

NEWS

Academic couples see upsides to ‘two-body problem’

BY NICHOLETTE ZELIADT

14 NOVEMBER 2016

After six years in New York, **Lilia Iakoucheva** and **Jonathan Sebat** were both ready for a move. The married autism researchers enjoyed their work: She was an assistant professor at Rockefeller University and he an associate professor at Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory. But she wanted a tenure-track position, and because the focus of his work was shifting, he wanted to be at a medical school and have access to people with autism.

They each interviewed for jobs, but finding positions in the same city proved challenging. A long-distance relationship was out of the question, because they have two children.

In a few instances, they landed interviews at the same institution. But Sebat's invitations came first, leading Iakoucheva to question the motivation behind hers.

"You kind of know at the back of your mind that maybe they are not that interested in you, they're just interested in your husband," she says.

Job hunting is nerve-wracking for any early-career scientist, given the paucity of positions. But factoring in the goals of a job-seeking partner — a scenario sometimes called the 'two-body problem' — can amplify the stress. One partner might have to accept a lengthy commute, settle for an imperfect position or even put his or her career on hold.

"You start off with the odds massively stacked against you," says **Stephan Sanders**, assistant professor of psychiatry at the University of California, San Francisco. Sanders has had to navigate the odds twice: first when he followed his wife, **Imogen Hart**, an art historian, to the United States from the United Kingdom, and again when she accompanied him to California. "The most likely outcome is one of you ends up making sacrifices, or it will be a compromise for both of you."

Terms such as 'two-body problem' and 'trailing partner' make matters worse, adds Sanders. "It can really feel like one of you is a problem," he says. "The way that we talk about it is a sign that it's a strange and unnatural thing to do."

Dual dilemma:

Many researchers face this problem at some point in their careers. More than one-third of university faculty **have partners in academia**, according to a 2008 survey by the Clayman Institute for Gender Research. And nearly half of scientists surveyed by the journal *Nature* in 2010 were concerned about **accommodating the career needs** of a scientist partner.

The predicament is so widespread that institutions are developing policies to address it. Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh **helps identify suitable employment** — even if it is in nearby states — for a partner. In some cases, the university offers financial incentives to departments that hire the partner of an individual the university is trying to recruit or retain.

"A lack of opportunity for partners is viewed as the major stumbling block to recruiting top talent," says **Kathryn Roeder**, vice provost for faculty at the university, who herself is part of a dual-career couple. "All the leading universities are moving in this direction."

Universities that don't support couples can miss out on highly qualified candidates. The most common reason for a professional woman to turn down a job offer is a lack of suitable employment for her partner, according to the 2008 survey. And 88 percent of faculty (of either gender) who successfully negotiated a dual hire said they would have refused the job if their partner hadn't also been offered a position.

When Roeder was hired by the statistics department at Carnegie Mellon, she negotiated a **position** for her geneticist husband, **Bernie Devlin**, in the same department. Two years later, Devlin got a faculty position in psychiatry at the University of Pittsburgh.

“The world is full of opportunities that are extremely interesting and match to your skills,” Devlin says. “As long as you have an open mind, I think you can make it work.”

Problems and perks:

Even if a couple successfully negotiates a joint hire, setbacks can occur. Securing a job for a spouse may limit a researcher’s bargaining power for start-up funds and other resources, for instance. “If you’re applying as a joint hire, all of that bargaining becomes about securing your partner a place rather than securing yourself the best conditions in the place that you’re going to,” Sanders says.

A joint hire can also backfire. If one of the partners isn’t a department’s first choice, his or her prospects for receiving awards or job promotions might be limited. On the other hand, one partner may benefit from the other’s connections. And some researchers see a partner’s move as a chance to transition into a new field.

Iakoucheva turned her two-body problem into an opportunity to apply her expertise in protein structure to psychiatry. During her job search, she **received a grant** to explore the interactions among proteins involved in autism. She credits this grant with helping her to clinch an offer for a tenure-track position at the University of California, San Diego, where Sebat was also being considered for a position. The two accepted their offers in 2010 and remain there today.

“The biggest issue is that careers tend to follow their own trajectories,” Sebat says. “You need to be prepared to make those career leaps together at the same time.”

Similarly, Sanders credits his wife’s move from the U.K. to Yale University for his entrée into autism research. Before the move, he worked as a pediatrician in the U.K.; through his wife’s connections at Yale, he got a job working with **Matthew State**, a leading autism researcher then based at Yale. “I would not be doing autism research if it weren’t for the fact that Imogen had got a job in America and I followed her,” he says.

Dual hires may offer advantages to the institution, too. Couples may be unlikely to leave a job, because a departure would produce the two-body problem all over again. “If you’re trying to build a department and looking for good, solid long-term hires, then achieving really good joint-body hires is probably a really good strategy,” Sanders says.