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Getting “Us” a Job: The Two+ Body Problem and the Academic Job Market

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What is the Two+ Body Problem?

In the United States, more than half of relationships include dual career couples where both partners have their own respective jobs (Petriglieri 2019; Su 2019). For such couples, dual careers are often seen as both an issue of identity and economic need (Scurry and Clarke 2021; Blossfeld and Drobnic 2001). When an individual's career path has required years of education, ambition, and hard work much of who they are has become tied up in their career. Such investments are difficult for people to give up for any reason—especially if they have yet to reach their career goal. In the past, multiple career households may have been considered a luxury—an opportunity for greater economic freedom, but for many couples today having dual careers has transitioned into a necessity (Heckman 2011). The rising costs of living, inflation, stagnant wages, and the expenses associated with raising children create pressure for households to require multiple providers and sources of income. Under these conditions, job uncertainty has the potential to develop into near existential issues. Any career decision—especially those that involve relocation—must necessarily incorporate the career prospects and needs of the rest of the household. This two+ body problem occurs when an individual is seeking a new job with the added considerations of finding employment for a partner (LaFerriere 2017; Wolf-Wendel, Twombly, and Rice 2004). In such situations what is best for one person's career may not be in the best interest of their partners' career.

When it comes to the world of academia, dual careers—and the two+ body problem—have become increasingly prevalent, yet the academic job market and traditional hiring practices tend to compound an already difficult problem (Khan et al. 2021). This is because academic jobs are shaped around individuals rather than couples. Academia typically requires applicants to put position and opportunity over location and other factors. This is especially true for academics attempting to land a tenure-track position (Chait 2005). In any given year the supply of academic jobs almost always overwhelms the demand (Larson, Ghaffarzadegan, and Xue 2014). Most successful applicants will apply to tens, if not hundreds, of jobs before receiving a placement offer. The uncertainty inherent in this stressful process is intensified when the needs of a partner are added to the equation. The purpose of this chapter is to unpack and demystify the two+ body problem in academia. It is not a problem without solutions, though successful navigation requires compromise, patience, and long-term planning.

Why Does the Two+ Body Problem Occur?

The academic job process is not currently structured in a way conducive to alleviating or overcoming the two+ body problem. The application and interview phases of the job process focus on finding an

ideal candidate and competition demands applicants frame themselves in a competitive way (Larson et al. 2019; Whitaker 2018). Though irrelevant to academic qualifications, sharing personal life information has the potential to influence job prospects negatively (Roberts 2017). Applicants are often advised not to discuss information about their partners, family planning, or other personal matters unrelated to a job's requirements as this can introduce bias into hiring decisions. Female applicants have historically faced discrimination related to concerns about pregnancy and their likelihood of staying in a position after childbirth (Rivera 2017). LGBTQ+ applicants face discrimination based on their sexual orientation and/or gender identity (Prock et al. 2019). (For further discussion on this topic, see chapters 54-61 on implicit bias and discrimination.) Federal and state law often explicitly forbid asking questions about an applicant unrelated to the job requirements for this exact reason (Roberts 2017). This prohibition often does not extend to questions asked by applicants, but since applicants know the potential ramifications of introducing personal matters into the interview process it is not in their best interest to do so.

For most individuals on the academic job market, it is difficult to fully plan anything substantial about the future prior to receiving a job offer (Diehl 2021; Roberts 2017). This is due to the number of applications required to land a job and the distinct locales of universities or colleges. Even limiting applications geographically by region or state can still find applicants looking at jobs varying across a range of hundreds—if not thousands—of miles. This inability to pre-plan is especially problematic for the partners of academics on the job market. The best time to introduce questions about spousal hire or help finding a job in the community for a significant other is after a job offer is extended (Kaplan 2010). Most programs place a short turn-around clock on job offers, making it almost impossible to work out anything substantial before a decision is required. Departments want to fill open positions as soon as possible and most operate in good faith to negotiate the needs of the applicants they select. Spousal hires, especially those that involve departments other than the one hiring the applicant, can be somewhat complicated (Wolf-Wendel, Twombly, and Rice 2004). Even adjunct hirings often require approval from both school administrators and the requisite academic department. In rare cases, tenure track or visiting professor hirings are possible, but these often take even more time to negotiate. It is common for departments to promise to the best they can to help with spousal placement, but few are able to put any such provisions into writing. In job markets of the past, strong negotiations on this front may have forced results, but large numbers of qualified candidates and shrinking academic budgets have mitigated candidates' negotiating leverage.

Once an academic job offer is extended, negotiated, and accepted there are usually only months before an expected start date. Quick relocation is difficult under ideal circumstances. The stresses of finding a place to live, moving, and getting settled are only amplified when finding a job for a significant other is added to the list. Most departments can be helpful with this process, but the best way to overcome the two+ body problem is to understand it and plan contingencies prior to the acceptance stage of the academic job process.

How to Best Navigate the Two+ Body Problem

There is no one-size-fits-all solution for the two+ body problem. Spousal hiring practices, as well as employment needs, vary across universities, while relationship dynamics, mental health, job prospects, and career path requirements vary across individuals. While it is impossible to plan for the outcome of the academic job market, it is possible to plan for the best way to handle the two+ body problem across circumstances.

Communication Between Partners

A key step towards navigating the two+ body problem is to understand the dynamics of one's relationship. This involves thinking through the needs and wants of everyone involved and ascertaining the limits of an acceptable work-life balance. Communication is key to preventing one partner's viewpoints from overstepping. Achieving career goals may be important to both partners in the relationship, but there can be differences in the cost each partner is willing to weather. Early academic careers can be

exceptionally stressful and having a significant other nearby for venting and support, or to provide an escape will be incredibly important for some people (Hollywood et al. 2020). Others may prefer space during the more busy and stressful parts of the job, viewing some relationship responsibilities as a potential distraction better suited for breaks or when time allows. Neither of these approaches is necessarily unhealthy if they are communicated and acceptable to both partners. Things become problematic if partners fail to understand how each approaches the career-relationship dynamic. Presuming knowledge of how a partner feels is not the same as asking, and the consequences of incongruity between partners can be detrimental to one's relationship and career. Other concerns like children, pets, or distance to extended family should also be included in two+ body problem discussions. The more a couple discusses potential concerns ahead of time, the less likely they will face surprises later.

Communicate Career Goals

While attempting to find one's ideal academic job it can be easy to lose sight of the career goals of a significant other. The job application process can quickly become a part-time job in and of itself, forcing applicants to spend less time thinking about the particulars associated with any one job. For this reason, it is imperative for couples to discuss and understand each other's long-term career goals prior to the job application onslaught. In many instances, it will be clear that successfully achieving everyone's goals will require compromise and time. The academic job market is stochastic in any given year, meaning it is difficult to know what opportunities will be available (Diehl 2021). Non-academic jobs are more stable, but this stability can make relocating for a partner's academic job exceedingly problematic.

Set Expectations for Different Job Offer Outcomes

For dual academic couples both seeking jobs, it will be unclear for months what offers will come available and to whom. Prior to applying for jobs, these couples should discuss what types of offers they are seeking and the conditions under which they would reject an offer. This step can mean prioritizing a better job, allowing one partner to further their career now while the other partner puts their plans on hold. The other partner may seek temporary work at the same university as their significant other or somewhere else nearby. This trade-off may only be sustainable long-term if the partner who received the better offer now accepts that they need to similarly compromise in the future.

Understand What Each Partner's Career Requires

For couples featuring a non-academic partner, there may be more options to pursue both career goals simultaneously, though this will depend on location and the type of non-academic job. Since the norms and trajectories of non-academic jobs often differ substantially from academic jobs, it is important that partners fully understand one another's careers. Just because a job may seem easily transferable to another location does not mean that it is. If a career requires building a reputation and relationships over time, relocating may be a step backwards. The distinction between job responsibilities, education requirements, and overall qualifications can differ between locations. Long-term non-academic career goals are also worth taking into consideration. Career trajectories for certain corporate or professional jobs may eventually require relocation or a commute to a headquarters in a large city. Professions that require building a client base take time to develop and would be difficult to expand or sustain if a partner is constantly having to move for short-term academic jobs.

Academic Job Negotiations

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of the academic job market process for couples with the two+ body problem are the negotiations after one partner receives an offer. All candidates with offers have some leverage to negotiate but the conditions of the job market and the capabilities of a university will constrain its impact. It is important to be realistic and deferential when asking for additional hiring con-

siderations—until an offer is signed it can be rescinded. Most of the people at the negotiating table understand the circumstances of academia and will be open to trying to help as much as they can. It is important to explain your circumstances and your ideal solutions. This is the only chance a candidate has to get any potential spousal appointment—or any other requests—in writing. Unless the spousal hire is a real line in the sand, do not frame your requests as obligatory demands. It is important not to do anything to needlessly jeopardize a job offer. Openness and respect go a lot further towards success in the negotiating process than reticence and demanding. (Consider reviewing chapter 46 to further prepare to negotiate your first academic job.)

Potential Solutions to the Two+ Body Problem

Beyond partners communicating about their relationship dynamics and career trajectories, there are some practical long-term and short-term solutions to the two+ body problem. One common solution is the long-distance relationship (Sahlstein 2004). In this scenario a couple maintains their relationship while living separate from each other either part or full-time. The distance between career locations, economic flexibility, and the scheduling requirements of partners typically dictate how this plays out. A long-distance relationship requires all parties to have adequate housing in their location. Apartments, especially those that come pre-furnished, are ideal for short-term long-distance relationships or for careers that do not require full time residency like academia. The associated cost of paying two rents, or a rent and mortgage, should be compared against alternative solutions to the two+ body problem. If the costs, both financial and emotional, of long distance are greater than what is gained by either of a couple's jobs, then it is likely not a good solution to pursue. Long-distance relationships can be exceptionally hard on couples and barring any obvious benefits they create more problems than they solve. For dual academic couples a long-distance relationship is often the only solution when both partners are pursuing competitive placements at the same time. Tenure-track positions are rare, and it is unlikely a couple lucky enough to get simultaneous offers will do so in the same geographic area. An additional solution for couples wanting to stay together geographically is for the partner seeking a job to examine opportunities outside of academia. Such careers may allow for individuals to utilize aspects of their degree while potentially making more money than many academic jobs. (Chapter 41 provides an overview of non-traditional options.)

Overcoming the Two+ Body Problem

The long-term goal for any dual career couple will be to find stable and secure employment in the same location (Wolf-Wendel, Twombly, and Rice 2004). The more career-related restrictions or requirements each partner brings to the table, the more time this goal may take to achieve. A partner may choose to utilize a long-distance relationship, maintain current employment, while they attempt to find a suitable new job in the locale their partner was hired. This helps ease the difficulty associated with the quick turnaround between academic job offers and start dates. It also removes pressure from needing to find a new job as soon as possible. For dual career academics, the ease of finding a job in the same location depends on both desired career trajectory and available job options. If one or both partners are willing to forego the more competitive tenure-track path, then it will be easier to find employment in the same location, though the contingency of non-tenured positions can create future job uncertainties.

For academic partners who seek both joint employment and tenure it is imperative that both do their best to remain competitive and desirable candidates. Even if compromises between a couple require a partner to take a less than ideal position in terms of their future career goals, it is important that they maintain impressive teaching, publishing, and networking within their discipline. The two-for-one package of academics is an easier sell if both have impressive CVs.

A Few Other Things to Remember

There are a few more things individuals facing the two+ body problem should keep in mind. Areas with

large numbers of universities nearby should be key targets for dual career academics. More universities means more potential job opportunities in the future. Though it would be ideal to find a job in the same city as one's partner, commuting should not be overlooked as a viable solution. Expanding the range where one looks for employment increases the likelihood of finding something suitable. Advances in technology, as well as recent societal shifts, have made working from home a great option for both academics and non-academics alike. Remote work allows individuals the opportunity to continue working in a chosen field without geographic restrictions. Less traditional academic jobs like researcher, academic advisor, or journal editor may be less competitive than more traditional professorial positions while still allowing academics to keep their foot in the door. Though this may not be a long-term solution, these types of jobs may allow a couple to both find work at the same school.

Finally, due to the prevalence of dual career couples in academia it is highly likely that there are other individuals at one's hiring institution with two+ body problem experience. Such individuals are an invaluable resource for helping early career academics navigate the two+ body problem because they have the added benefit of sharing the same institutional background.

Ultimately, overcoming the two+ body problem requires careful planning, communication, and investment in a shared future. The academic job market as it currently exists can aggravate rather than alleviate the problem if one does not approach the process with a plan in place. Depending on a couple's agreed upon balance, dual careers may involve long-distance relationships, lengthy commutes, or short-term employment solutions. Flexibility is key since the job market plays an inequitable role in the opportunities available, making it necessary for couples to consider alternative routes that satisfy their preferred balance. A couple's ideal solution to the two+ body problem can take years to achieve.

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