



# Families and Work: Making it Work. Full Transcript of Directed Discussion on Family and Work Balance at Pacificchem Conference 2015, Honolulu, HI, USA

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The following document is the approximate transcript for a directed discussion on the topic of work and family balance. The audience contained mostly professionals in chemistry (academia and industry) but also science educators and magazine editors. The discussion was held at the Pacificchem Conference, 2015, in Honolulu, Hawai'i, USA. The discussion was preceded by a [7 minute slideshow](#) aimed at describing the genesis of the discussion and the aims of the discussion. The transcript represents important information from approximately 10 participants on trends relating to family demographics amongst scientists and how institutions are interacting with the changing demographics of their employees. The names of participants and institutions have been removed. The names of countries and states are revealed in this transcript. It is our hope that this transcript motivates communicating more anecdotal evidence in this area and gives rise to intense discussion concerning the topic(s).

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## NOTA BENE

*NB: Author **Matthew S. MacLennan** is abbreviated here as **MM**, author **Jennifer MacLachlan** is abbreviated here as **JM**, participant **Simon J. Coles** agreed to have his name displayed and is abbreviated here as **SJC**, and participant **Matthias Lein** agreed to be identified as present during the discussion. Any unidentified participants are labelled as "Participant" followed by a number which matches their chronological entry into the dialogue. Names of institutions and people mentioned in speech have been substituted by a general descriptive such as [\*institution\*] in italics.*

## BEGINNING OF TRANSCRIPT

**JM**

Does anyone have experience travelling with spouse, kids or significant others?

### Participant 1

I run a small business. I've always brought my children to work with me (they always come to conferences).

Really, for the last several years they haven't come to conferences because they're at this in-between age (they're 8 and 11 now) and I don't think we can get away with a romantic trip to Hawaii, but we brought them here because we thought it was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and it's once every five years, so that's why I have brought my kids with me.

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### Participant 2

Is this just limited to conference travel?

**MM**

No. Everything. Some of the words I displayed on **the slides are "career transition", "graduate school to first career"**, how do you manage? A lot of people move (i.e. relocate) big distances, sometimes with families. An interesting demographic that I've noticed is that, in my lab alone, there are four people who are married and two of us have children. Across the hallway, in a completely different lab, two post-docs have children. So, we are in the same hallway. I feel like this is a big demographic switch from what people generally expect. Yes...

### Participant 3

Well, I feel like (I'm not a chemist...so sorry for the intrusion). You sort of can't talk about this without talking about the "two-body problem" in science where you have two partners (not necessarily spouses) who are both scientists and professionals... I mean, to find the same job in the same place--that seems like an important topic.

**MM**

Does anyone have some experience with that?

### Participant 4

I do. Not necessarily as myself, because I actually met my wife at the institution I moved to when I moved from my PhD to my faculty position. But I've been on many search committees where we've evaluated obviously a lot of faculty and it is very much becoming a much more serious issue because you're thinking to yourself "Okay, I really like this person, but they've got this spouse..." that either they're in the same discipline area or maybe they're in biology etc, but a lot of times they're not: they're in some completely different discipline. How do you communicate to your colleagues in that other department that "Hey we've someone we really like here. Can you really like this one too, so we can get them?" It doesn't happen, obviously, so that is definitely a trend that has caused pain for us.

### Participant 5

So at [*company*], in publications, over the years that I've been there, I've begun to hire more and more PhD chemists, which might strike you as unusual for us, but when I first started at [*company*], we had maybe 10 or 12 journals and they were along traditional models it was the editorial offices in the field that controlled everything. But as we've gotten now into journals publishing more articles, journals needing a web presence, journals needing social media presence, the things that the managing editors do are a lot more intensive than they used to be. And so whereas in the early days, it was like maybe one PhD chemist could handle maybe 10 journals, now it's like one PhD chemist handles 2 or 3, and you have a lot of people around. But what we're finding is that more and more of those people are able to work remotely. So, in the 2 PhD "couple model", one person can be at an institution in Connecticut and their spouse can work for [*company*], but also be in Connecticut. So that kind of alleviates the problem a little bit. But, I think we're also seeing ... I mentioned in my talk: we're also having this [*program*],

and one of the more popular modules is "Alternate careers in....". So it's becoming harder and harder for graduate students and post-docs to actually find academic positions, whether or not there's another person involved in this "two-body problem". And so, the spouse or partner is not necessarily looking for an academic position in the same location. So I think that is maybe a way: a "virtual workspace" where you can find meaningful employment independent of location.

**MM**

That's a good example of an "institutional solution", you could say. Thank you.

**SJC**

There's quite a big assumption in the room and that is 'every family has two parents'. So, I'm a single parent and that generates an awful lot of logistical problems more than anything. Half the time I've got all the time to travel to Hawaii or around the world and the other half of the time I have none.

**MM**

Have you developed any sort of strategies that you would be comfortable sharing with us today? You are probably not the only single parent chemist either.

**SJC**

No, no I'm not. You do need support networks and money. And also childcare.

**Participant 7**

May I just say, because I am very much in the middle of this: I'm a post-doc with two young children--3 months and 2 years, and a wife who's ill, so I'm having to do a lot of work with her, but I have a very supportive institution and a very supportive boss who is really helping me work through a lot of this. One of the big benefits of doing research is that you don't have to work 9-5, you can work whenever and wherever and so my boss is really helping me trying to take advantage of that and not feel guilty if I'm not in the lab at 9 o'clock but I'm there different times and things like that. Then, also about the institution: My institution has a lot of things that are trying to be very practiced on how they schedule meetings. So, for example our lab meetings used to start at 8:30, but now they start at 9:30 so people can drop their kids off at childcare and there's not a mad rush. And it's generally not considered 'fair game' to organize late meetings because people have kids too. So, I think there's a lot of little things like that that can really help encourage good work/life balances.

**Participant 8**

I just think it's quite interesting. I think the key thing may be, out of that, is the socialization of the issues and being open and transparent about the fact that "yeah, I got kids and things can be difficult," and, to the extent, then, that maybe you have more senior people or people who are not personally affected by needing childcare, sometimes need people to bring the issue or "We're having a meeting. Is this a problem for anybody?" Partly because I think the problem often comes down to entitlement: Do people easily feel guilty? Not feeling guilty is the quickest way to feel able to do something. I guess the one really optimistic thing I can say is that I was in the session this morning and three of the presenters had their kids in the room while they were

talking, and that was kind of a 'first' in my experience, but it was nice.

**MM**

This was one of the main motivations for this session too, because I'm not the only one who is seeing more children, of a whole range of ages, at conferences and even in the P.I.'s office. So, I'm thinking, "Oh wow! Things are changing here, but how can we communicate this so that institutions look and say, "Oh! Things are changing. We'd maybe want to cater to some of this so that we can get good reviews or whatever (help employee's families...).

**SJC**

You're right. Most employers are pretty good at being flexible and accomodating in this. However, things change when you stop your pay stub and become faculty and you have to teach. Then, you have to battle with the timetabling system not to scheduled or a 9 am lecture or a 6, 7, 8 pm lecture because we're using all the hours of the day to teach because there are so many undergraduates. I'll mention also that in the UK we have got a thing called [*\*program\**] which is a gender equality program and nowadays, an institution isn't worth its merit if it doesn't if it doesn't have an award from the [*\*program\**] organization. They have kind of like three levels: bronze, silver and gold. Bronze is like "You're just about getting there", you're realizing that people have family commitments and all that kind of thing--all the way up to gold wher you're making life very easy for them and hinking about it in very fundamental, "infrastructure" kind of levels. You're changing the way the organization operates to accomodate that.

And you get 'beaten up' if you're not on the [*\*program\**] radars as an organization. It's done at a department level basically. So, the chemistry department has to show that it's got gender equality, that it's supporting families, that kind of stuff.

**MM**

And here's just an example of an interesting situation: I had a friend, he finished his masters in computaional biology, and during that, he was taking care of an elderly man. That obviously required a lot of his time and energy. So that's just anoter example of a, not unconventional, but just a different place where there are a lot of family needs and that takes a lot from you. And it wil affect your peformance on both sides.

**Participant 9**

Just a question. Maybe it's different in chemistry than it is in biology, but are people generally expected to move to a totally different institution between PhD and Post-doc and first job work.

(Many 'yes' from the audience)

... in the United States? I found that in biology, that in the UK, it was perfectly acceptable to get your PhD from an institution then go on and do a post-doc at that same institution then go on and get afaculty job at that same institution. Whereas in the United States, that, to me... I had never heard of people doing that and it was frowned upon and people would say, "You have to sort of show your dedication to scince by being willing to move in-between or 'go anywhere' for science and I was pleasantly surprised in the UK to see that it was considered normal to be able

to stay in the same place because of course you have other people that you are attached to. They aren't necessarily ready to move when you are ready to move. We need to get better about that.

**MM**

Just before I go to you, it's funny because at my institution, you hear the 'word on the street' that "You need to go to [*\*university\**], etc... before you even get considered at his school." But then you look at the profs at the school and not all of them have gone there either. So, there's a dissonance there, which is interesting.

**Participant 10**

This is a response to what you just said from the UK perspective, not my own perspective, but of someone I know who is an early career researcher and it's interesting you mumbled "*\*university\**" under your breath because it may depend on the institution. This is someone who's been through [*\*another university\**], passionate about animal behaviour, psychology, and all that sort of thing, really struggling to get taken seriously for a Fellowship in [*\*institution\**]. They've settled down, married et cetera, because there's a feeling you should "go away and come back" because you're not worthy to progress unless you've been out to see the world. So, it varies possibly with the institution.

**Participant 11**

I wouldn't consider it as "worthy" or necessary in order to do that, I'd consider it a more "incestuous" relationship. You're stuck in the same mindset with the same people over and over again and I don't think that's necessarily healthy for a scientific progress. That being said, I certainly understand the complications associated with raising a family in those conditions. I just don't believe it's a mandate...that you 'force' it on people.

**MM**

Do you think social media could be a proxy for that 'incestuous' sort of thing?

**Participant 11**

No, it's intrinsic. You have an apartment that has, let's say, 20 or 30 people and you have how many that do the sort of thing that you do? maybe a couple. I mean, you are going to be interacting with them so much that you adopt their mindset, just like you do with your spouse, since we're on the topic here. So, you want to get exposed, you want to leave-and I think that's one of the detrimental aspects associated with European science, in general, because, for one reason or another, they do stay very localized. They just maintain, not necessarily 'clones', but they've replicated all their own concepts they don't need to move and get away..... and that is obviously very ... to the family issue. ...it's not an evil push.

**END OF TRANSCRIPT**

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