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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

My Mentors and their Influences on My Career

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History and Background

Can you tell us a little about how you were introduced to behavior analysis and what motivated you at the time to pursue it as a career?

This article is part of a special section in *The Behavior Analyst* titled "Prominent Women in Behavior Analysis." Interviews were conducted by either Melissa R. Nosik or Laura L. Grow.

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Fig. 1 Linda LeBlanc

As an undergraduate Psychology student, I enrolled in a practicum class working with children with intellectual disabilities and autism. I was lucky that Louisiana State University (LSU) has a very behavioral Psychology department and offered relevant behavioral coursework for undergraduate students. I later became involved in research during my undergraduate work. My interest in behavior analysis was really as a tool for improving the lives of those with disabilities and the world view seemed to fit very well with my interests and scientific viewpoint. My view of my career has always been that of a clinical psychologist who specialized in disabilities across the lifespan.

You attended graduate school at Louisiana State University for your doctoral training, can you take a moment to describe the graduate program (e.g., department, number of students, dynamics, coursework, advisement, etc.)?

My program was an APA approved PhD program in clinical psychology. There were three tracks – adult, child, and medical/neuropsychology. I specialized in child psychology but did some portion of my training in each of the three areas. It was one of the few behavioral child clinical psychology programs in the country along with those at Kansas, SUNY Binghamton, and WMU where I later taught. There were about 10–12 students in each cohort. The clinical program was behavioral, but the overall department included a mix of many theoretical orientations. There was a cognitive psychology program, a developmental psychology program, a social psychology program, and a school psychology program which was also very behavioral. My curriculum included everything from psychotherapy to psychometrics and advanced statistics plus all of the behavioral assessment and treatment courses. My training was much more eclectic than most people who go to behavior analysis programs where the curriculum is exclusively behavioral theory and application. The majority of my exposure to behavior analysis came from my research efforts, my behavior therapy courses, and my school psychology courses.

At Louisiana State University, who was your major professor and how did this relationship influence you?

Johnny Matson was my major professor. Johnny was very influential at a national level during the de-institutionalization years in many of the efforts to transition individuals served as developmental facilities to community based programs. He was a strong advocate for the right to effective treatment and the importance of identifying

and treating mental health issues in those with intellectual disabilities. His background, efforts, and mentorship had a huge influence on my values (e.g., science, a behavioral approach, a love of data) and my commitment to working with those with intellectual disabilities and advocating for their rights. He definitely anchored my efforts as part of important social impact that could occur in the lives of vulnerable individuals. Johnny also was a journal editor and gave me many opportunities to review papers and books early in my career

All of these activities contributed to my appreciation for scientific research, the context and history of intellectual disabilities and behavioral services, and the leaders in our field who brought about big change. Johnny was also the primary reason that I became a professor. I had a terrible fear of public speaking which led me to think that I would not enjoy being a professor in spite of the fact that I loved research. Johnny recognized that I could potentially have a career as a professor and he took action to help me overcome my fears. He explained that the best way to overcome my fear was to teach frequently and habituate to the experience. He assigned me to teach full time in my last year of graduate school and he was absolutely right! I soon came to love the experience.

Were there any other professors in graduate school that strongly influenced you?

Dr. Timothy Vollmer also had a strong influence on me and created many opportunities for me as well. Dr. Matson told me one day that the School Psychology program had hired a great new professor that was going to be a really successful researcher (i.e., Dr. Vollmer). He indicated that I should volunteer extra time to do research with him and that I should learn all that I could from him. I approached Tim soon after he arrived at LSU and offered to work on any projects that were available to me. I was serving consumers with severe problem behavior that I thought might benefit from his research projects and we began to collaborate. Tim had expertise in severe problem behavior and research methodology. I was fortunate to work with him when he had few other students so I received many direct training opportunities where we sat side-by-side collecting data, analyzing progress, and taking turns working directly with clients during sessions. Dr. Mary Lou Kelley also had a great influence on me during graduate school. She was the only female professor in my graduate program at that time. She had three young children, was a productive researcher, a great teacher and had an independent clinical practice. She was juggling all of the balls successfully and with a smile. She was a Kansas and West Virginia (WVU) graduate who taught me how to appreciate family context and the critical impact that this context has on children and their families. She taught me about the importance of the environment on the evolution or resolution of all forms of behavior problems and psychopathology in children and family systems.

Early in your career, who were your primary leadership role models in the field?

My female role models were Dr. Cathleen Piazza, Dr. Judy Favell, and Dr. Alyce Dickinson. Cathleen was my internship supervisor at the Kennedy Krieger Institute. She taught me so much and was such a great role model of a supervisor and productive researcher. One of the most influential things that I recall her saying to me was that clinical services and research should not be considered separate things. All of our clinical services are important enough to warrant careful scientific examination to be certain that our efforts lead to good effects. I have definitely tried to follow that good advice. Dr. Judy Favell was definitely a role model, though I never met her or worked directly with her until we were both on the Board of Directors of the Association of

Professional Behavior Analysts. Early on I was aware of the powerfully effective work that she was doing in public policy, which is an important responsibility for all leaders in our field. I have always admired her values and knowledge, her presentation style, and the marvelous way that she interacts socially with people. She can turn a difficult situation into a very positive interaction very quickly! Dr. Alyce Dickinson also has always been amazing to me. She was the ONLY female full professor at Western Michigan University when I arrived there. She was successful in academic and business environments that were almost entirely male dominated and she provided great advice to me about how I might handle those kinds of situations.

Describe your first job in behavior analysis after graduate school.

I had to complete an internship as part of my degree and I stayed for a post-doctoral fellowship at the Kennedy Krieger Institute in Baltimore. That probably doesn't count as a first job since I was still in training at the time. My first non-trainee position was as a visiting assistant professor position at Claremont McKenna College, a small private undergraduate college in Claremont, California. I taught behavioral psychology courses to undergraduate students and ran an autism clinic while Professor Marjorie Charlop was on sabbatical for the year. I also began consulting with a local agency that served adults with intellectual disabilities. They were struggling to identify dementia in their older consumers and I was one of the few professionals who had a strong interest and some expertise in this area. These jobs provided great opportunities for me to learn about supervision, teaching, and consulting.

What did you learn as a result of going on the job market for the first time after graduate school?

I learned a lot about how to give a job talk and present yourself effectively to others who might or might not share your theoretical orientation. Because I took a 1-year visiting assistant professor position as my first job, I was right back on the job market having interviews the next year. This built some fluency and experience in interviewing situations that has allowed me to coach and support others on this skill later in my career. Having this experience has really informed my own training and advisement of students who wanted to pursue academic careers. As a mentor, I provided opportunities to practice job talks with feedback well in advance of an interview so that the student can be as comfortable and successful as possible on their interviews.

Within your history you have spent many years training behavior analysts in academic roles and currently in a clinical role training strong scientist/practitioners. Can you tell us the story of that path through your career?

When I was finishing my post-doctoral fellowship, I found that I really loved the clinical services arena. I was not at all sure that I wanted to be a professor, unless I could also provide clinical services as well. I had always viewed myself as becoming a practicing clinical psychologist and applied researcher. However, I thought it might be fun to try teaching if the opportunity came along and I valued the potential to create impact at a larger scale by teaching others how to do what I could do. I knew that if I didn't try teaching first, the opportunities would likely not present themselves later. I actually had to decide between a Clinical Director position on the east coast and the academic position on the west coast. I gave teaching a try and really liked enjoyed the experience as long as I could simultaneously oversee clinical services. In all of my positions, I have created opportunities to directly provide and manage clinical services

– sometimes as a training experience for my students, sometimes as a community outreach contract. That allowed me to have the best of both worlds while I was in academia. After many rewarding years as a professor, I had the opportunity to join a human services agency where I could mentor hundreds of people and oversee the services for well over a thousand! That scale of impact was very appealing to me so I joined Trumpet and have loved the new opportunities, new challenges, and direct connections with families.

Advice and Guidance

Describe your primary approach to managing people (e.g., providing feedback, problem solving).

I am a strong proponent of copious amounts of praise and direct, supportive feedback. If you are constantly telling people what they do well and you can phrase the need for change as an opportunity to see them do even better, then people generally appreciate and value feedback. I tend to take a structured approach to managing people: we should all make the effort to be organized, use each other's time well, and make expectations clear with sufficient supports to ensure that people can meet those expectations. I also prefer to set the bar high and reinforce approximations to that desired performance level while fading prompts. For example, if you need to write a program to teach a child a skill, I would want every critical component of that program present and well-constructed. For a new student or clinician, I might help them write most of the program so that they have the experience of seeing and helping to produce a final product of great quality. Later opportunities will involve less of my help and more independence, hopefully with the same quality of product resulting from the effort.

What advice did your mentor give that still influences you today?

Johnny used to encourage me to stop and plan rather than "just do." He made it clear that he thought I could be successful in lots of endeavors, but that I would be happiest and most impactful in the field if I took the time to think about the career and path that I wanted and then planned my activities to directly move me down the path to success. He suggested that I should be structured and systematic about the opportunities I pursued. It was important for me to hear that because I was a young student and could be impulsive. I started graduate school at age 20 and finished my Ph.D and was a professor by age 26, so I likely would not have made such well-reasoned choices without his council. Also, Cathleen Piazza used to tell me that clinical work and research, for those of us that are applied researchers, should be fully integrated efforts. You should always be thinking about experimental design in your clinical work because we always want to make sure our interventions are working and worth the effort that is being devoted to them. I have tried to share both of these pieces of good advice with my students over the years. Now they will know the original sources of the wisdom!

Of all of the roles you have served in our field, what are some of the activities you have valued the most?

I really valued the opportunity to be an associate editor and reviewer for multiple journals. It was really a great opportunity for me to build fluency in research skills. Many professionals conduct a study for their thesis or dissertation and then never again

– usually because they did not reach a level of fluency with their research efforts. Collaborating with other people is one way to build this repertoire because each paper or project becomes another exemplar to learn about asking a research question, using an experimental design, and writing effectively about your efforts. Reviewing others efforts in the editorial process is another great way to see how other researchers do things such as framing the question, methods, experimental design. Being a reviewer also can teach you how to provide direct feedback in the nicest way possible, because you are handling manuscripts that are very personal to people. My first review for JABA happened because Dr. Wayne Fisher was the discussant for the very first presentation that I gave at a conference. I was so nervous that I thought I might literally be sick, but Wayne was so nice and positive in his comments. After my presentation, Wayne asked if I would be so kind as to consider being a guest reviewer for him if he mailed me a manuscript. As if I would be doing him a favor instead of what was clearly the reverse! I remember how he phrased that and when I ask someone to do a review for me, I try to remember to approach it as a valued favor that they might do for me rather than just another thing to scratch off of the task list. I have also really valued the role of teacher and mentor. As much as I was afraid of public speaking at first, Johnny was right and conquering that fear allowed me to realize that I really do love teaching. I love thinking about how to craft a training experience that really prepares a person to succeed in their chosen career after they graduate, whether that career is in the academy or in human services. Hopefully there will be many more useful roles for me to serve in our field.

What advice can you offer to people considering becoming a student in a behavior analysis program on choosing training programs and advisors?

This is general advice, for future students as well as those graduating and choosing a job. It is important to work with someone that you like and who clearly has your best interests at heart. It doesn't really matter if it is a male or female mentor or boss, but that person has to care as much or more about what they can do to help you meet your goals than about what you are going to do to help them meet theirs. Sometimes professors admit students because the student can help them advance their already existing research agenda rather than approaching the efforts collaboratively. If you choose such a professor, it is important to make sure your goals are very well aligned with what that person's goals because your experience is already preset when you start.

Is it important to have some experience with a same gender role model?

Of course I think it is important to observe, reflect and emulate the role models of your own gender particularly on things where gender matters. However, those role models don't have to be people you interact with everyday. It could be someone in the field (e.g., Judy Favell), another professor in your graduate program (e.g., Mary Lou Kelley), or someone more senior in your applied setting. I would focus less on the fact that the role model has to be the same gender and more on the fact that the role model has to be a great human being that you can readily admire.

What are some leadership characteristics that have been most valuable to you?

Over time I have become a more direct leader. That is, I have become more comfortable and willing to address issues with people that I supervise. People have learning histories with feedback that are not always positive and I definitely had that same history. This can lead to people being reluctant to give feedback or approaching feedback very indirectly. This can mean that the supervisee misses the point of the

feedback or has no specific plan for what needs to change and how they would make that change. As a new supervisor, providing feedback was initially somewhat aversive and I probably vacillated between being too indirect and subtle with feedback and too direct and annoyed while giving feedback. The most important leadership skill is being able to provide direct feedback to people in a way that conveys how much you value them and their success. A second important leadership skill is seeking feedback for your own performance so that you can more clearly recognize the impact that you have on others. You also have to take the feedback that others provide as pertinent to your behavior rather than your personal value. That is, the onus is on the leader to reflect on their relationships, seek and use feedback, and value the environment that you create for other people on a daily basis.

Can you speak to any barriers that you faced and how you dealt with them?

Well that definitely can be an issue in academic settings, although plenty of other issues can arise in social environments or in non-academic situations. Being effective at your primary duties and responsibilities can be a buffer against certain challenges. For example, evidence that you teach well helps to balance out the more negative ratings and experiences that women have tend to have compared to their male teacher counterparts. But difficult situations can arise when you least expect them. I remember teaching an upper level undergraduate class at Western Michigan University. One student was doing relatively poorly in my class and had spotty attendance. One day he received a low grade on a test in class and stormed out of the room, flinging the door open so hard that the knob went through the drywall on the other side. He was a big guy and I definitely planned what I would say if he returned at the end of class if I were alone in the room. All of my colleagues were supportive, especially Alyce Dickinson who gave me great advice for this situation and others. I have also encountered situations in which men interacted inappropriately with younger females in our field. I think it is really important to speak up about these situations if they are going to impact your students or colleagues or you directly. There are some relatively prolific behavior analysts that behave inappropriately towards female students and young professionals at conferences. When I see these situations occur, I address it directly and immediately. I choose to take this role and am not afraid that my career will suffer for my actions, but those younger woman may fear reprisal if they speak up on their own behalf. It is important to not let everything little thing get to you, but pick your battles and be willing to fight the ones that matter for yourself and other women. Now that I am in the private sector as an executive, I am often the only woman in the room during board meetings or other executive level social functions. I haven't found that to be a problem as long as I am willing to speak up when I have something useful to say. I think as long as you are paying attention to the outcomes you produce, it doesn't really matter the gender of the people that are having the working relationship.

In this time of growth in behavior analysis, what advice do you give to behavior analysts of the future?

Our field is growing very rapidly and there is a huge supply/demand imbalance in applied settings. There are so many more consumers who need us than we have the capacity to serve. We have to be careful because this could lead to pressure to produce more students more quickly. If students are rushed to complete their degree and get into the workforce quickly, they may not get the experiences that they need to succeed in that workforce. It can also lead to new higher education programs that may or may not produce the same quality of graduate as those that have been produced in the past.

When inexperienced or under qualified people are hired into situations without substantial ongoing supervision and professional development, those consumers who need our help suffer. I also think that we have to find ways to continue to communicate to our new young professional the values that go with our field. That is, we take pride in producing meaningful change in the lives of people with disabilities and we have a long and important history of doing so. We have to tell younger professionals every day about the important events and people in the history of our field to create appreciation for those amazing leaders who preceded us in different times. People like Johnny Matson, Judy Favell, Mike Cataldo, and Richard Foxx actively crafted our field and they did so due to a mission and vision about the future of the field. It is scary to think that we might lose that history, impact, and opportunity for big change. My advice is to know the story, tell the story and influence people to strive to do "good" in the world!

Can you share a story about a time in your career that you made a mistake and how you changed your approach in the future?

My mistakes have been so numerous that I can't possibly keep track of them all. I make them every day and will surely continue to do so. The critical thing is to recognize the mistake as quickly as you can, apologize sincerely and immediately to those who suffer ill effects, and figure out what to do differently in the future. Figuring out what to do differently in the future generally arises from reflection on what pieces of information failed to control your response previously. Of course it helps to start off by doing a careful analysis and problem solving exercise before you respond to a situation so that you limit the number and scope of your mistakes.

What advice do you have for female students or young professionals who are planning to have children? Is this advice different when given to men? Please share your experience or thoughts on this topic.

My advice would be to a) plan ahead as much as possible and b) create effective stimulus control so that you can enjoy both roles and responsibilities. My advice for women is only different for women than for men because a higher proportion of professional women are likely to be in two career families and because of the possible physical complications of childbirth for women. The physical and emotional impact of pregnancy, childbirth, and the first 6 months of a child's life are difficult to comprehend until you actually experience them (i.e., amazingly elating and amazingly difficult). People often plan on everything going really well (e.g., work until a few days before childbirth, baby and mother have no complications, take 8 weeks off, have all of your energy and cognitive faculties fully intact when you go back to work) and then experience stress and disappointment when they are "unexpectedly" fatigued, emotional, or have to take additional time off due to emergencies, illness or complications. The old rule of thumb "hope for the best but PLAN for the worst" is absolutely the way to go for this particular life event and for ongoing parenting. It is important to make an honest evaluation of your expect with your parenting partner if you are a dual career couple. Being part of a dual career couple means that my husband and I have to share almost all parenting duties so that we can each be successful with our daughter when the other is unavailable and each maintain success in our careers. You also have to actively program for stimulus control to facilitate your greatest enjoyment of each role. This may mean turning off the email when you are able to be home with your family or only working on projects after your children are asleep. It also means that you have to be organized and efficient at work to get as much done as possible during the hours that

you are devoting to your job so that you don't bring work stress home with you. When that stimulus control gets weakened and the roles interfere with each other, unhappiness and stress result. The important thing is to recognize your own role in purposefully creating time for enjoyment of each role.

Are there any other topics that you could elaborate on that specifically pertain to your mentorship practices with female professionals?

Men may be more likely to actively seek out leadership training and resources than women. I try to actively create opportunities to talk about leadership by running a weekly leadership mentoring group in my company. We explicitly focus on effective strategies for leadership and the importance of becoming a mentor to others.

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