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## CAREER FOCUS

# Finding Success as a Dual-Career Couple

Natalie Banerji

A scientific career in academia can present a young researcher with the challenge of juggling work life and personal life—especially when their partner is also an academic, working in the same discipline.

**W**hen you pursue an academic career in the sciences, you sign up for a great deal of hard work. You will have less free time and, at least in my case, interact less with nonscientists. Therefore, it is not surprising that the partners of many young scientists are often also scientists. Couples with similar research interests may meet during their undergraduate or doctoral studies. But what happens to these couples when it's time for them to move on and find postdoctoral or faculty positions?

This is how the two-body problem begins: How can partnered scientists both find jobs in academia either at the same university or within commuting distance from each other?

## The dual-career conundrum

The postdoctoral and faculty stages in a scientist's career path present their own unique relationship hurdles for dual-career couples. In Europe, mobility has become an important criterion for a successful scientific track record. Therefore, postdoctoral positions must be found abroad, which adds complexity to the two-body problem. I have seen young

scientists, especially women, drop out of research at this stage because staying with their partner is more important to them than pursuing a career in a different location. There are also many dual-career couples who persevere and find postdoctoral positions in close proximity to each other. But even if a partner takes a position on a different continent, which is what happened in my situation, all hope is not lost, since postdoctoral stays are limited in time.

After completing a postdoctoral fellowship, things can get complicated if you and your partner both decide to pursue a faculty position. Tenure-track and tenured faculty positions are scarce, so it is unlikely that there will be openings for both you and your partner in nearby places, especially if you work in a similar field. This career stage also tends to coincide with the time when many couples want to settle down and start a family. I have seen young researchers deal with this situation in a variety of ways.

Occasionally, as I stated earlier, one person gives up their career. I must admit, it makes me feel a little jealous when I see some of my successful male colleagues with a beautiful social life and family life, all managed by a loving

wife at home. In other situations, I've seen partners find a university with a dual-career program that is able to hire both of them. I have also witnessed several cases in which a university has found a job for the husband

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or wife in order to keep the highly successful partner from leaving. Other couples enter a long-distance relationship, taking positions at different universities and seeing each other on the weekends—or even less frequently. This last “option” is the one that my partner and I initially chose, but it is typically only acceptable for a short duration.

### My dual-career couple experience

In my case, my partner was not a fellow student, but a tenured lecturer at my university (University of Geneva, Switzerland).

We started dating at the beginning of my Ph.D. program. I have always been extremely career-driven, so giving up my career to stay local was simply not an option, and he had no plans to move. For a while, I considered changing my career orientation to school teaching. After trying it for a year (part-time, in parallel to my Ph.D. research), I ultimately decided dealing with teenagers was not for me. Instead, I chose a two-year postdoctoral

program in the United States at the University of California, Santa Barbara. I had a wonderful time in California and never regretted my decision to go without my partner. Our relationship survived through Skype calls and frequent visits.

At the end of my postdoctoral program, I chose to return to Switzerland, where my partner still lived, also because I considered the scientific opportunities there to be among the best. I obtained a fellowship for a semi-independent position at the École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne, an excellent research institute and only about an hour away from my partner's workplace in Geneva. We ended up finding a home equidistant from both of our offices. This arrangement worked out well for about three years.

When my fellowship came to an end, I had to once again look for a job. I started my search early and did not hesitate to apply for suitable positions outside Switzerland. I also put a lot of effort into building a strong résumé and a wide professional network during my fellowship, knowing that they would help me in this quest.

A tenured associate professorship opened at the University of Fribourg, about two hours away from Geneva. At first I thought I was too young—academically speaking—for this position. But my experience made me a competitive candidate: I had a strong resume, other universities were interested in hiring me and I had been awarded an important research



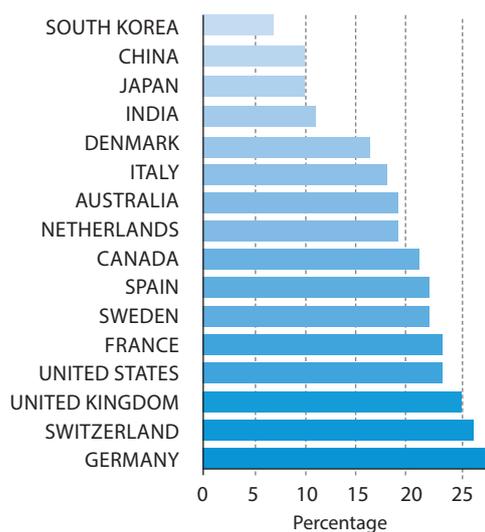
### THE ACADEMIC CAREER TIMELINE IN SWITZERLAND

**A typical academic career in Switzerland and some European countries includes:**

1. Obtain a Bachelor's and Master's degree  
**4.5 years**
2. Obtain a Ph.D.  
**~4 years**
3. Move abroad for a postdoctoral research stay, often funded by a fellowship  
**2-3 years**

Possible academic gray zone for postdoctoral research, an independent fellowship and/or junior group leader positions.

5. Apply for a tenure-track or tenured faculty position.



### THE TWO-BODY PROBLEM

Respondents who said accommodating job needs of a partner who is also a scientist “very much” influenced how and when they secured their most recent job.

Source: Naturejobs International Salary Survey, 2010

grant. I applied for and was eventually offered the associate professor position. At the age of 33, I was able to settle into a stable, tenured career.

I have been in this position for a little over a year now, and I am very happy with the great research group and laboratory that I've assembled. I did not need to compromise my career for my personal life, nor did my partner. And this time, my partner and I decided that commuting for both of us would not be practical. I got the better end of the deal and we now live closer to my university and he takes the train to his office.

In the end, my partner and I found a solution to the two-body problem. However, every couple is different. If I could give some general advice, it would be simply to make the excellence of your research a priority and to apply to as many positions as you can. This



Natalie Banerji, her partner Pierre-Yves Morgantini, and their rabbit Noëlle.

may give you the necessary leverage to end up right where you want: next to your partner, without compromising your career. **OPN**

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## Resources for Dual-Career Academic Couples

- ▶ The Clayman Institute for Gender Research, USA <http://gender.stanford.edu/>
- ▶ The Dual Career Network Germany [www.dcmd.org/home.html](http://www.dcmd.org/home.html)
- ▶ Dual Career Services at the Delft University of Technology, The Netherlands <https://intranet.tudelft.nl/loopbaan-en-ontwikkeling/dual-career-services/>
- ▶ EURAXESS - Researchers in Motion, European Union <http://ec.europa.eu/euraxess/>
- ▶ The ISM Dual Career-Spouse Network in Copenhagen, Denmark <http://ism.ku.dk/atdestination/dualcareerspousenetwork/>

## To learn more ...

- ▶ E.H. Simmons. Dual-career academics: The right start. *Inside Higher Ed.*, 27 July (2012).
- ▶ B. Hillman. Webinar: A roadmap for dual career assistance. Higher Education Recruitment Consortium, 15 September (2011).
- ▶ E. Pain. Dual-career couples at the Euro-Science Open Forum. *Sci. Career Mag.*, 24 June (2014).



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