Antinepotism: An Obstacle for Career-bound Couples?

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How many people do you know that have met their prospective husband or wife in college? Just as frequently as this occurs, many prospective mates also meet while pursuing graduate studies. While love and school often mix, career and marriage often do not. While most professional women are aware of potential career problems which they face (particularly if they are married to professionals in the same field), acknowledgment of the problem is not the same as dealing with it.

This concern was expressed by female horticulturists at the meeting of the Women in Horticulture Ad Hoc Committee at the ASHS Award Meeting in 1981. Committee members suggested that this issue be addressed through a questionnaire which would be sent to all horticulture departments. The questionnaire was formulated by Laura W. Rice and the authors, together with input from other members of the Committee. Costs for mailing, printing, and duplicating were assumed by ASHS. To assure a maximum response rate, the questionnaire was limited to one page. It was mailed to 52 departments of horticulture and/or related branches of the plant sciences within the United States and Canada, of which 35 responded. Topics broached not only the total number of women faculty in each department, but also the issues of pregnancy, paternity, and infant-care leave. The following questions and responses are described and discussed.

Question 1: How many faculty (total) are in your department? How many are women? Of the 35 departments that responded to the questionnaire, the mean department size was between 23 and 24 faculty members, with the median between 21 and 22. The smallest department had 5 members, and the largest had 29. The average number of women per department was between one and 2. However, the 2 largest reporting departments had no female faculty.

Question 2: Does your university have formal policy regarding hiring of spouses? If so, can you briefly state the policy or attach a copy of the document which details this? If not, is there an informal policy within your department and would you briefly describe it as you see it? Thirty-four of 35 departments answered this question. Twenty-one of the respondents indicated that there was some restriction on the hiring of spouses such that one could not be in a supervisory position over his or her spouse, with decisions regarding hiring, salary, and promotions being included under the broad category of supervision. One university prohibited the hiring of spouses unconditionally. One university discouraged it, and 3 universities informally discouraged it. Seven universities were basically neutral in that they specified that marriage relationships should not be considered in hiring decisions. One university specifically prohibited departments from invoking antinepotism rules. One department reported that hiring of spouses was encouraged.

Question 3: How are new faculty members hired by your department (vote of faculty, committee recommendation, etc.)? Please describe. Fourteen departments had some sort of screening and/or search committee that recommended directly to a department head and/or higher administration. Two of these departments did solicit information from faculty and/or graduate students informally. One said it was mainly the department head’s choice. Fifteen of the 35 departments had search and/or screening committees, but faculty were involved directly in voting on selection of the candidate forwarded to their department head. One of these departments responded that this vote was a moot exercise, as the department head chose anyway. Two responded that it was all done according to affirmative action, but only one of these gave any details on the actual procedure. One said it was done without committee or votes—it was very informal; another said it was the decision of the department head or higher administration only.

Question 4: How would you describe the attitude of your fellow faculty members to-
ward the hiring of both spouses within a department? Eleven of the respondents had negative feelings concerning the hiring of spouses within a department. Five had mixed feelings; 3 had neutral feelings. Two had positive feelings, but with reservations. Two were indifferent and did not comment. Five hedged the issue. Seven were positive. Therefore, 16 out of 32 departments were less than neutral, tending toward a negative attitude, about hiring spouses in the same department. Only 7 departments were definitely positive.

Question 5: What are the potential problems of hiring a spouse within the same department? Within the University (different departments)?

Four of the 35 saw no potential problems in hiring a spouse within the same department. Another 4 saw no problems providing certain minor conditions were met; for example, one spouse should not supervise the other. One said that antinepotism codes prevented hiring. Another said that this problem has never occurred. The remaining 25 saw problems that included the following: collusion; personal matters causing disruptions; one getting promotion or tenure before the other; students preferring one spouse over the other; one spouse being a better teacher than the other, equitable resource allocation and pay increase; management problems for department heads (evaluations and supervision); equitable distribution of time and money; competition between spouses; neither spouse ever becoming department head; and the wife always being regarded in a support position rather than in a professional capacity. Regarding problems for a couple in the same university but in different departments, 32 of 35 saw absolutely no problems. However, 3 saw a few, which might include losing 2 people if they change jobs and possible interfamily strife if strife were to get tenure and the other not.

Question 6: Does any member of your department have a spouse who is employed in the university? In what department and what capacity? Of the 35 responding universities, 7 replied no. Of the 28 remaining, 6 respondents reported that spouses currently were or had been at one time employed in horticulture. Of these, 4 were faculty members and 2 were secretaries. Of the total 28 responding schools, 18 said that the other spouse had worked on the staff (technical, secretary or administrative aide), 12 said they were research associates or other personnel, and 11 said they were faculty or instructor level positions.

Question 7: What is the policy of your university regarding leave for pregnancy or infant care? Please describe or attach document. Of the 35 responding universities, 10 reported a maternity-leave policy. Details of different policies included the time awarded prior to delivery or as advised by a physician, and cited pregnancy as a temporary short-term disability with up to 6 months leave granted. Some were paid, but most were not. Three of the 35 had a flexible policy which indicated that something had to be negotiated. Four indicated that they were unsure or did not know if it was a maternity leave policy existed. Eighteen described pregnancy as being treated as any other illness (e.g., leave would be taken as sick leave or vacation time, with some suggesting leave without pay may be granted if sick leave were not enough). As for infant care, 7 of the responding institutions treated it as sick leave or annual leave, 7 said the leave is unpaid for up to one to 2 years, 3 had none, 3 were flexible, and 15 gave no specific mention to it in reference to any sort of infant-care policy.

Question 8: Are there any provisions made for the father to receive paternity or infant-care leave? If so, please describe or attach document. Twenty-three of the 35 had no provision (e.g., they used personal leave or vacation time). Seven said they could take some sort of leave, such as "family" leave, personal leave up to 90 days, sick leave only (2 respondents), unpaid leave (2 respondents), and a combination of leaves. Four said they were not aware of any policies. A few universities mentioned that there was no real policy and that each case could be considered separately.

Question 9: Your position in this department most closely relates to (circle all that apply): Professor, Research, Teaching, Extension, Department Head, Other. Of the 35 respondents, one did not identify him/herself. Twenty-one of 34 identified themselves as professors; 16 as department heads; 17 as engaged in research; 15 as engaged in teaching; and 5 as engaged in extension activities.

In summary, we can see that in horticulture—typically an agriculturally oriented field and historically male-dominated—there are one or 2 women professors per department. There is little or no consistent policy on maternity leave, infant care, and paternity leave to accommodate the emergence of women into this field. Whether a formal, consistent policy among universities is needed or desirable is unclear. In many cases (10 of 35), a maternity-leave policy of some sort exists. In addition, 3 of 35 have a flexible policy, which indicated some sort of case-by-case analysis and general positive attitudes. Eighteen of 35, however, viewed pregnancy as they would any other illness—a view which we contend. While the use of sick leave might be agreeable in the case of a disability due to the pregnancy, the use of vacation time to supplement leave, especially without pay, is highly questionable.

Only 14 of 35 responded that there was any sort of policy on infant care. Half of these said, again, that it should be taken as sick leave or annual leave. Of the remainder, 3 had flexible policies, which is to their credit; whereas 18 of the respondents either did not care to respond or had no policy for dealing with any sort of infant care. The question which follows naturally is whether day-care facilities are available to these employees. Even though this matter was not included on the questionnaire, the implication is that day-care facilities (at the universities) may not be readily available.

In 25 of the 35 cases, there were no provisions for the father to receive paternity leave or infant-care leave. A father must use his personal leave or vacation time. Only 7 of the 35 offered some sort of family leave or sick leave. Two of the 7 suggested some sort of unpaid leave. The universities which indicated that there was no real policy and that each case would be considered separately should be commended for their stance, providing there is truly a spirit of flexibility and understanding. As the number of women entering the work force increases and more husbands claim their responsibilities and interest in raising children (by requesting paternity leave), there will be increased pressure for maternity leave as well as for maternity leave. If future projections of a shortage of well-trained scientists do materialize, institutions or industries with attractive personnel policies will have an advantage in recruiting and hiring.

The subject of antinepotism itself, however, is diverse. Although there was no consistency in hiring among the universities, most (29 of 35) employed a search committee. The most surprising result on the subject of antinepotism was neither the 11 out of 35 negative feelings nor the only 7 out of 35 positive feelings toward the hiring of spouses in the same department, but rather the suggestion that an informal antinepotism policy exists. Despite an informal antinepotism policy, the倾向 for better or worse, people with similar interests often tend to gravitate toward each other. No matter how career-oriented or goal-oriented people are, there always will be some who fall in love with a person in the same (or very similar) field of interest. Currently, few schools promote the hiring of spouses in the same department. Given the tight economy, the question arises as to the feasibility of offering a single position to a married couple. This arrangement might allow a husband-wife team to split a teaching/research appointment. While this approach would be fought with problems, the university could get the most for its money. As members of the Women in Horticulture Working Group, we hope that department heads and administrators realize that the two-career family is, in many cases, not only an intellectual, but an economic, necessity. We hope that policies for issues which cannot be avoided—such as maternity leave, infant care/day care, and paternity leave—will be dealt with on a positive level, not ignored or left to chance.