

Conversations with the Experts

Dual-Earner Couples



Joy Pixley

Bio: Joy E. Pixley, winner of the 2009 Rosabeth Moss Kanter Award, is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Sociology, University of California, Irvine. She received her M.A. in Human Development and her Ph.D. in Sociology at Cornell University. Her research interests include career hierarchy in dual-earner couples, gender differences in occupational outcomes, the intersection of work and family roles, the transition to adulthood, and life course methods. Current projects on career hierarchy address the relationship between career prioritizing in major decisions and partners' outcomes from those decisions, measuring life course patterns of career hierarchy, long-term attainment consequences for partners who have secondary careers, and partners' disagreement about whose career has been favored. Other projects involve gender and race differences in partner age preferences; the relationship of life course patterns of work hours to current work and work-family outcomes; and country-level predictors of work-family spillover.

An Interview with Joy Pixley
by Judi Casey

Your article, *Life Course Patterns of Career-Prioritizing Decisions and Occupational Attainment in Dual-Earner Couples*, focuses on career-prioritizing decisions in married couples. Can you tell us what you mean by “career-prioritizing decisions”?

Career-prioritizing decisions are any decisions that affect both partners' jobs or schooling situations. In the current article, I focus on decisions about whether and where to move. I call these decisions “career-prioritizing” because couples must (consciously or not) either give more priority to one partner's career or give equal priority to the impact of the decision on both partners' careers.

How has the increasing labor force participation of married women affected these career-prioritizing decisions?

According to career hierarchy theory, there are two distinct effects. First, for purely economic reasons, when wives earn a substantial portion of the household income, couples' decisions are less likely to automatically favor the husband's career. Second, being more invested in their work and adopting more egalitarian attitudes, wives increasingly expect their careers to be treated with the same respect as their husbands' careers, even if they don't earn as much. So we should see more couples prioritizing their two careers equally for ideological reasons as well.

Can you describe the five patterns of career decision making that were found in these couples?

The easiest pattern to describe is when couples never face any major decisions that would affect both their careers, which isn't uncommon. Another pattern is “equal decisions,” where they face at least one major decision about moving, but any decision has approximately equal effects on each spouse's career. In the “husband moderate gains” pattern, couples make one or two decisions that are somewhat better for the

husband's career and no decisions favoring the wife's career. In contrast, the "husband large gains" pattern shows one or two decisions that are substantially better for the husband's career, often preceded by an early decision slightly more beneficial to the wife's career. Finally, in the "taking turns" pattern, couples make at least two decisions that alternate between favoring the wife's and favoring the husband's career.

You used a new method for analyzing data about the couple's career prioritizing decisions. Can you explain what you did differently and the benefits of this approach?

In this article, I introduce the interpolated curves approach (ICA) to analyzing life-course data. This method allows me to represent and compare patterns of events over time, incorporating both the timing of the events and a value associated with the event—in this case, career-prioritizing decisions, and the extent to which each decision was better for the husband's or the wife's career. Then I use cluster analysis to identify groups of couples whose patterns are similar to each other. Without this method, I would have to use summary measures, such as the number of decisions that were better for his career or for her career or the average for spouses' career gains over all decisions. When I compared these two approaches, the clusters created using ICA were better at predicting income than any of these summary measures, indicating that the pattern of decisions makes a difference.

What decision clusters increased occupational outcomes (or income) for the couple as a whole? For the husband? Wife?

There's no single pattern of decisions that is associated with higher income for both spouses. Income is highest for husbands in the "husband large gains" cluster and highest for wives in the "taking turns" cluster. In both cases, income for the other spouse is average. The highest household income is found in the "husband large gains" cluster, but this is due entirely to the very high average earnings for these men (mean of \$125,500).

How would you advise couples who are considering job changes and relocations?

One important finding is that decisions about whether and where to move, and the patterns of those decisions over time, still impact income earned 10 or even 20 years later. So, before couples make major decisions, I would advise them to talk very openly and honestly with each other about their long-term plans and expectations for their two careers.

Also, get as much information about the options as possible before making the decision. From some of these respondents' narratives, it's clear that things did not always work out the way they had hoped. This was especially common for women who didn't have a job lined up in the new location and just assumed they would find something good once they got the boxes unpacked and the kids settled in, which is a strategy I would definitely not recommend.

How might your research help employers or HR practitioners with talent management issues?

Research on career prioritizing reminds managers that workers' lives are often intricately linked with those of other workers, and decisions about their careers—especially those that involve moving—can be strongly influenced by the perceived effects on their partners' careers. Increasingly, this is true for men in dual-earner couples as well as for women, and I would hope that managers would treat the "trailing" partner issue just as seriously when that partner is female.

This study goes further by illustrating the variation in patterns of career prioritizing over time. Two of the decision pattern clusters ("taking turns" and "husband large gains") involve switching between decisions that favor the husband's career versus the wife's career. Therefore, managers should be careful not to make assumptions about workers' plans or future behavior based solely on their past decisions.

What further research questions arise from your study?

The study raises questions about how career-prioritizing patterns might vary across different groups, such as professional versus nonprofessional or urban versus suburban, which will require collecting new data on a much larger scale. In the meantime, I'm examining the decision-making process itself in more detail. In particular, I'm interested in whether the kinds of options that spouses consider vary when decisions are instigated by wives' careers versus by husbands' careers, and also in how spouses account for choosing one option over the others.

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