Rethinking the Two-Body Problem: Using Grounded Theory to Understand Experiences of Partner Hires

Elisabeth Day McNaughtan  
*Texas Tech University*, liz.mcnaughtan@ttu.edu

Jon L. McNaughtan  
*Texas Tech University*, jon.mcnaughtan@ttu.edu

Cameron C. Brown  
*Texas Tech University*, cam.brown@ttu.edu

Grant R. Jackson  
*Texas Tech University*, grant.jackson@ttu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr](https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr)

Part of the Higher Education Commons, and the Quantitative, Qualitative, Comparative, and Historical Methodologies Commons

**Recommended APA Citation**


This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the The Qualitative Report at NSUWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Qualitative Report by an authorized administrator of NSUWorks. For more information, please contact nsuworks@nova.edu.
Rethinking the Two-Body Problem: Using Grounded Theory to Understand Experiences of Partner Hires

Abstract
The abundance of dual-career couples in academia has led many universities to implement partner-hiring policies and practices to extend a job offer to a candidate's/employee's partner to either recruit or retain the target hire. Most of the existing research in this area has focused on institutional policies and practices, with less attention given to the experiences of couples who have received such accommodations. The present study used a grounded theory method and qualitative interviews to analyze the process and perceptions of target hires and accommodated hires working in U.S. postsecondary institutions. Participants shared barriers they experienced, strategies employed to optimize their experience, and identified ways institutions can improve partner hiring processes.

Keywords
hiring, professoriate, spousal hire, partner accommodation, organizational sense making, grounded theory

Creative Commons License
This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 4.0 International License.

This article is available in The Qualitative Report: https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol29/iss4/20
Rethinking the Two-Body Problem: Using Grounded Theory to Understand Experiences of Partner Hires

Elisabeth Day McNaughtan, Jon McNaughtan, Cameron C. Brown, and Grant R. Jackson
Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Texas, USA

The abundance of dual-career couples in academia has led many universities to implement partner-hiring policies and practices to extend a job offer to a candidate’s/employee’s partner to either recruit or retain the target hire. Most of the existing research in this area has focused on institutional policies and practices, with less attention given to the experiences of couples who have received such accommodations. The present study used a grounded theory method and qualitative interviews to analyze the process and perceptions of target hires and accommodated hires working in U.S. postsecondary institutions. Participants shared barriers they experienced, strategies employed to optimize their experience, and identified ways institutions can improve partner hiring processes.

Keywords: hiring, professoriate, spousal hire, partner accommodation, organizational sense making, grounded theory

Introduction

Wolf-Wendel et al. (2003) described the “two-body problem” as dual-career couples in academia where “[w]hen searching for a job or deciding whether to accept an offer, one partner has to consider the career options for the other” (p. 1). This can either lead to both partners finding suitable positions at the same institution, or one partner “communicating long distances or making compromises about the types of jobs they are willing to consider” (p. 1). One survey indicated that 36% of full-time tenure-track faculty at 13 leading research institutions in the United States were academic couples (Schiebinger et al., 2008), but there is no clear data on how many dual-career couples there are at universities in various staff, faculty, or administrative positions. At many institutions, and in current research the term spousal hire, spousal accommodation, and spousal hiring are used to refer to this process. For this study, the terms partner hire and partner accommodation are used, and we refer to the first partner hired as the target hire and the accommodated partner as the second hire to align what has been argued is more inclusive language (Promin, 2011). The abundance of dual-career couples at universities, however, has led many universities to implement partner hiring policies and practices that allow them to extend an offer to a candidate’s/employee’s partner to either recruit or retain the target hire.

Scholars have produced a steady, albeit scant, stream of scholarship on the topic, including research on common partner accommodation policies (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2000, 2003), advantages of hiring partners (Schiebinger et al., 2008; Smith et al., 2004), and attitudes towards hiring partners (Burgan et al., 1991; Fleig-Palmer et al., 2003). Minimal research has focused on understanding the perspectives of dual-academic couples who have personally experienced the process of a partner accommodation and potential challenges they may face when entering their institutions. Because second hires circumvent the traditional hiring route,
the existing effectiveness and potential needed improvements in their organizational experiences warrant special considerations from researchers and institutions.

In the last available survey, 80% of institutions said they were willing to assist a partner in finding employment as part of the recruitment package of the target hire (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2003), but research suggests the practice remains highly controversial due to concerns of unqualified second hires, preferential treatment for the second hire, and complicated office politics (see Burgan et al., 1991; Schiebinger et al., 2008), as well as institutional members being generally unaware of common approaches towards or even their own institution’s policies on partner hiring (see Schiebinger et al., 2008). However, not offering an accommodation also leads to challenges for the institution, including the target hire going back on the job market or commuting long distances to maintain familial relationships, which could lead to less engaged teaching, service, and research (Bell, 2010).

Due to the competing tensions on this issue, there have been calls to enhance understanding of how to create egalitarian and effective outcomes for both the institutions and couples (Bell, 2010). In addition, there is a need to clarify barriers partner hires faced after being hired to improving the partner hire process. As one (anonymous) second hire observed in a 2014 Inside Higher Ed essay on the matter, “People have written posts about how to land (and negotiate) these elusive spousal hires. What I haven’t seen as much discussion of is what comes next?” (Anonymous, 2014, para. 3). The present study attends to this gap by illuminating common potential barriers for those who are accommodated and potential strategies that both individuals and institutions can implement to ease the tensions.

**Literature Review**

The politics of partner hiring date back to the 1960’s when many universities had anti-nepotism policies prohibiting the hiring of family members of current employees (Martin, 1972), with some institutions being so strict that if two tenured faculty members got married, one had to forfeit their tenure (Dolan & Davis, 1960). Such policies claimed to ensure that faculty were promoted on merit rather than association. However, this approach resulted in the many partners struggling to find even menial work, which was especially the case for women. Over time, creating policies that allowed for the hiring of both partners became a key strategy for attracting and retaining talented faculty (Morlock, 1973; Weissman, 1973).

More recent research has shown that gendered assumptions and roles continue to shape partner hiring practices and policies (see Rice et al., 2007; Rivera, 2017; Tierney & Salle, 2008). For example, Rivera (2017) found that committees actively looked at female applicants’ relationship statuses, at times leading to declining female applicants if they believed they could not offer male partners suitable employment as part of the hiring process. This finding is especially problematic given that women are more likely to have academic partners than men (Schiebinger et al., 2008). Because of many institutions’ antiquated, ineffective, or unenforced dual hire policies, some argue that top talent is missed and gender imbalances will continue to be perpetuated unless universities engage in critical discussions to improve the dual hire process (Rivera, 2017; Zhang et al. 2019).

The majority of past partner accommodation literature used an institutional or administrative lens, covering dimensions of prevalence, guidance, and how to mitigate concerns when developing policies (Burgan et al., 1991; Promin, 2011; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2000, 2003). Other research has synthesized some institutional members’ concerns about partner hiring, such as second hires not being qualified for the job, second hires being given preferential treatment over other applicants, and fallout if the couple’s relationship ends (Burgan et al., 1991; Schiebinger et al., 2008). Schiebinger et al. (2008) found that 29% of faculty believed their department had accommodated a second hire whom they considered
underqualified, 26% believed that it disrupted “the intellectual direction of the department,” (p. 50) and 37% believed that the second hire was less respected than the target hire. Researchers have also indicated that partner hires were frequently hired at a lower position and salary than the target hire despite similar qualifications (Collier, 2001; Ferber & Loeb, 1997).

Scholars have also highlighted the benefits of partner hiring, such as better retention (Li, 2009) and increased diversity in the faculty body (Schiebinger et al., 2008; Smith et al., 2004). Partners themselves described benefits of increased or comparable productivity in their research (Creamer, 1999; Ferber & Loeb, 1997; Girod et al., 2011; Schiebinger et al., 2008) and greater success at prioritizing their careers while balancing home life when compared to those who do not work at the same institution as their partner (Wilson, 2002). Despite perceived benefits, many of those hired as part of an accommodation are placed into contingency positions (Rice et al., 2007) leaving them with limited stability, lower pay, hindered career progression, and related challenges (McNaughtan et al., 2017). Burgan et al. (1991) also warn that increasing diversity is not a guarantee when partner hiring and that such efforts can actually be undermined and extend existing privileges to dominant groups. For example, if a department’s efforts to hire more females results in partner-hire positions being created/extended to only male partners, then the gendered dynamics of the department have not been remediated. For all sides to be treated fairly in these complex situations, many researchers have called for better understanding and strengthened practices for hiring and retaining couples (Girod, 2011; Homayack et al., 2009; Wells, 2005).

While previous studies have considered the issue of partner hiring from the perspectives of colleagues and administrators (e.g., Burgan et al., 1991; Schiebinger et al., 2008), very few integrate the perspectives of those who have actually been hired through a partner accommodation, which are essential in identifying the strengths and shortcomings of current processes. Research, like Layne et al. (2005), has focused on the voices of those hired in partner hire scenarios and developed recommendations for institutions, and our research will largely strive to extend and update that work. In addition to contributing more current perspectives to the body of literature, past literature also focuses predominantly on partners who are both hired into full-time, tenure-track faculty roles, whereas many partners may end up in staff, administrative, or a combination of part-time roles at a university. These roles and contributions risk being overlooked without further study. As such, the overarching goal of this study was to update our understanding of the processes and perspectives of how the organizations engage those who have been hired into various roles through partner hiring processes, and was guided by three questions:

RQ 1: After being hired as part of an accommodation process, what common barriers or concerns do partners identify in their organizational experience?
RQ2: What common strategies would partner hires recommend to other dual-academic couples to navigate organizational challenges?
RQ 3: What recommendations do partners have for improving institutional processes and policies for partner hiring?

Method

This study employed aspects of the grounded theory methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Specifically, the research questions were considered through a qualitative and inductive thematic analysis without a specific guiding theory. Grounded theory was selected for this study given the dearth of research that focuses on the processes experienced by dual hires from the perspectives of the couples. Dual-academic couples or academic pairings were defined as...
two partners who were employed at the same academic institution in either staff, administrative, or faculty roles.

This qualitative interview approach allowed for participants to engage in what Weick (1979) called retrospective sensemaking, wherein organizational members can look back at their experience and attribute meaning to choices, actions, and events to begin “constructing rational accounts after an organizational process that is actually messy and ambiguous” (Mumby, 2016, p. 119). As partner hiring has been called an “elusive” (Anonymous, 2014) process that is “shrouded in secrecy and inconsistent across departments” (Schiebinger et al., 2008, p. 2), conducting interviews that would have participants attribute such meaning to their choices, actions, and events during their partner hire experiences was a beneficial approach to answering the research questions.

Data Collection

We conducted a 30-60-minute, semi-structured interview with each participant in the study, either in person or over the phone (depending on their location and preference). We asked participants a series of open-ended questions about the partner accommodation process, recommendations for other dual-academic couples, and recommendations for institutions. The six primary questions were:

1. What was the process of being offered a partner accommodation?
2. What did you consider when deciding whether to accept the accommodation?
3. What has the experience been like? What has been positives and what have been the challenges?
4. What are the strategies you’ve implemented to navigate the challenges?
5. What advice would you give institutions wanting to improve the process of hiring partners and supporting partners after they’ve been hired?
6. What advice would you give those seeking an accommodation for their partner?

While these questions guided the interviews, each researcher applied flexibility in the order we asked each question, follow-up questions, and the discussion of alternative topics that naturally surfaced in the interviews.

The interviews were then transcribed with all identifying information (i.e., names, locations, subject areas) removed to assure anonymity. Names were replaced with pseudonyms, which will be used when reporting the results. These processes were approved prior to beginning the study by the researchers’ home institution Institutional Review Board (IRB). Participants were informed that the study had been approved, and that their identity would be protected prior to beginning each interview. Each participant also had an opportunity to review their transcript and confirm participation prior to the writing phase of the project.

Participants

Participants were recruited in a snowball sample through eight original participants found through research ads and colleague recommendations. This rendered 33 participants with a total of 56 hiring experiences as many had been through multiple hiring processes with their partners. Twenty-one participants were second hires (6 male, 15 female) and represented 35 of the hiring experiences; 12 participants were target hires (1 male, 11 female) and represented 21 of the hiring experiences. Participants were consistent in being the target or second hire across hiring experiences and only contributed to this study from one perspective. The participants were from 11 universities in 10 states from diverse regions of the contiguous U.S.;
however, including their past hiring experiences, 28 different universities in 21 different states were represented. Twenty-nine participants came from large research institutions, while four came from small regional colleges. Fourteen had multiple experiences of being hired with their partner, while nineteen had a single experience. Nineteen participants worked in the same college or department as their partner, while fourteen worked in different areas on campus. Five of the participants were international hires, and six identified as a race other than Caucasian.

To be included in this study, participants had to self-identify as having participated in a partner accommodation as either the target or partner hire. However, during the interview process, six participants (four second hires, two first hires) expressed uncertainty about whether they or their partner were, in fact, hired as an accommodation. All six were hired at institutions where they successfully sought to be co-located with their partners but were unsure to what degree an official accommodation was made. The ambiguity of their hiring experiences was reminiscent of a problem past writers described when calling the accommodation process “elusive” (Anonymous, 2014) and “shrouded in secrecy” (Schiebinger et al., 2008, p. 2). Reviewing those six interview transcripts, it was clear that the participants’ hiring committees knew of their need to be co-located, and as a result most participants described a non-traditional hiring processes, with some being hired without a formal interview process or after being the only candidate interviewed for the position. The six participants also shared similar organizational experiences and recommendations as those who knew they were partner hires. Because of their common organizational experiences and the perception of ambiguity that can exist in partner hiring, these six participants were retained in this study.

While previous partner hire research has largely focused on tenure-line faculty accommodation, participants in this study held a variety of positions. Participants’ current positions (though some held different positions in past accommodations) included: tenure-track faculty (16), student services (4), non-tenure-track faculty (4), non-tenure-track faculty who later became tenure-track (3), adjunct faculty (2), administrative (1), and those who held a mix of positions (i.e., split time between lecturing and working in a center on campus) (3). This study also combined the insights from both the second (21) and target (12) hires.

**Data Analysis**

Utilizing grounded theory, we employed a qualitative thematic analysis following guidelines from Hsieh and Shanno’s (2005) qualitative conventional content analysis. Hsieh and Shannon described this method as “appropriate when existing theory or research literature on a phenomenon is limited” (p. 1279), which was the case with our study. When analyzing the data in this process, “researchers avoid using preconceived categories (Kondracki & Wellman, 2002), instead allowing the categories and names for categories to flow from the data” (p. 1279), making it an inductive process wherein themes are generated.

The lead researcher followed Hsieh and Shannon’s (2005) guidelines to develop codes/themes by becoming familiar with the transcripts through repeated reading of each one, then making preliminary codes by “highlighting exact words” that “capture key thoughts and concepts,” (p. 1279). The lead researcher then identified emerging code names that captured several key thoughts/concepts throughout several transcripts. These preliminary codes were then organized into more specific categories comprised of codes that related to each other in meaningful ways, thus identifying major themes in the transcripts. This process was assisted with NVivo software following the best practices as outlined by Jackson and Bazeley (2019).

We followed Creswell’s (2007) recommendation of using at least two methods to establish trustworthiness in our analysis. First, we used source triangulation (Creswell & Miller, 2000) by drawing on participants from varying viewpoints (i.e., first and second hires
in either faculty and administrative positions) to find the common themes and viewpoints. Second, we rely on thick, rich description (Creswell & Miller, 2000) by relying heavily on the participants voices when presenting results, allowing readers to experience participant’s statements and judge the applicability of the findings themselves.

**Researcher Positionality**

The research team is comprised of four faculty members at a large southwestern research focused university. Two of the researchers study higher education, one studies marriage and family therapy, and the fourth studies interpersonal communication. While none of the participants have participated in a partner hire, two members of the research team are married to each other. The motivation for the work came as the researchers each witnessed colleagues experiencing the partner hiring process with little practical guidance and minimal research to help them navigate the process. As a team, we approach this study with a post-positivist paradigm seeking to observe the experiences of others and amplify the voices of those who have navigated the opaque process of partner hires.

**Results**

In this study, participants were asked to reflect on the key barriers in their hiring experience as a partner accommodation, how they would advise other dual-academic couples navigating these same barriers, and recommendations they would give to universities for supporting partner hires into the institution. The themes from the interviews were organized according to the research question that participants were addressing, and as such will be further presented and discussed with their corresponding research question.

**RQ 1: After being hired as part of an accommodation process, what common barriers or concerns do partners identify in their organizational experience?**

Participants were asked to identify common challenges they faced in the beginning stages of the hiring process in their respective institutions. Four themes emerged which were aligned with the timeline of the process. As the prospective partner hire began the process, they first experienced sacrifices in career which often led to relationship stress. The third and fourth theme occurred in the work setting where partner hires felt they had to overcome stigma and a general lack of resources. Each theme is discussed below.

**Sacrifices in Career**

The first emergent theme was that in an effort to get two jobs, the second hire often made sacrifices in their careers. As Becca explained, “there's very, very few people I know where both have jobs that they wanted.” One example of these sacrifices included being placed in a department different than their degree. Patrick was in this situation and described, “Most of the time, when I was talking to faculty in the college, I had no idea what they were talking about and they had no idea what I was talking about either.” A second example of this sacrifice was described by partners who described taking roles below their education or experience level being assured that the department or the hire themselves would eventually find a more permanent position (Adam).

Many believed these would be short-term sacrifices that would eventually lead to their ideal positions. There were mixed results in how these sacrifices paid off. For some, they were able to eventually work towards the position they wanted. For others, however, there were
long-term effects. Stephanie said, “It certainly wasn't super advantageous for my career advancement. It kind of took me in places that led me outside of the straight-line career trajectory that some people enjoy.” Lexie likewise explained, “With a promise of a tenure track forthcoming, we thought this would be a positive move. In reality, it's basically killed my career and gave me very little upward mobility.” These resultant challenges provide some concrete examples of the sacrifices made during the partner hire process.

**Relationship Stresses**

A second common challenge that participants mentioned was the stress partner accommodations put on their relationships. Representative of many comments, Laila said, “if something goes wrong with one person, even though you are very objective, you're very balanced, it eventually affects the other person.” Target hires worried that their partner resented them for receiving an unideal position, and some second hires admitted that they did struggle with feelings of resentment or not being able to share disappointments with their partner because it would sour the success of their first hire position. Female participants especially seemed to feel competing tensions between supporting their partner or career. Kylie described such tensions leaving her tenure track job for a mixed teaching/research center position:

> It put a massive amount of strain on our relationship. Because for me the question was, “Am I going to leave a tenure track job for my husband?” essentially. And, as I identify very strongly as a feminist, to be put into that position where I had to choose between the health of my marriage and the health of my career—it was very, very emotionally tumultuous.

While male second-hires often felt magnanimous for being a second hire with one man saying “I don't want to damage [my wife’s] career” and he went on to describe how he was willing to do whatever work was available to him in order to support her (Adam). Female second-hires often described feeling pegged into traditional gendered roles and almost being expected to put their careers behind their partners. These difficult feelings did not stay isolated at work, with Lexie admitting that “there's constant feelings of who had to compromise and sometimes an argument comes up.” Stress at work often led to stress in the relationship.

**Stigma**

The third most common barrier participants identified was a negative stigma among colleagues and administrators in their colleges and departments. Stigma was manifest through microaggressions such as being reminded that they were an accommodation. Participants felt like they had to work harder to prove themselves, fight isolation from colleagues (i.e., not being invited to department meetings or not being acknowledged when they arrived), and overcome some people’s poor opinions of partner hires. One participant (Lexie) exemplified this sharing that her dean “publicly stated that he thinks that spousal hiring weakens the overall faculty body,” and she felt that the dean’s attitude trickled down to her colleagues. She continued, saying, “I have found that my productivity is judged more harshly than other people. I think I'm expected to be above and beyond what other people can do.” These perceptions led to feelings of resentment towards colleagues and the institution as a whole.

Much of this stigma came because partners were seen as noncompetitive hires or because departments felt they had been forced to take this person. On feeling “forced” on the department, Adam said: “They didn't hire me. They didn't really have a choice. And, you know, after things really started to come out in the open, I had a couple of them flat out tell me that
they didn't want me to come.” Kylie similarly said, “My friends, well, people who became my friends later, told me they were pissed that I got hired. They didn't know who I was. Nobody was able to vet me.” For some, these toxic atmospheres eventually went away, but for others it eventually drove them (and their partner) out of the institution. Paula, a second-hire who described consistently being treated as a second-class employee in her department and who was in the process of seeking new positions for both her and her partner, said, “I know that sounds really dramatic but the thing is, why stay in a war zone where you're just miserable all the time? If you can get out and you can find a salary where you can survive in a better situation then get out.” These experiences highlight how the partner hires were perceived, and why the feeling of a stigma perpetuated among partner hires.

Others described that there were biases against couples working together in general. Tiffany, who was twice-accommodated participant who took a role in student affairs and a role in academic support, described having a tenured professor approach her partner and say “I just want to let you know, I will never vote for your wife to enter into a tenure track line, even if one becomes available, because I don't think you two should be serving on the same faculty.” Whether spoken outright or more covertly, the sense of stigma among their colleagues was ever present for all participants in the study.

### Lack of Resources or Support

The fourth barrier for second hires was a lack of resources to help them thrive in their position. This lack of support was manifest in various ways such as weak onboarding processes, having no support for navigating toxic work environments, and insufficient university contacts to facilitate making their temporary positions permanent.

The weak onboarding processes came up with many who saw the contrast between their partner’s experience (target hire) of being welcomed into their departments with parties and HR orientations while they as the second hire were not given any training with many claiming their colleagues were unaware they were coming. Kylie described, “Nobody even told me I had to go get an [identification] card. Nobody told me how to go sign up for health. I still to this day have had no information about signing up for healthcare benefits.” Kylie had been accommodated twice and had this experience at both institutions. She concluded, “The first time I was like, ‘Oh, they're kind of disheveled and they don't know what they're doing.’ And the second time, I'm thinking maybe this is a larger pattern, that spousal hires are not necessarily welcome in the same fashion that traditional hires are.” Becca similarly echoed the lack of official socialization practices received by partner hires:

I don't actually know how my contract is renewed. I don't know what the basis for that renewal is. I don't know what the benchmarks are for that renewal. I don't know who makes that decision or when, and I've been told not to ask because that might remind people that I'm being paid and that maybe I shouldn't be.

John described how he felt frustrated that “there’s no official resources to navigate” these questions. For some participants, they did have a central office where they could seek support, but for most this office did not exist. John was especially frustrated that he found himself in a temporary position within a department that refused to permanently hire someone who had been accommodated. He stressed, “What do I do when [my appointment] ends? That question has not been, in any way, settled. In fact, navigating that question has been a nightmare.” He further pointed out that his university was “supposedly appropriating some extra money for future spousal hires, but they haven't thought about pre-existing spousal hires.” This example
highlights how even when additional resources are being allocated for partner hires, university administration is not reflective of the current dearth of resources for existing partner hires.

RQ2: What common strategies would partner hires recommend to other dual-academic couples to navigate organizational challenges?

Participants were asked to reflect on the strategies they believed helped them navigate these organizational challenges. While many participants said they believed personal circumstances and preferences would warrant unique responses, there were four common strategies that were consistently mentioned by participants including open communication, establishing independent and long-term value, networking and diversifying contributions, and strategically negotiating.

Open Communication

Participants recommended open and honest communication as a couple both before and after being hired, with many reflecting that they had been “naïve” and “unprepared” as a couple for the challenges of the process (Tony). Looking back, many referenced that more communication was of key importance, with Shannon explaining: “Be open and honest with one another about your aspirations, what your dreams are, where you want to be, where you see yourself, not making assumptions that they're feeling and seeing things exactly the same way you are.” Ethan similarly suggested that an accommodation “might require one or both of the spouses to make a trade-off with regards to their career trajectory” and which trade-offs each partner is willing to make must be established.

Participants also advised that couples establish a backup plan in case the accommodation does not work out. Stephanie said, “Have a backup plan. Be sure that you're not coming somewhere where the only option is for you to work at this one university—that there are other places you could seek employment if it doesn't work out.” Tiffany reiterated this idea sharing that “one person might be left hanging” if the partner hire does not work out, so “having a backup plan makes that easier.” Said another way, when engaging in partner hiring processes, the couple needs to communicate about expectations and plan when considering all possible outcomes.

After being hired, couples claimed that communication must continue and as part of these discussions, couples should establish a willingness to make reciprocal sacrifices for each other so one person’s career was not prioritized over the other. Pauline gave realistic expectations for what those trade-offs would look like, “I don't think there's such a thing as an equal year in terms of being able to have an equal amount of work time for each person in a given year. You have to talk about sets of years in terms of ebb and flow. I took the hit for about two years, [and now he is] .” Open communication as a couple encompassed many elements, but all revolved around honestly discussing what could happen and planning how the couple would manage it together.

Establish Independent and Long-Term Value

Participants emphasized the need for the second hires to establish independent and long-term value to the institution. In establishing independent value, Pauline emphasized that the second hire needed to differentiate themselves from their partner,

Strike out on your own as soon as possible. Don’t have offices near one another. Never sit together at meetings. First impressions matter, particularly for the
person who was the accommodation. That person needs to shine more brighter sooner so that people see them as power in their own right.

John also said of establishing independent value, “I would say for other people entering into this kind of thing, if they hope to stay, they need to make themselves indispensable in some sense.” Participants shared that by demonstrating value they eventually began to strengthen their case for longer term employment.

Tony shared from his perspective, partner hires needed to focus on their ideal position and work to establish enough value over time to achieve that role. He said:

You have to keep moving. So, even though I'm an assistant, it's good to have that vision of the next level, and ask "Okay, what do I need to be doing now that kind of makes me look like [the next position]?” Because if you don't have that vision about the next career step, you're just going to remain in your current one and become stagnant.

Lisa also suggested keeping the long-term vision for ideal positions, even when the current environment seemed inhospitable to helping partners progress to it. As the target hire, she described how she and her partner patiently worked for their ideal positions over several decades at the same institution, advising, “Things could change. The negative, the lack of support from the institution, or the lack of support from the department, or lack of support from the chair or the dean—nothing is permanent.” Thus, establishing independent and long-term value should be done upon being hired, but hires should also realize that the benefits of doing so may take time and intentional effort.

**Network and Diversify**

Partners also recommended networking and diversifying skills both before and after being hired. Networking could lead to new jobs being offered, and diversifying one’s skills can give institutions greater flexibility in being able to employ both partners. Kelly described how she and her husband had followed each other to different institutions over the course of 20 years: “What has worked for us has been diversification . . . I was able to apply to multiple different jobs because I was qualified in multiple different areas.” If partners know they want to be co-located, having diverse skills and being able to apply broadly is an asset.

Once a couple is hired, participants agreed that it was especially important for the second hire to continue to network across departments and to diversify their skills. This was recommended for two reasons: (1) as a strategy for finding a permanent position, and (2) to establish a network of support. Describing the value of networking as a second hire, Tony said:

I think that just helped increase my popularity, and once my popularity level was high enough, then I felt accepted and that "Hey, I'm needed here.” And so it's kind of like building your own value. You have to constantly prove you're valuable to your department . . . . [Then,] if I had enough popularity, that would also help me move up.

These relationships and collaborations especially helped participants feel less isolated and better able to overcome the stigma they felt as an accommodation.

Kelly said that she and her partner immersed themselves in campus culture and that also helped them adjust and be accepted by colleagues who were first resistant to her accommodation. She explained, “We fully bought into [campus rituals] and we went to football
games, and we involved our children in everything that we could that was acceptable on campus. We had staff members over to our house on a regular basis.” This immersion in campus culture and social networks helped signal that they were committed to the institution that hired them.

**Strategically Negotiate**

Partners also recommended that couples approach negotiations strategically, specifically, when to bring up the accommodation need—in the beginning to not waste time applying for jobs that will not accommodate, or waiting until the offer is made to ensure an unbiased evaluation during the hiring process. Most participants recommended the latter. There were some exceptions: if an institution sought you out for a position or if co-location is the reason for being on the job market, they believed the accommodation should be brought up in the beginning. Otherwise, wait for a verbal offer.

After an offer, participants recommended negotiating strategically. Jackie said, “I was intentional when I was negotiating with the dean. So, I knew I was making a really big ask for a spousal hire, so I didn't really negotiate on salary or course releases or anything like that.” Many shared the attitude that getting an accommodation should be the first thing asked for—all other sacrifices could be made up for once they were in the job.

Participants also recommended that the target hire be very active in advocating for the second partner. Shannon, who originally did not get the tenure-line she sought while partner hires after her did, said, “Just ask questions and advocate, don't assume. I think if we would have understood that it really would have been possible for them to create a line for me then we would have pushed a bit harder.” In other words, participants suggested that partners should push for the ideal positions for the second hire until it is clear that it is not possible.

Participants also suggested to negotiate as a couple so that the second hire has a voice and is able to feel involved in the process. As stated before, some accommodations ended up in jobs where they did not have their own contract and did not know the terms and expectations of the job. Participants also suggested that the second hire should not feel bound solely by what the first is able to arrange; they could be proactive in reaching out to department heads, sending out their CV, and letting people know they are looking for a job. The couple does not have to (and perhaps should not) trust that the university will be especially proactive in finding a position.

**RQ 3: What recommendations do partners have for improving institutional processes and policies for partner hiring?**

As a complement to our second research question, participants were asked to consider what steps institutions could take to optimize partner hiring. Participants showed an acute understanding of the complex situation institutions are in when they hire couples, and many of the participants even had experience with hiring as administrator at a departmental or college level. Some participants saw accommodations as gifts and knew the university did not owe them anything. However, they were also aware of the impermanent situation that couples and institutions are put in if both partners are not given permanent positions. As such, participants did not feel entitled to accommodations, but their experience helped them identify ways in which the process could be refined from the institutional side. Responses resulted in four main themes: support partner hiring, ensure institutional transparency, strengthen onboarding processes, and address administrator and colleague attitudes toward partner hires.
Support Partner Hiring

Participants thought universities could show more enthusiastic support for partner hiring and for offering continued support after being hired. Mary, who had served in administrative positions in addition to faculty roles, stated, “I really hope that institutions stop acting like this is some new weird thing . . . . This is a really big, pervasive problem. It’s not unusual. And that’s the biggest thing, is to stop acting like it’s unusual.” Like Mary, others saw partner hiring as an inevitable and growing need, an economic benefit for universities, and a core component of attracting and retaining talented staff and faculty. Jackie argued for the economic benefit of retaining faculty, “If I were to leave, you couldn't just plug in another assistant professor and have all that pick up where I left off. You do give that three years up, plus more startup money, plus more search costs.” Partners will come to an institution together but they will also leave together if the accommodation does not work out, amounting to a waste of resources for both the institution and the couple.

In order to better retain couples, participants suggested that institutions need a central office or designated support person to provide resources for those who had been accommodated. Support could include established procedures for hiring partners and continued support for finding a permanent position for second hires. John explained:

If your dean is just being super obstinate about [offering a permanent position] and is just refusing for no obvious reason, what do you do then if there’s not a centralized office? They have to do something to strengthen the communications on these issues and establish procedures of this kind of thing.

Offering these continued resources, participants believed, would help strengthen the university’s goal of retaining those they hired through accommodations and possibly prevent couples from having to go back on the job market when one partner’s job did not work out.

Lastly, participants widely agreed that they did not want an accommodation any more than departments wanted to provide them. Laila described that, after years of living away from her partner, “I just didn't want to be apart from my husband anymore . . . . But if you ask me, I still just want to stand out because of my own things, not because someone hired me because they hired my spouse.” Thus the key to university involvement is to help partners co-locate while still maintaining their own professional identity and contribute uniquely.

Transparency

Participants also wanted institutions to be transparent about what could and could not be done throughout the hiring process. They did not want institutions to promise more than they could deliver. They also suggested it would be helpful if universities demystified the process of when to bring up the accommodation need in the job search. Mary, who had significant administrative and hiring experience, said:

Institutions need to be much more upfront about . . . “if you have concerns about a spousal accommodation, here is what you can do, and we are willing to help you. We’re not going to promise that we’re going to give you two jobs, we’re not going to promise that we can do this or that, but we're recognizing that this is reality, and we're not freaked out about it.”

Participants also recommended that institutions have a clear and accessible policy as part of their transparency in hiring partners. Tiffany explained,
I think that the institutions have to have a policy. We came across some schools saying, "Well, we don't have a history of hiring couples." But it wasn't like an official policy that we could find anywhere. And that was really frustrating because it just felt like they were just outright discriminating against us, because they didn't like us rather than because they have a policy.

Many participants echoed similar thoughts, even those who had been in administrative positions and arranged accommodations for others. They felt that those who got accommodations and how they were arranged remained very mysterious, political, biased, and they wanted a more streamlined process that worked systematically and equally for each candidate.

**Strong Hiring and Onboarding Process**

Participants felt that a process that mimicked a traditional hiring process was the best for accommodating a partner. Kelly said of her experience being hired with her husband at various universities, “I always had to go through an interview. I always had to go through the search process in some shape or form and could have been told no. I always feel like I was hired of my own merits, and that's a point of pride for me.” Like Kelly, many participants believed a separate hiring process fostered better attitudes among colleagues and diminished the self-doubt they themselves felt from not being hired independently. Sherry, who was very positive about her accommodation experience, recounted how she was hired independently of her husband even though it was technically done through accommodation funding. She described:

I came and just kind of met with a bunch of people . . . I think that what happened was they sort of circulated my CV to different places on campus, and then people who were interested in meeting with me signed up on my schedule, so I met with those people. I had a background in professional development when I was a graduate student, so I met with people in [a professional development center on campus.] I had been teaching, so I met with people in [my field’s department] and then they were able to create a position for me that involved both.

In this case, she was treated as an individual, almost entirely separate from her husband’s hiring, and departments were given a chance to indicate interest in hiring her. This participant went on to describe a positive experience at her institution, even though she identified many of the challenges other participants did (such as not knowing the long-term plan).

Similarly, having a strong onboarding process was recommended. Some second hires watched as their partner got taken out to dinner, gave job talks, and had parties thrown to welcome them. Meanwhile, the second hire entered departments who were unaware they were coming. Kylie recommended:

Treat your spousal hires the same way that you would treat your other faculty when they get there. A happy hour, a welcome meeting. Have your HR person, your IT person there—they should know that those people are there . . . I would even go so far as to suggest if there's a way for the spousal hire to have a somewhat traditional hiring process so that they get to meet a whole bunch of people beforehand . . . Get them in front of not just the heads of the department but like actual other faculty members, because . . . that's a big part of a traditional
interview is meeting your colleagues. And, so, without that in place, I think you can feel pretty lost.

Participants believed—and some experienced—that the more their hire looked like a traditional hire, the better they and their colleagues would be able to adapt to the hire.

**Administrator and Colleague Attitudes**

Lastly, participants argued that institutions needed to help department and college administrators understand the value of partner hiring. Lexie said:

> The message from the top needs to be that these people add value to our campus and here's why, and if it's coming top down, then I think other people might be more likely to follow suit.

Several suggested that even using positive language like *opportunity hire* rather than *spousal hire* could shift attitudes.

Of the participants in our sample, those who ended up happy and successful in their positions were welcome by administrators and colleagues—they did not feel like they were being forced on anyone. Participants argued that administrators in the department and colleges should be actively trained to see partner hires as they would any other hire so that the idea of accommodations being “forced” on departments would be dispelled. From her experience hiring others, Mary discouraged departments from getting “oddly romantic” about the hire they could have had. She elaborated,

> I sometimes joke that people have read too many princess things when they were kids, even the boys, where they feel like there's just this one perfect person for that position.... So, I think people need to get over this "Oh, but we only hired them because blah, blah, blah." There's always a whole network of circumstances that surrounds every hire you make. They're all contingent on tons of things.

In her reasoning, there is no reason to single out a partner hire as more problematic than others because almost every hire incorporates elements of chance and several are results of pre-established relationships. If universities prioritize a welcoming attitude in administration, it signals a similar attitude to all employees, thus creating a more welcoming atmosphere for accommodations to contribute to the institution.

**Discussion and Directions for Future Research**

This study illuminated common barriers experienced by partner hires as well as recommendations for dual-career couples and institutions that could help mitigate these barriers. It should be noted, however, that advice from the participants in this study was often coupled with a lamentation that the best thing to do as an academic couple is to avoid a partner accommodation altogether. Their suggested avoidance makes clear that, perhaps with few exceptions, higher education institutions do not yet have appropriate processes and supports in place for partner hiring which aligns with the work of Rivera (2017). Further, findings indicate that many couples are not fully prepared for the challenges of seeking employment together and being hired together. Participants in this study and past research suggests that dual-academic couples will continue to permeate the market, and institutions need to thoughtfully
address the hiring of these couples (Schiebinger et al., 2008). As such, this study provides insight to empower couples to be better prepared to advocate for themselves throughout the process and acquisition of academic jobs.

In addition to what the results have already stated can be implemented into practice, there are a few nuanced results and observations from our data that deserve further discussion and exploration. First, it’s important to highlight the gendered elements of partner hiring that our study does not fully address. Overall, our formative findings were strikingly consistent between male and female hires, with greater variance in experience dependent on if they were first or second hires. For example, men and women alike struggled with their identities and lack of career opportunity when they were second hires, both reported feeling stigma from colleagues, etc. These findings strengthen the argument for institutions to improve their partner hiring processes, because all second hires are at risk of facing these barriers. Past literature, however, has demonstrated that gendered problems can permeate the hiring process (Rivera, 2017; Sallee, 2011; Tierney & Sallee, 2007), and our results also hinted at some gendered phenomena connected to organizational decisions and hire framing. Women, for example, seemed more likely to be given mixed positions and men seemed better able to frame being a second hire as a feminist act. As second hires, some of the women seemed to uniquely struggle with the gendered nature of being the “follower,” while some of the men seemed to uniquely struggle with what being a “follower” meant to their masculinity. Additionally, some of our participants voiced suspicion that men got accommodated at a higher rate than women and men were accepted into departments with less stigma.

Our findings were not able to confidently discuss these issues due to the sampling procedure and the questions themselves being outside the realm of our study. However, given the growing body of work illustrating the challenges women face as both the target and the second hire (Rivera, 2017; Zhang et al., 2019), we thus suggest that future researchers take on these nuanced and overt differences to increase our understanding in how different genders are treated in accommodations, how they respond to being a partner hire, and how policies can be shaped to mitigate these differences.

In addition to the influence of gender, we need an increased understanding of how various identities (i.e. race, sexuality, class, etc.) influence the accommodation process. For example, we were not able to explore how those in non-traditional or non-heterosexual relationships experience the hiring and socialization process as partner hires as all in our sample were in married, heterosexual relationships and identified as male or female. Understanding the organizational experiences of people with these and other varying identities would be important contributions to the literature for understanding the privileges and barriers that exist in the partner hire process. This is especially critical given secrecy and ambiguity of the hiring process, which could hide discriminatory hiring practices (Mumby, 2016; Schiebinger et al., 2008)

Third, while our study incorporated staff, administrators, and faculty positions – a unique sample compared to past research – it could not make any certain conclusion on how these positions affect the partner hire experience due to the limited sample size. It did illuminate, however, that research has neglected partner hiring processes outside of full-time tenure-track faculty positions by hinting that those who are hired into staff or student services positions may face unique barriers and burdens. For example, though only four participants in this study worked in student services, they told of more experiences with being hired into positions for which they had no previous experience or corresponding education, such as an academic or financial advisors. Margaret said of these accommodations, “Sometimes when you’re trying to fit a square peg in a round hole, I think you’re setting that person up for failure. And it’s not fair to the rest of the department that has to work and train that person to tiptoe around the fact that they [weren’t qualified].” Margaret also described being put in a
combination of positions so that she could be given a comparable salary to her previous position.

I went in for a job in advancement and it wasn't at the same salary as I was making. So we were negotiating salary and [the president] said, "Hold on a second. I'm calling the athletic director" because she said she saw that I had coaching experience. So she calls the athletic director, and said, "I have somebody here that's going to help coach." Like to be thrown over there was like, "What?" It was so awkward. So that was my part time gig that got my salary up to a certain level, which is kind of lame, because I still did all the work of both jobs. And I think that happens more than people are willing to admit.

These experiences were too few in our sample to include in our results but gave strong reason to widen the lens from just full-time faculty positions to include more contexts in which partner hiring is happening.

Finally, many of our findings reflect organizational barriers and organizational solutions; however, one barrier participants discussed was the heavy toll accommodations can take on relationships. This is an area in which organizations are limited to help, and yet such stresses will likely have organizational consequences in addition to consequences for the couples themselves. As such, we do recommend that future researchers investigate the topic of partner hiring from a relational perspective. Such an investigation could include how dual-career couples negotiate the complexities that come with being a target or second hire, which likely intersects with the gendered elements and influences mentioned earlier. Empowering couples to navigate and negotiate these labels and influences in their personal lives and relationships would likely extend benefits in their organizational lives and relationships as well.

In conclusion, the driving purpose of this study was to highlight the experiences of those who have been through a partner hiring experience. These voices have not been dominant in research and yet have the potential to inform more intentional developments of fair and thoughtful organizational policies and practices for all involved. This study did illuminate ways in which couples and institutions both can work to remedy the gaps that still exist in these processes. Through this contribution and our encouragements for continued future research, we trust that couples will be empowered to enter this landscape better prepared to navigate the challenges and that higher education institutions will be able better equipped to attract and retain talented and capable dual-career couples.

References


Creamer, E. G. (1999). Knowledge production, publication productivity, and intimate


**Author Note**

Elisabeth Day McNaughtan, PhD, teaches in the college of media and communication at Texas Tech University. Her courses focus on interpersonal, small group, and leadership communication. Her research centers on the experiences of women in leadership roles.

Jon L. McNaughtan, PhD, is an associate professor and department chair in the College of Education at Texas Tech University. His research seeks to enhance understanding of the roles and experiences of college leaders as they strive to empower and support employees and students. The majority of his scholarship is viewed through the Positive Organizational Scholarship lens. If you have any questions or are interested in discussing this study, please direct correspondence to jon.mcnaughtan@ttu.edu

Cameron C. Brown, PhD, is an associate professor in Couple, Marriage, and Family Therapy at Texas Tech University where he trains the next generation of clinicians, educators, and researchers. He focuses his research on systemic health and well-being where he
Elisabeth Day McNaughtan, Jon McNaughtan, Cameron C. Brown, Grant R. Jackson

specifically looks at the intersections of physical, mental, and social health. Lastly, he is a licensed marriage and family therapist at a local mental health clinic in Lubbock, Texas.

Grant R. Jackson, PhD, is an Assistant Professor of Higher Education at Texas Tech University. His research centers on higher education leadership, teaching, and how often abstract principles of diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging can be put into practice. Much of his research focuses on intergroup dialogue experiences that bring together people from different groups to effectively navigate difficult and controversial issues together.

Copyright 2024: Elisabeth Day McNaughtan, Jon McNaughtan, Cameron C. Brown, Grant R. Jackson, and Nova Southeastern University.

Article Citation