

Freedom, Flexibility, and Never Finished

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DYNAMIC DUOS

Step aside, *Survivor*. Time's up, *24*. Get lost, *Lost*. This season's hottest reality series is right here in the *Observer*! Okay, now that we have your attention: the truth is, we invited a number of distinguished couples to co-author a memoir about their lives together – anything from how they met, to other major personal and career milestones, to how they juggle careers and home. Their articles will appear as a series in the *Observer* over the next several months. In generously sharing their lives with us, they provide a fascinating glimpse into the human side of science and a record of the events that shaped some of the most productive and influential careers in our field.

We were married in September 1969 in New York by the Reverend Cyril Jenkins, of Rutgers Presbyterian Church, the same man who later married a more prominent couple: Kermit the Frog and Miss Piggy, in *The Muppets Take Manhattan*. The year 1969 was significant for other reasons, too: Starting with the event of most importance to New Yorkers, the Mets won the World Series; Neil Armstrong walked on the moon; 500,000 people traveled to Woodstock, New York, for a concert; Charles Manson and family invaded Los Angeles; and the first message was sent over the ARPAnet (from UCLA to the Stanford Research Institute).

When we decided to get married, Bob was in his third year as an assistant professor at the University of Michigan and Elizabeth was nearing the end of her first year as a research associate and lecturer at Rockefeller University. Our plan was to return to Ann Arbor, but rather than lose Elizabeth right away, Rockefeller—in the person of Bill Estes—arranged for Bob to spend half the 1969-70 academic year at Rockefeller, where we had the good fortune to be part of a congenial and highly interactive group of

researchers.

After we returned to Ann Arbor, our good fortune continued. Michigan, renowned for being a supportive Department, provided a regular faculty position for Elizabeth—a highly unusual step in that era—after she had taught courses for a couple years, and the Human Performance Center, led by Arthur Melton, provided a wonderful professional home for both of us. We remained in Ann Arbor until 1974, when we moved to UCLA and Los Angeles.

The Times, They Were A-Changin’

Looking back, our years as a professional couple have spanned a period during which attitudes towards married couples working in the same field have changed dramatically. Couples just a few years older than us often have stories of how they tried to improvise and cope with nepotism rules that prevented them from having positions in the same department—which, of course, translated in nearly every case to the husband having a regular position and the wife finding whatever she could in the same geographic area, or abandoning her career temporarily or even permanently.

Things were starting to change when we came along. Several senior women who had become major figures in the field were belatedly given professorial appointments after years of holding non-regular positions within and outside of psychology departments. We were among the first couples in the University of California system to hold professorial positions in the same psychology department. Howard and Tracy Kendler, via a waiver of anti-nepotism rules obtained by the UC Santa Barbara Psychology Department in 1966, were the very first. Howard’s memoriam in honor of Tracy (Kendler, 2001; see <http://content.cdlib.org/xft/view?docId=hb987008v1&doc>) provides an enlightening perspective on that earlier era.

It remained the case early in our careers, though, that couples in the same department felt an obligation to work in different areas—which accounts, in part, for Elizabeth’s early publications being in fields other than memory, such as visual perception and developmental psychology. Couples were also subtly, or sometimes not so subtly, discouraged from doing research together and publishing together, which largely accounts for the fact that our first joint publication—other than a brief 1988 conference presentation—appeared 23 years after we were married (Bjork & Bjork, 1992). (Appropriately enough, that paper is a theoretical essay written for a festschrift volume honoring William K. Estes, Bob’s graduate mentor and *The Professor* in the mathematical psychology program that Elizabeth joined at Rockefeller.)

Balancing Work and Home Life

There are formidable difficulties and challenges in trying to manage two careers, especially if you also have children. We arrived in Los Angeles with two young sons, one (Olin) three years old and the other (Eric) six weeks old. With two young children to raise and two careers to worry about, our lives soon became impossible, which led us to hire a live-in housekeeper, Mary Soltys (“Aunt Mary”), who remained with us for 11 years and restored a semblance of order to our lives.

Even with such help, trying to succeed professionally while being responsible parents entails a never-ending oscillation between work guilt and family guilt: working to assuage the guilt in one category

increases guilt in the other category. Among our various keys to survival were to become experts on take-out foods; to defer maintenance on our house until some problem became a crisis or somebody else was going to have to live in the house while we were away on leave; and never even considering not filing an extension of time to complete our taxes.

A high level of cooperation and give-and-take is required. Who has the biggest crisis? Who should sacrifice this time? Who is best equipped to handle an unanticipated problem or emergency? We discovered that balancing things most effectively was not a matter of each of us doing 50 percent of everything. Instead, except with respect to our sons' sports activities, where it seemed necessary for us both to be fully involved, we came to divide labor and responsibilities in terms of which one of us was the most competent, or least incompetent, in a given domain, such as Elizabeth handling all of our paperwork and bill paying and Bob doing what he would characterize as more menial jobs, like buying groceries. The idea was that things would balance out, but the truth is that whenever a family crisis emerged, such as a school project that needed to get finished, one of our sons being ill, and so forth, it turned out that Elizabeth was almost always the one to make the necessary sacrifices.

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of managing our professional and family lives is associated with the freedom and flexibility one has as a researcher and teacher. Having no fixed work hours, coupled with open-ended teaching, research, and writing goals and challenges, means that one is free to work all the time. The fact that their parents were never done working, that they always brought work home to do evenings, weekends, and even on vacations, might have been the hardest thing on our sons.

But We're Not Complaining

We were asked to focus in this article on matters such as how we have juggled work and home life; how we have negotiated the requirements of two demanding careers; what the secret of our "coupleness" might be; and so forth. We would be remiss, though, not to mention the joys and opportunities that also come with being a professional couple—and colleagues. In fact, if you are going to be a professional couple both working 60+ hours a week, being an academic couple in the same department is probably the way to go. We have had the freedom and flexibility to take impromptu walks on the Michigan and UCLA campuses; to get together for a latte or ice cream after an exhausting lecture; to schedule getaways during breaks and holidays; to attend basketball games in Pauley Pavilion and football games in Michigan stadium; to interrupt each other willy-nilly with questions and ideas; and on and on. In addition, being in the same department and same field has let us arrange leaves together at stimulating and interesting places, such as UC San Diego, Bell Laboratories, Dartmouth College, the Center for Advanced Study at Stanford, and the School of Psychology at the University of Saint Andrews in Scotland. In short, only on very rare occasions have we ever felt sorry for ourselves.

The Bottom Line

Whatever the difficulties and challenges, our careers have had a singularly positive feature. We have been eager, every day, to go to work (okay, make that nearly every day). We have not only enjoyed research and teaching, we have been able to share the questions, the observations, and the ideas that make psychological science so compelling, captivating, and challenging.

References

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