

Driving Force

How do male scientists balance lab life with home life?

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Some male scientists struggle with the demands of the job, limiting their time at home. (Photo: CDC/ Amanda Mills)

By interviewing male biologists and physicists from different career stages, Elaine Howard Ecklund and colleagues examined how these scientists balance time spent in the lab versus time spent on household and child-rearing tasks. The original study isn't available yet, but Scott Jaschik of Inside Higher Ed recounts some interesting [tidbits](#) from what was presented at the American Sociological Association annual meeting.

For example, the researchers found that male scientists could be grouped into four different categories: those pursuing autonomy (15% of the sample; childless), egalitarian partners (33%; seeking to share child care and household considerations equally with partner), neotraditional dual earners (22%; with working partners who also take responsibility for managing children and household), and traditional breadwinners (30%; had partners that do not work outside the home).

The in-depth interviews with these 74 male scientists at elite institutions provided some strong sound bites that highlight how the different groups think about work-life issues:

- An “egalitarian” partner’s sentiments sadly speak to the struggles highlighted in similar studies of female scientists with children: “I am not nearly as productive as I used to be.... And it’s hard because I used to work here till whenever I wanted to and then I’d go home and I could work at night; now I kind of get home, put the kids to bed.... No academic institution is particularly—that I know of—is particularly great for family.... The people that do best in academia, sadly, often are those who don’t have [the responsibility of] child care.”
- From a “neotraditional dual earner”: “I think that my timeline for taking and not taking jobs is not going to be as dependent on when I have kids. I think that’s going to be more dependent on my future wife because she hopes to not be working when the children are very, very young. That means that she wants to—there’s certain times in the career track when it’s better or worse to take time off.... So that’s her issue.”
- And there’s this shocking/not-so-shocking quote by a “traditional breadwinner”: When asked “Do you think that having children then is difficult to manage with being a scientist?” one physicist replied, “No, absolutely not. That’s why you have a wife.” Let’s hope he’s emeritus and on the way out (other breadwinners showed more awareness of the advantages that having a stay-at-home spouse had on their careers).

What may be most interesting, however, is the large group of neotraditional dual earners—many of whom were grad students according to the article. Although several of the male scientists in this group mentioned that their partners chose to take on the bulk of family responsibilities—the authors question the societal pressures at play here. How

many of the partners in this group are also academics, and how does this relate to the recent study that showed that [female scientists do more housework](#) (and family organizational tasks) than male scientists? Interestingly, the groupings in this study do not seem to include male scientists who also are primarily in charge of the household—were there none in this sample? And what about same-sex couples?

Will this study shed more light on an earlier study by Ecklund and colleagues, which found that [one quarter of male scientists had fewer children than they wanted](#)? Are these scientists predominantly from the “egalitarian” group or the “neotraditional dual earner” group, or a mix? Hopefully some of these questions will be answered in the paper or in follow-up studies.

It’s great to see a study examining how male scientists handle work-life issues. It really highlights [the range of family arrangements](#) and the possible downstream ramifications of these arrangements on a science career (i.e., a “traditional breadwinner” may have more time to spend writing papers and grants than an “egalitarian partner”). The more awareness we have of these issues, the better prepared we can be to improve work-life balance for all scientists and fight the [workaholic](#) nature of the profession.