

Some Ins and Outs of Being a Couple in Psychology

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We didn't begin on an equal footing, which would have been almost impossible in the 1950s, but we began in a not unfamiliar way: George was five years older and an assistant professor in the Social Relations Department at Harvard where I was getting my PhD. George was on my dissertation committee, and while I was working on my thesis he hired me as a research assistant. His research on the auto-nomic nervous system underpinnings of emotion in humans required a set of measurement devices made for us by the Grass instrument company in Quincy, Mass. On the many trips out there from Cambridge to check on progress, love bloomed.

My PhD, a postdoctoral fellowship, marriage, and our first son, Peter, followed in quick succession, still in the 1950s. Then the limits that I was vaguely aware would constrain my professional life became real, not just theoretical. All my women colleagues knew that ca-reers in academia would be difficult to find, especially so if one married. I remember one particularly unpleasant conversation about this with a male graduate student, who berated women for taking fellowships that could have no societal return and that deprived those who could make good use of them. It was a difficult charge to answer. What was I going to do with my degree?

Having a husband to talk psychology with and a baby to raise mitigated the problem. In 1960, with me now pregnant with our second son, Michael, George accepted a position at the University of Toronto. Our time there was good for us in different ways: George was happy helping rebuild a department and doing research on the organization of memory, and I enjoyed the many pleasures of raising two sons. George was sensitive to my professional needs and arranged for me to do (unpaid) research part-time at the University. The two of us also wrote a book on the history of thinking, so I kept my hand in a bit in the field. Then George got an offer too good to refuse —starting a brand new department of psychology at the new University of California, San Diego. It was a great challenge and a rare opportunity.

I fell in love with California and now had a beautiful home and garden overlooking the Pacific, and a family to nurture. George wan-gled a part-time appointment in the research series for me, so I could apply for a grant from NIH. Although nepotism rules meant that the appointment could not be in psychology, where he was chair, I had a courtesy appointment in biology, a department I never set foot in. All should have been well, but the situation was far from ideal. I had become utterly bored with animal learning research, but had no way out of it if I was going to do any psychology at all. Depression was threatening to overtake me. In retrospect I find it surprising how long it took to figure out what the problem was: I needed a regular job. The proximal stimulus to this insight was the student unrest of late 1960s. Angela Davis was there to arouse the social conscience and there was plenty of consciousness-raising, not only about race and the Viet-nam war, but also about feminism. Why couldn't I have a regular position rather than always being on the periphery of the university?

George took stock of the situation and, although he was busy running a new and expanding department as well as carrying out his re-search at full speed, he decided that change was vital — if we needed to

leave UCSD to find a place for me, then we would. For the younger generation reading this piece, it is important to realize that, like everyone else, we were creatures of our time and culture. We had simply accepted that women would not have the positions that men would. George always encouraged my intellectual ambition, he helped me obtain a share of the limited resources that were available to women, and we both enjoyed talking psychology together. But when not being able to have a regular job began to truly weigh me down, he devoted himself to bringing about a change. That attitude was rare among professional men at that time, and is not always found even today. (Moral for young female psychologists reading this: If you want to marry, be sure to find a man who is as committed to your career as you are.)

I won't go through the ups and downs of the next few years as we gradually resolved the problem, but only note that during this time I switched out of animal learning and into developmental psychology and managed to do some developmental research. In 1973, at age 43, I finally got my first regular appointment, in the department of psychology at UCSD. I applied for and got a research grant on developmental issues and, best of all, a bunch of graduate students to work with. My life changed utterly. Our sons were now in their teens and very supportive of the long hours I was putting into work instead of their care. They griped a bit now and then, but I think were rather proud of me; professional mothers were still not commonplace. George, delighted to have a happy wife again, said I was the bushiest-tailed associate professor he knew. At an age when many people begin to slow down, I was just beginning and was full of energy and enthusiasm for my new-found work.

Interestingly, as I became an expert in development, George and I gradually talked somewhat less psychology at home than before. Our research interests were now quite different and we had begun to diverge theoretically as well — our discussions were more often heated, especially after I moved into cognitive science. Still, always having someone there to discuss problems or new ideas was a great benefit.

Having two salaries that grew along with our seniority was a great benefit, too. When I turned 60, George was 65 and beginning to plan for retirement, and even I was beginning to flag a bit. The university had a wonderful program of semi-retirement through which one could work two quarters instead of three, taking some money from one's university retirement fund to partially restore the missing quarter's salary. The result was six months free time every year for us and savings to the university that allowed it to hire two new assistant professors. A win-win situation! But what happened? What I thought would enable us to pursue other interests (and indeed it did) also freed us from teaching and the endless bureaucracy that grant-getting had become. So much so that I felt rejuvenated. Time to think deeply is precious but often rare in a high-powered university. Now that I had it, my interest in psychology was renewed and the result (the How to Build a Baby series) was what I consider the best work of my career.

George and I are now both fully retired, still doing psychology, mostly writing. It has been a wonderful life, but it was chancy for me. George's career path was never in doubt, but mine certainly was, and I do not advise young women to postpone their careers as I did, because they may not be as lucky.