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Advancing Women In Leadership

## **When Women Educators are Commuters in Commuter Marriages**

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"How difficult for [women], then, to achieve a balance in the midst of these contradictory tensions, and yet how necessary for the proper functioning of our lives." (Anne Morrow Lindbergh, *Gifts from the Sea* in Exley, 1996).

She put down the telephone and shouted with glee! The dream job she had always wanted was hers. Just 40, with a new Ph.D. degree hanging on her wall, she was now officially a university professor. The new job was located 3 1/2 hours away from her home and she and her husband who owned a small business had already discussed how she would rent a small apartment and work there four days out of the week and drive back to their home for a long weekend each week. He had already committed to going to all of their oldest son's soccer games since, as a senior, this was his last year to play soccer before going away to university. Their middle schooler was oblivious to just about everything, but she knew her husband's job allowed him to be flexible enough to be around when he was needed. This was May 20.

On July 8, she arrived at the university, unpacked in the small, furnished apartment, and went to her new office. She had a great week teaching. On Friday, she drove home to be with her family. The second week of summer school, her middle school-aged son, rode back with her, because he had missed her, and stayed with her that week in her apartment. On the weekend, they drove the 3 1/2 hours

back home. She spent the weekend running errands. The refrigerator was empty, the washing had not been done, and the house was a mess. When she left the house to make the 3 1/2 hour drive to her new "dream" job for the last week of summer school, she was crying. Her husband, who had been so supportive, at first, was definitely not happy that things were not running very smoothly at home. She had not realized how stressed her oldest son was about starting his senior year, until his soccer coach had called her about some problems they were trying to work out. She finished that last week of summer school. On Friday, she turned the key of her new apartment in to the leasing office. She put the key to her university office in an envelope with a letter of resignation. She drove home and never returned. She just couldn't make it work.

This scenario is not fiction. It happened and continues to happen frequently in America today as women, caught in the double bind of needing to work for family finances and wanting to enter satisfying professional positions, are caught between family and career conflicts; they are prepared but unable to practice their profession. What can they do? Sometimes they wait, sometimes they do something else, and, increasingly, today, they commute. In order to understand the growing phenomenon of women who commute, this paper reviews some of the changing concepts regarding male and female roles within marriage and then explores what the literature says about career development of women and the impact of immobility. The purpose of this study is to explore the concept of commuting when women live away from home to work in another community for career purposes. Why do they do this? What kind of problems occur? What suggestions would these women give to others who might be contemplating such a move?

## **Marriage: Then and Now**

"Just don't give up trying to do what you really want to do." (Ella Fitzgerald in Eisen, 1995, 33).

Recently, a study of 17 Western nations, indicated that married persons reported a significantly higher level of happiness than those who were unmarried. Additionally, a good marriage appears to benefit children both financially and emotionally (Coontz, 2000). Until the early 1800s, most married couples worked together in farming or in small household businesses. At about this same time a wage-labor system supplanted widespread self-employment and more work began to be conducted in workplaces away from the farm and the home. Men began to work in these jobs and household work and child care became the domain of the wives. While poor women continued to work outside the home, other groups were likely to quit paid work after marriage (2000).

During the 1920s, an increasing number of office jobs in a much more urban economy drew many women into the work force. In the Great Depression of the 1930s and during World War II, women of all but the wealthiest families once again

began to work outside the home. After 1970, the fastest growing group of female workers were mothers of young children and by the 1990s, over 55% of working mothers went back to work before their child was even a year old (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1998). Today, in the 21st century, most marriages, even with children, have a husband and a wife who work outside the home. Nearly thirty years ago, Pleck (1977) reported that men did only about one-third of the work around the home as compared to a full-time working wife. Still, three decades later, women continue to be more responsible for most of the housework and childcare than men (Coontz, 2000).

Just as women's roles are changing by entering the work force, research on how marriage has changed focuses on the importance of the emotional side of marital relationships, and the importance of sharing that is necessary to nourish marriages (Sollie, 2000). The changing state of marriage is leading to an emerging type of marital relationship called peer marriage. In peer marriages husbands and wives share in all aspects of their lives. Consequently, in some marriages the roles of men and women are becoming increasingly more alike (2000). In fact, much of this research indicates that husbands who are accepting of their wives, influence within the marriage and who are able to remain "emotionally connected" have more stable marriages (p. 45). One of the influences of these types of marital relationships appears to be that of creating an environment that encourages women and men to seek satisfying careers. As more and more couples are willing to go the distance for "both love and career" literally, as well as figuratively, there is a growing number of couples who commute long distances to work (Anderson & Spruill, 1993; Carter, 1992; Gerstel & Gross, 1982).

## **Women's Career Development**

"It's very important to define success for yourself. If you really want to reach for the brass ring, just remember that there are sacrifices that go along." (Cathleen Black in Eisen, 1995, p. 184).

Research suggests that most women will work in jobs that are important to them outside the home at some time as adults (Miller, 1986). In fact, Miller (1984) found that 87% of women surveyed obtained feelings of personal accomplishments from their work, and 58% actually preferred working outside the home. Traditionally, males and females perceive career paths differently. Men consider work as a way to earn money and this influences their career decisions. Women, on the other hand, see work more in terms of personal satisfaction. Even though women plan careers, they continue to factor inequality into their futures by assuming they will move in and out of the workforce due to family responsibilities (Machung, 1989; Orenstein, 2000).

*Sequencing.* Family demands have had the greatest influence on women's career patterns by causing women to move in and out of the work force based on family needs. Jamieson (1995) refers to this as "sequencing" (p. 64). While some believe that education, family, and work can occur harmoniously in one's lifetime, others

believe that sequencing is harmful to careers, because women ultimately have less professional experience than men of the same age. For example, the years between age 25 and 35 are critical for lawyers to become partners in firms, for academics to earn tenure, and for other workers to learn skills that will result in high earnings. Even twenty years ago, this was also the time when women were most likely to have children and leave the work force (Thurow, 1984)

Prior to 1978, sequencing was often forced on many women. A National Educational Association study in 1930-31 found that 77% of districts surveyed would not hire married women and 63% dismissed female teachers if they got married. Further, as recently as 1974, the courts were considering school policies in some districts that required pregnant teachers to leave the classroom as early as the fourth month of pregnancy "to spare children the sight of pregnant women" (Jamieson, 1995, p. 66). In fact, even in the early 1980's, studies indicated that career advancement for women in professions often caused women to limit family size (Holt, 1981), while male university professionals, for example, were 18% more apt to have three or more children than were women at this same level (Ezrati, 1983). Still, in the 1990's, 50% of university level women remain childless (Hensel, 1991).

Another example of the sequencing effect of family on career moves was pointed out in a study by Lowery and Harris (2000) when prospective female superintendents were advised by other women to "make sure your children are out of elementary school" before applying for superintendency positions. Additionally, research suggests that a husband's support may exert a powerful effect on women who become superintendents, and, even, to a lesser degree, influencing if they succeed in it (Ramsey, 1997).

*Cultural stereotyping.* Twenty years ago, Miller (1984) wrote about culturally related stereotyping of appropriate occupations for women and their influence on women's career patterns. Women were influenced in career decisions by career role models. For example, daughters of working mothers tended to have a higher career orientation than daughters of mothers who did not work outside the home. The lack of women in some career fields contributed to the high number of women who still chose traditionally female occupations, such as teaching or nursing. Even Barnett (1971) observed in the 1970's that whereas men selected careers based on interests and aptitudes, women tended to make career decisions based on their own goals, the influence of significant others, and when no goals were present, they made choices at the last minute.

The struggle for women to gain leadership positions continues in the year 2000. For example, in education, there are more elementary school principals (39.7%) than high school principals (12.1%). Furthermore, only ten percent of female school administrators reached the level of school superintendent in the 1990's (Natale, 1992) a number which has only risen to thirteen percent by the late 1990's (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000). Yet, 65 percent of teachers are women (Shakeshaft, 1999). Clearly, culturally related stereotyping still occurs as "women are still battling the same myths they did years ago" (Grady, LaCost, Wendel, & Krumm, p.

*Traditional perceptions of women.* "The suspected witch was submerged in a pond. If she drowned, she deserved to; if she didn't she was a witch. In the first case, God was revealing her nature; in the second, the devil." (Spee, 1632).

The traditional public perception of femininity and competence or a woman's ability to be both "tough and caring" has also had an effect on women's career development (Jamieson, 1995, p. 120). Consequently, women frequently must have more credentials than male counterparts, be better prepared and have more knowledge (1995). Assertiveness is a valued male characteristic, but not in women (Morgan, 1993). There are concerns that women might not be able to do discipline, do the budget, or be tough enough (Tallerico, 2000). In fact, if a woman is unsuccessful in being a school superintendent, the school board is unlikely to hire another woman, as though it was her gender that contributed to her failure (Lowery & Harris, 2000). Today, however, successful women in leadership roles are changing many of these perceptions and the work force is beginning to view women in different roles as competent and able (Jamieson, 1995).

*Career gaps may be closing.* "It is never too late to be what you might have been." (George Eliot in Eisen, 1995, p. 18).

By 1991, both women and men were earning high school diplomas in equal numbers. At the same time, nearly the same numbers of men and women were finishing between one to three years of college. Also, the number of white women and men who had completed four or more years of college was becoming more equal. At the same time, the income gap that separated college educated men and women was also closing somewhat, from women making 35% less than men in 1986, to 31% in 1991 (Phelps & Winternitz, 1992). Perhaps, this suggests a trend that within the next few years, women will be more equally represented in a variety of roles that were previously held only by men. Psychologists assert that when there are less than 15 to 25% of women in management, women are at highest risk of being appraised in stereotypical fashion. Now, that more women are ready to move into upper management opportunities, perhaps the evaluative norms will change and managers will be viewed as managers, not as women managers (Jamieson, 1995).

Despite the indications that there are cracks in the glass ceiling, there are still many subtle reasons that prevent women from advancing in many professions (Watkins, Herrin, & McDonald, 1998). Historically, a major barrier for women in advancing career goals is that of geographic immobility (Ezrati, 1983; Johnston-Anumonwo, 1992; Ramsey, 1997). Rarely does a married woman have the opportunity of relocating for job advancement. While 90 percent of women reported that relocating was not even a consideration unless husbands found jobs, 75 percent of men would consider relocating if they found a better job regardless of whether or not their spouse found employment (Ezrati, 1983). In 1982, Gerstel and Gross reported that the husband's job was usually viewed as more important than

the wife's job. Even today, University of Connecticut geographer, Thomas Cooke (Smith, 2000) refers to the "trailing wife" phenomenon when he asserts that, "even when wives have higher-status jobs, the direction of migration is to help the husbands" (p. 1H). This is even more pronounced when children are involved, causing Ezrati (1983) to suggest even twenty years ago that society actually "discourages family change for the sake of a wife's career" (p. 107).

However, on the other hand even twenty years ago, a national study of university women administrators indicated that 78% would move more than 50 miles from their current location for job advancement purposes (Curby, 1980). Another study indicated that being married is not a barrier for the majority of university women, because only 44% are married, whereas 88% of male administrators are married (Moore, 1983). In fact, during the 70's, university women were more mobile than their male counterparts and this was prior to major affirmative action efforts of the government (Sagarra, 1988).

*Commuter Marriages.* "It is ridiculous to take on a man's job just in order to be able to say that a woman has done it - yah!, The only decent reason for tackling a job is that it is your job, and you want to do it." (Dorothy Sayers in Eisen, 1995, p. 20).

Some couples demonstrate that traditional concepts of male and female roles are changing within the family by making decisions, such as that of Tamar Schapiro and Dmitri Petrov. This young university couple, in describing their recent job search, pointed out that "neither one was willing to take even a terrific job if the other one had to suffer professionally as a result" (Leatherman, 2000, p. A14). Other couples, such as Theodore Bromund and, Shilpa Raval, reflect the inherent nature of sacrifice when career goals conflict with job locations. "What it,s probably going to come down to is one or both of us making a career sacrifice" (Wilson, 2000, p. A18).

However, as the rise of workplace demands (Carter, 1992) and marriage relationships become more equal (Sollie, 2000) a new phenomenon is occurring - commuter marriages. It is estimated today that anywhere from 600,000 to 1 million couples are living apart much of the work week and commuting to jobs in different cities (Carter, 1992; Maines, 1993). Dr. Alvin Poussaint of Harvard Medical School defined commuter marriages as "two people going back and forth rather frequently, maintaining relationships, seeing each other when they can, and staying in close telephone contact because they, re not living together in the same city" (Carter, 1992, p. 247). In fact, the typical commuter is well-educated, a professional, possibly in academics, a mean age of late thirties, and has been married for at least nine years. Only 40-50% have children (Anderson & Spruill, 1993).

*Why do people commute?* Certainly there are several reasons why married couples choose to live in different communities when they work. Many are forced to do so because of employment trends. The average worker today will probably change careers or employers, at least, four or five times over the span of a career. Sociologists feel that this will only increase the trend toward commuter marriages because relocation costs are very expensive, reaching \$15 billion in 1992 (Carter,

1992). Many corporations help a relocated employee's spouse find a job, but more and more, "trailing wives" are likely to have satisfying jobs and do not want to leave their jobs (Maines, 1993, p. 47). Thus, the opportunity to pursue satisfying careers and increased potential of realizing professional success, play a major role in couples making this decision. Commuting is just "a price they pay for satisfying careers" (p. 47).

*The good, the bad, the ugly of commuting.* The greatest benefit for wives in commuting is the opportunity for career mobility. This allows them to concentrate as fully on work as they need. Additionally, couples discovered an enhanced sense of competence regarding domestic duties that had previously been gender defined (Gerstel & Gross, 1982). However, these gains do not come without a price. One of the stresses of commuting mentioned by couples includes the issue of being alone. Couples who commute note that they miss just being together. Relationships with family and friends are sometimes altered due to cultural understandings of marriage in America and our "couple" society (1982). Stress also appears to focus around attempting to balance career and family life. Although, Barbara Bunker, State University New York, Buffalo, has researched the phenomenon of commuter marriages and found that couples who commute do not suffer from higher levels of stress than other married couples because commuters are well-educated professionals and they have fewer dependent children (Maines, 1993).

Mary and George Garcia, agreed that "as soon as one of them got a job [as superintendents], they would move together...once there, the other would begin a local job hunt" (Pardini, 2000). Despite this agreement, they were offered jobs on the same day that were 400 miles apart. Thus, they began several years of commuter marriage. Their five children were grown, so they bought a house in one location and rented an apartment in the other location. They purchased two of everything "and for nine years they took turns commuting on weekends" (p. 46). They had fun, but it was expensive and they are glad to be living and working in the same town today.

Brett McQuade and his wife, Katie, have been commuting for most of their four year marriage (Franklin & Ramage, 1999). They are well compensated, love their jobs and are committed to the marriage, but now that they are expecting their first baby, they are re-evaluating the decision to commute. Linda Stroh, a university professor, and her husband have been in a commuter marriage for five years. Stroh has found that "commuters are able to compartmentalize your work and family life" (p. 56). The Rasleys chose to commute because when George took a job in Virginia, his new job did not include health benefits. So, Nancy stayed in Florida with her teaching job. Two years into a commuting marriage, their daughter is still not at all interested in moving. George finds his job professionally satisfying, but he regrets missing special activities with his daughter (1999).

Spencer and Lela have three children and they have been married for 10 years. When Spencer was offered a promotion with a big raise, he accepted and moved several hours from their home. Not wanting to take the children out of school, Lela stayed behind. During this time she learned that she had "strengths that I never

gave myself credit for" (Carter, 1992). Waltina and Kevin have been in a commuter relationship for the past five years. Her job required that she travel 95% of the time. Kevin says that the idea of commuter marriages is a sign of the times and that just because individuals are not in the traditional right place at the right time, they still need to take advantage of economic and professional opportunities (1992).

Seifert (2000) described complications of a long-distance marriage when after twenty years of marriage he and his wife took jobs in different parts of the state. Among the difficulties they experienced: two housing costs, double bills for electricity and other utilities, dual bank accounts, two family doctors, and increased transportation costs as they traveled back and forth to visit one another. A strategy recommended to create a successful commuter marriage was the ability and willingness of the husband to "modify his male role by taking on some traditional female roles" (p. 216). However, after two years, this couple decided to search for positions where they would have their "lives back together" (p. 218).

## **The Study**

While the estimated number of commuter marriages ranges from 600,000 to 1 million, traditionally, it is the male who commutes. However, today businesses indicate that 8 to 10 per cent of their transfers are offered to women (Anderson & Spruill, 1993). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the idea of commuter marriages when women educators are the commuters and the effect this has on the lives of these women and their families.

*Population.* At university conferences and other professional meetings, women were identified who were commuters in a commuter marriage. They were invited to participate in this study and then surveys were mailed to them. Fifteen women who were successful in their career fields participated in this survey. Six were superintendents and nine were university professors. The respondents lived in different areas of the United State including Texas, California, Nebraska, Nevada, Massachusetts, and other states. Eleven of the respondents had been married at least 21 years. All fifteen held advanced degrees.

*Data collection.* A survey was designed to explore the perceptions of married women in education who were commuting. Survey questions asked why they chose to commute, the effect of commuting on their professional experiences and personal experiences. Additionally, participants were asked to share their advice for others who might choose to be involved in a commuter situation in the future. The questionnaire was designed by two professors working in different universities. Two other professors reviewed the survey and suggested revisions for better understanding and clarity of questions. Twelve of the fifteen respondents gave permission on their returned surveys for the researchers to contact them by telephone or e-mail for additional information if it was needed.

*Data analysis.* Responses were read by three university professors. Primary meanings were formulated from the open-ended statements of the respondents. These meanings were then organized into emerging themes. This focus on the



"subjects' points of view" allowed this phenomenological study to describe behaviors of this group from the group's point of view (Dooley, 2001, p. 251).

*Findings.* Because participants frequently responded with more than one answer percentages will not always equal 100%.

*What is/was the main reason you chose to live apart from your spouse/family?* Question one had a variety of different responses, including needing time to plan and the financial gain involved. However, eleven of the fifteen women (83%) indicated that it was the career opportunity available to them that caused them to be living and working apart from the family.

*In what ways did your spouse/family aid in the decision making process?* The second question was concerned with the decision making process. Answers fell into two categories: support (33%) and discussion (80%). Types of support that aided in the decision process were helping with finances, offering moral support, and sharing tasks. Overwhelmingly (12/15), most families discussed this possible move about whether or not the woman should begin a commuting job in great detail. Two women commented that after all the discussion, "my husband gave me permission to do this." One university professor commented, "Oh, I've had a well-planned career. I taught wherever my husband was in medical school, internship, and medical practice."

*What professional problems have/did you experience?* While there was no overwhelming agreement for the third question, it was interesting to note that four women indicated there had been no problems at all. Four other women commented on the isolation of living in another area without family. Other comments were that it was hard to work out of two offices, it was difficult to establish one's own identity by living in "just a work setting," and that it was difficult to make professional connections "especially with males, because I am an enigma to them." One commuting university professor described this by saying, "I'm just an oddity. In my small town, I'm frequently asked, Why don't you just teach here locally at the high school?"

*What personal problems have/did you experience?* When women commuters were asked to discuss personal problems that they experienced they focused on family issues and general inconveniences. Thirteen (87%) responses centered around the family, such as missing their spouse or children ("I suffer Mommy guilt") and being lonely. Comments were poignant as women found themselves in this non-traditional setting and tried to deal with sometimes conflicting feelings, "It makes the heart grow fonder *and more independent.*" One superintendent working on her doctorate was asked, "What are you going to do with it when you get it - the nearest university is nearly an hour's drive from here." Other comments reflected the general inconvenience of traveling back and forth, car problems, poor diet, forgetting to pack everything that was needed and the problems created from having to keep up two residences. Three women commented on the high cost of being a commuter which led one family „to sell the family home. In trying to address these problems all 15 respondents indicated that they made daily phone calls, purchased phone cards, learned how to use e-mail and "never forgot my cell

phone."

*What were the positive aspects of this situation?* Overwhelmingly, women identified professional issues as the most positive aspects of being a commuting wife. Fifteen responses resonated with professional goals and "desires" being met through this opportunity. Eight women mentioned the opportunity to "saturate" or "immerse" themselves during the week with "my work." Only two responses in this category mentioned family issues. One woman indicated that she grew closer with her husband during this time and another found it to have been a good transition for her daughter who would soon be going away to college.

*What suggestions would you give a person currently experiencing a commuter marriage, or someone considering this type of arrangement?* An interesting phenomenon occurred in this last question. Every suggestion focused in some way on the family. Responses given included:

Include all family members in the decision process.

Decide at the beginning if this is transitional or long term.

Include goals for the future of your family.

Be sure to have mutual trust because "if fidelity is in question, don't do it."

Recognize potential risks to your relationships.

Be sure to have your spouse's support

Make special time to be together; meet often; take long vacations.

Share tasks to reduce stress.

Establish clear boundaries at work and at home.

Recognize there will be added financial costs to your family. This was mentioned in 5 of the responses

Finally, six of the women gave one additional piece of advice to other women considering making a career change that would take them out of their home and place them working in another community and commuting to be with their families, "You can do it!!"

## **Discussion**

While this is not a large population from which to draw, the consistency of themes that emerged from this study indicates that when women educators are the commuters in commuter marriages the issues for the women are consistent with the literature. One can infer that many of these women were involved in marriages

that were moving toward the non-traditional "peer marriage" (Sollie, 2000) and had spouses who, in focusing on the importance of the emotional side of marital relationships, recognized the importance of women having satisfaction in their jobs and career opportunities. However, regardless of how forward-thinking a spouse might be, the conflict inherent in this decision was obvious. This was evidenced in the many responses that focused on family issues as they gave advice to others who might be considering this arrangement regarding trust, needing to communicate often, and becoming more independent. It was clear that for the women in this study, the husband still played a major role in whether or not a woman could do this, and further, if she did, how successful she would be.

Sequencing (Jamieson, 1995) also appeared to play a major role in the decisions these women made regarding their job commutes. While a limitation of the study was that it did not ask for the age of children still living at home, the general age of the women, 46 years or older, indicated that, in most cases, children were either grown, or at least out of elementary school. Several women commented about their high school age children. But, even then, there were references to "missing out on my children's games" and general guilt feelings of not being home and available for their children. For those women whose children were grown, this was a time when it was finally possible to seize a particular career opportunity.

There is a paucity of information regarding commuter marriages and how this effects both men and women. While this explorative study has provided some information about the effect on women educators, careers and marriages, it is just a beginning. When considering the woman in the scenario at the beginning of this paper, perhaps, her marriage was still too traditional, perhaps her children were just too young, perhaps she was too young. Obviously, the timing just was not right for her. We can only hope that, for her, there will be another chance for that career opportunity to come along and that when it does, she will have the freedom to accept it. The overwhelming responses in this study of career satisfaction, despite the risks involved, despite missing family members, and despite the inconveniences caused by constant travel, indicate that commuting to achieve job satisfaction might be worth the effort. One woman said, "This is the best job I've ever had. I love it!" The theme of having a great career opportunity and having the freedom to accept it resonated with depths of feeling that extended beyond job satisfaction into thankfulness, "I,m so grateful to my family for the chance to do this!" and excitement, "What a great way to continue my career!"

"Mama exhorted her children at every opportunity to 'jump at de sun". We might not land on the sun, but, at least, we would get off the ground" (Zora Neale Hurston in Eisen, 1995, p. 167). Commuter marriages are a way today for many professional women to do just that!

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