is to discuss, from one career couple's perspective the obstacles and opportunities encountered by the couple who is "Married with the SAME Job" within the same department.

THE COUPLE'S PERSPECTIVE OBSTACLES

Career Competition

Couples working for the same employer should be aware that competition can exist on the job. In most academic departments, resources and opportunities are limited. Consequently, competition will exist to acquire these rewards and opportunities. As capitalists, we recognize that in many cases competition can be positive, but in the case of the couple, competition can be disastrous. Competition, by its very nature can breed a rivalry. Over time, many rivalries disintegrate into all out, no holds barred, wars. In a business, or athletic circumstance, these wars often become personalized. While rivalries may not be entirely healthy in either sports or commerce, to the couple the intense rivalry can create many negative repercussions.

In many relationships, nurturing has been described as an important activity. Each individual in the relationship encourages, assists, and tries to facilitate the growth of the other. One person's success is a source of celebration. In fact, both parties in the relationship want the other to succeed and grow. However, in the competitive relationship, one person's success may mean that the other has failed. Further, one person's career growth may create a competitive challenge for the other. A natural response to the individual who is victorious in a competitive engagement can be jealousy, sabotage, and a wide variety of competitive tactics whose legitimacy and fairness can be questioned. Thus, competition can create significant obstacles to the success of the "same job couple."

Politics

Members of academic departments may discover that politics is a portion of their career activities. Alliances may be formed regarding curricular, hiring, tenure, promotion, and other decisions. For the same job couple, the fact that the couple might represent two players in the political arena may create some significant tension in the department. For example, if the couple acts as one unit in these decisions, one might anticipate that the more political department members might perceive the couple as either an asset or a liability in instituting various decisions. As Wilson (2004) suggests, when the couple is perceived as being a single unit, it may be viewed as a power base. Similarly, it has been argued that resentment may arise when one member of the couple serves as the “proxy” for the other (Rodgers 2000). When the couple is perceived as being a liability, then attempts by departmental members to limit the couple’s influence will be instigated. These attempts may include excluding either member of the couple from various opportunities or rewards that may have been earned or making certain that neither person is appointed to committees or positions of responsibility.

Bringing it Home

While other couples may be able to go to their jobs and then come home and “forget about” work, the same job couple may find this more challenging. For better or for worse, the same job couple can discover that work “follows them home.” The “departmental couple” will typically share students, research, and other job issues. Each of these factors can provide contentious issues. For example, if the male member of the couple holds negative feelings toward student “A,” these negative feelings will be shared with his mate. Regardless of the mate’s opinion regarding the legitimacy of these negative feelings, a discussion will ensue. These discussions may become harmful when they either become disagreements or when the discussions become the focal point of the couple’s life. In fact, some on-the-job issues may take on a life of their own.

One can imagine times when an occurrence at work seemed particularly vexing. In the typical household, the person may come home and let off steam to his/her significant other. The “outside” participant might be able to either serve as a venting partner, a sounding board, or an impartial counselor. However, regardless of the other’s role, the issue would eventually lose some of its vitality. On the other hand, consider the identical circumstance with the same job couple. The spouse comes home with the same problem, but in this case the other individual has first hand knowledge of the problem and may be affected by it. In this case, the opportunity to vent, get a hearing, or obtain impartial counsel has been diminished, as the other

member of the couple becomes an active participant in the issue at hand. In fact, the issue from work may gain momentum, as when one member of the couple begins to cool on an issue, the other begins to find it more interesting. Thus, one member of the couple provides a catalyst to the frustration of the other member, resulting in a seemingly nonstop pattern of griping and complaining.

Opposite Positions

Issues and problems that arise at work often have no single simple solution. When multiple possible solutions and ideas exist, there is the potential for the couple to hold opposite positions on an issue. In a typical departmental setting, the combatants are generally physically separated at the end of a meeting. However, for the couple, physical separation is less likely to occur, and as a result, the conflict can continue. While conflict may not be negative, it can become personalized and it can spill into other aspects of the relationship. Thus, some controversial issues may not die, but they may be magnified as a result of the couple’s ability to continually rehash the issues.

OPPORTUNITIES

Understanding

One of the best benefits of working together is a clearer understanding of the challenges the other person is facing. For example, each member of the departmental couple can recall the challenges inherent in pursuing an advanced degree. Further, each can identify with the challenges of directing classes, working in adverse classroom situations, accepting a reviewer’s judgments concerning their research efforts, etc. Thus, when both parties are doing the same job, they can better empathize with the trials and tribulations associated with the job. This understanding can help considerably as one person tries to cope with adverse or positive circumstances that arise in the work environment.

Correspondingly, an understanding can contribute to the other’s success. Support for goals, work activities, and other job endeavors may be more forthcoming from the spouse that understands the challenges of his/her partner. While in more “normal” career circumstances, the other party may view the job as an opponent, the individuals in the same career couple should each have a better understanding of the demands of the job. This understanding should facilitate the support necessary to help both individuals succeed in meeting their career goals.

Synergy

Two heads are often better than one. This can be a natural advantage to the same department couple. Since

they work together, at the same job, they often have insights that they can share with one another regarding methods of completing their responsibilities better and easier. For example, they can discuss issues of teaching candidly. While one might be hesitant to identify “problems” (students, comprehension, competencies, etc.) to a stranger, the couple should be secure enough that they can candidly discuss challenges with each other that they could not or would not discuss with others.

Additionally, the couple can share new and unique ideas with one another regarding various aspects of their jobs. For example, one might have developed a new way of teaching a particular concept. By sharing the idea, the innovation may be polished, adjusted, and copied by the other party. Research ideas could be shared, with creativity encouraged, new ideas might occur that could be very worthwhile in the academic community.

Togetherness

For a couple, working in the same department offers great opportunities for togetherness. Few jobs offer the chances to work together in so many different aspects. The couple can conduct research, develop teaching ideas, serve on committees, attend conferences, etc. together. Further, both individuals generally will have the same holidays, same office location, same parking location, etc. If the couple truly wants to be together, 24/7, then working together in the same department is a wonderful opportunity.

THE UNIVERSITY’S PERSPECTIVE

Not only will the couple working in the same department experience opportunities and challenges, the institution from the top down will also experience opportunities and challenges. The major challenges faced by the university may focus on managerial issues, evaluation issues, scheduling, turnover issues and marital problems. The major opportunities for the university include the opportunity to hire and maintain two positions, bargain pricing and great value, and employee loyalty.

Management Challenges

How does the department head/chair interact with the couple? Does he/she treat them as a unit or as individuals? It would seem obvious to anticipate that each member of the couple would tell the other of interactions with the chair. Therefore, when disciplinary issues arise, the chair may discover that the actions taken with one faculty member have repercussions for the other member. An additional challenge arises when the department head/chair shares confidential information with one member. Does this sharing result in both parties obtaining the

information? Controversial issues may also create managerial challenges. When the department head/chair has to resolve a controversial issue, he/she might anticipate the couple in the department to take either supportive or nonsupportive positions. These alliances could lead to additional challenges for the department head/chair.

Evaluation Issues

In addition to the interpersonal and political challenges identified in the preceding section, evaluation issues may also arise. For example, how does the organization work in circumstance in which one member’s work is acceptable and the other’s is not acceptable? It could be assumed that offering rewards to one member and withholding rewards from another due to performance due to performance differences could result in less than comfortable situations in both the workplace and in the home. Additionally, it should be noted that failure to tenure one member of the couple is probably tantamount to failing to tenure both parties, as it would be assumed that a relocation is probably in the future for both parties.

Other evaluation issues may relate to shared work on projects, research articles and other assignments. Just as one may have difficulties determining the roles of co-authors on many academic works, the inter-departmental couple’s role will be difficult to delineate. Which member of the duo had the greater role in co-authored publications? Additionally, what if the members of the couple are assigned a project? How does the department head/chair determine the degree of input provided by each member in the completion of the assignment? While many of these issues may exist in the department regardless of marital status, it appears that the problems associated with these issues may be exacerbated in the situation of the couple operating under the same manager in the same department.

Scheduling Issues

The schedules given to faculty members are often treated as a valuable resource. In some cases, the couple may desire special scheduling considerations. For example, the couple may want overlapping schedules. This desire may be quite rational as it would facilitate commuting to and from work, travel, and other activities. Conversely, the couple may desire parallel schedules. In this circumstance, the couple may want to work opposite schedules to facilitate child care, vehicle sharing, and other activities. Regardless of the couple’s desires, most department heads/chairs have numerous faculty members with which to work. Each faculty member has his/her own scheduling desires and fulfilling the wishes of the couple may result in the manager’s failure to fulfill the desires of other faculty members.

Marital Issues

A final issue that may be particularly vexing for the department employing the couple is the possibility of marital problems and their impact on the department. Other authors have mentioned the challenges that may exist within a department that may arise when a couple's home life and/or marital issues interfere (cf., Rodgers 2000; Wilson 2004). Many potential problems may arise if the couple engages in "battle." For example, the synergy that may have existed may be reversed as each member of the couple begins to attempt to downgrade the efforts and accomplishments of the other party. Further, what may have been a collegial and positive atmosphere in the department might disintegrate into one in which sides are taken with each of the spouses. This type of "civil war" could damage the department's morale, create significant obstacles for new agendas, and could amplify political challenges that may exist within the department.

ORGANIZATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

Two Positions with One Shot

From the university's perspective, challenges may exist in the hiring of the departmental couple. However, it should also be recognized that these challenges may be present to some degree for many departmental relationships and additionally, that certain advantages of hiring couples within the department are presented. One advantage relates to the fact that the department is able to fill two positions with almost one hiring process. The expense of interviewing and hiring the "couple" is often significantly less than the expense associated with hiring two individuals separately. One aspect that may lead to lower expenses is that the couple will probably interview in a single day, while an individual hire will probably also take up a full day in the interview process. Thus, from the university's perspective, a day is saved when selecting a couple. Further, expenses may also be reduced, since the couple will probably share a room, rental car, meals, etc. Thus, both time and expenses may be saved as a result of hiring a couple, rather than two separate and distinct individuals.

Bargain Pricing and Value

A related advantage to the selection of the couple is the fact that it is often difficult for individuals to find universities with one academic department that has two openings. Regardless of the ethics of this situation, both the couple and the university recognize that since the supply of opportunities to work in the same department is limited, that it is in essence a "seller's market." This situation means that the university can often hire more qualified faculty members at salaries that may be lower than those typically on the market. Thus, the university

may discover that they have obtained truly valuable additions to their departments, at "value prices." In fact, it has been suggested that a "second tier" university may be able to "hire two top tier faculty" when they are willing to hire a couple (Rodgers 2000).

Employee Loyalty

A final advantage also relates to the supply of positions for the departmental couple. Since the supply of positions is limited, it is likely that the couple will recognize the opportunity that has been presented by the university that is willing to "take a chance" and hire a couple to work in the same department. This recognition is likely to result in greater employee loyalty and lower turnover in the department. Both of these factors can be significant to the department in terms of experience, stability and lower costs.

TIPS FROM OVER 20 YEARS OF TRIAL AND ERROR

Let the Other Person be Wrong

This topic might also be titled, "treat your partner more like a friend at work." One author has suggested that such relationships may work "because couples respect one another's talents" (Wilson 2004). The point is that you will allow a friend to have an opinion that differs from your own. You might even appreciate differences in opinion that you have with a friend. In circumstances in which two people always agree, it has been said that "one of the parties is redundant." Thus, just as you would allow a "normal" colleague or friend to disagree with you, allow the same consideration to your "significant" other. The fact that your partner has an opinion that differs from yours, may be very insightful. It should be noted that your partner has your best interests at heart, and that a disagreement may reflect this attitude. Thus, rather than act as if a disagreement is a personal affront to your own credibility and intelligence, instead accept it as a way to learn and grow. Give your partner the space to have his/her own opinions and don't require that each of you be on the same side of every issue. By doing this, you will discover that you have not only learned, you have created a situation in which both of you have opportunities to express your opinions without fear of marital repercussions.

Accept Some Discrimination

Some individuals in the department, college, and university will refuse to treat the two of you as individuals. It is inevitable that right or wrong, many others will be incapable of separating the two of you. Thus, when rewards are offered, don't expect those to be allocated to each of you in a manner that is entirely equitable. For

example, if one of the members of the couple receives an award, people may believe that the other individual is automatically ineligible. Further, since the two of you are each earning incomes that approximate your peers, anticipate that some jealousy will arise. This acceptance may reduce the frustration that will arise when one or both of the members of the couple are denied opportunities or awards solely because of a misplaced jealousy or sense of right and wrong.

Leave it at the Office

One of the best recommendations that may be given is to “leave issues at the office.” As one couple has suggested, don’t spend too much time discussing work, away from work (Neufeld 2003). However, this recommendation is very difficult to implement. Another writer has suggested that one of the challenges is making certain that a separation between work and home is indeed a difficult (Wilson 1998). Awareness of the fact that a failure to separate work from one’s personal life may be hazardous to both is important for the couple. As stated earlier in the “challenges” section, too often issues can be magnified (molehills do indeed grow into mountains) by the couple. Since the two work and live together, controversy will follow them into their personal lives and work can dominate the family life. However, recognizing this potential challenge and knowing when to end the magnification of a controversial issue can indeed help the couple maintain a balance between their work and personal lives.

Be Individuals

Stand alone! As one couple has said, “we have a lot in common but our differences make us unique individuals (Neufeld 2003)” Focus on your abilities and goals and allow your mate to focus on his/hers. For example, in one

situation in which a couple worked in the same department, the female member of the couple would consistently defer to her spouse. She did this in class as well. In answering questions she would say “my husband says that _____ is the answer.” Her behavior resulted in a loss of credibility for her in the classroom and in the department. Correspondingly, she always deferred to her husband’s judgment regarding departmental issues. Thus, members of the department realized that in order to get two votes, all one had to do is convince the husband to “go along” and the wife would follow.

Thus, each member of the departmental couple should behave as individuals. The disagreements discussed may actually be positive in this regard. If the department recognizes that you and your spouse don’t “always” agree on every issue and that you still respect the other’s opinion, then some of the potential negatives in terms of politics and rewards may be reduced. Further, if the two can behave as individuals, students will respect each member of the couple for the contributions they make in the classroom. In fact, the more the two members of the couple can behave in ways that support their individuality, the lower the threat levels to other faculty members and the greater the couple’s personal rewards.

Priorities

Perhaps the best tip that can be provided to the “Married with the SAME Job Couple” is to maintain their priorities. Admittedly work and career are important, but in the grand scheme the most important factor should be the family and the relationship. Jobs are relatively easy to find, but loving and trusting relationships are invaluable. So, couples should strive to maintain a balance between work and home, recognizing and agreeing upon priorities will help that balance occur.

REFERENCES

- Neufeld, Kristen M. (2003), “Married and Working as Colleagues,” *The Digital Collegian*, (September 12), 1–4.
- Rodgers, Lawrence R. (2000), “The Chair’s Challenge: Hiring and Managing Couples and Partners,” *The Department Chair*, 11 (2), (Fall), 10–12.
- Wilson, Robin (1998), “When Officemates Are Also Roommates,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 44 (32), a12, 2p, 4c.