

A Career in Behavior Analysis: Notes from the Journey

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Judith E. Favell received her bachelor's degree in psychology from Illinois Wesleyan University in 1966, and earned her Ph.D. in developmental and child psychology from the University of Kansas in 1970. Throughout her career as a clinician, researcher, teacher, lecturer, and administrator, she has focused on the understanding and treatment of serious behavior disorders, such as self-injurious and aggressive behavior in individuals with autism and other intellectual and developmental disabilities. Her work has encompassed not only clinical domains, but also organizational, regulatory, legal, and policy issues, through testifying, chairing national task forces, serving as an expert witness, and writing guidelines and policies governing treatment in behavior analysis. Dr. Favell has authored numerous articles, monographs, chapters, and books; edited a leading journal and several newsletters; and served on the editorial boards of many others. She has presented extensively both nationally and internationally on a wide variety of topics related to serving individuals with intellectual, developmental, and emotional challenges. Her offices have included President of the Association for Behavior Analysis International (ABAI), President of the American Psychological Association's Division on Developmental Disabilities, and President of the Behavior Analysis Certification Board.

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?

I was an undergraduate at Illinois Wesleyan University in Bloomington, and explored a variety of majors, sifting through the possibilities of trying to understand and effect

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social change, until I arrived at the psychology department. The psychology department, with Roger Ulrich, John Mabry, and Tom Stacknick, was very well regarded but was controversial because it taught “radical behaviorism.” I enrolled in a class in operant conditioning and behavior analysis, which was heavily focused on basic principles and research and utilized lab animals in demonstration of these. I was mesmerized, awe struck. As I applied the principles with those animals their behavior was so lawful and predictable, and the effects seen with methods such as positive reinforcement was so formidable, I knew I was witnessing my version of “creation.” That was the epiphany, and I never looked back. Operant conditioning and behavior analysis were the means we would use to solve some of the social issues that I was so interested in, and importantly to do so in a scientifically based manner. Through the decades that have followed, those basic revelations and convictions have never dimmed.

You Attended Graduate School at the University of Kansas (KU) for Your Doctoral Training, Can You Take a Moment to Describe the Graduate Program (e.g., Department, Number of Students, Dynamics, Coursework, Advisement, etc.)?

At KU, I was enrolled in the Human Development and Family Life (HDFL) Department which was derived from a home economics background but was transformed into a scientifically based behavioral program. This transformation occurred under the leadership of Francis Horowitz, a singular visionary and administrator. Dr. Horowitz hired Donald Baer, Montrose Wolf, Todd Risley, James Sherman, and Barbara Etzel into the faculty of HDFL and those individuals formed the heart of the operant conditioning and behavior analysis program. When I was a student, this department was just beginning, a small program of perhaps 15 to 20 students, which included both basic research as well as applied behavior analytic research in a broad range of learning labs. The history of the HDFL Department was recently celebrated at its fiftieth Anniversary which will yield authoritative accounts of its development and impact.



Judy Favell

For purposes of this discussion, a very salient feature of the HDFL Department from my perspective was the close interactions of the faculty and students. We worked and learned side by side with our mentors. Discussions (often as lively as they were enlightened) occurred well beyond the classroom, in labs and halls and across all hours and days. The faculty were extraordinarily gifted and formidable, but they were also in relatively formative stages of their own careers. They, and even the students, did not yet have all the answers. We plowed into finding them together. To arm us for the task, we were given a respectable array of conventional courses and requirements, but also a focus on fundamental and functional knowledge in our field, both principles and methods, and the science behind it. Best of all, we were learning in the midst of the emergence of that knowledge and technology. Thus, we learned the foundations and fundamentals, but we also saw them launch whole new endeavors, from early education, to reform of living environments to the teaching family model, and much more.

The time was charged with ideas, electric with the energy of discovery, bursting with excitement at the effects that were being achieved, and heady with the conviction that we were on our way to changing the world. Those circumstances and times are difficult to replicate, but I hope training has retained some of the sense of wonder and promise to fuel the lifelong careers of students.

At the University of Kansas, Who was Your Major Professor and How did this Relationship Influence You?

Jim Sherman was my major professor for my doctorate at KU, and I cannot say enough about Jim and his influence. He was a superb teacher in all areas, teaching not only content, but discipline in addressing issues. I must say, one of his most powerful features was the way he motivated us: we wanted to earn his praise; we did not want to disappoint him. His opinion mattered.

Were there Any Other Professors in Graduate School that Strongly Influenced You? Early in Your Career, Who were Your Primary Leadership Role Models in the Field?

Barbara Etzel had a major influence on me as a mentor, and as a friend. Todd Risley and Mont Wolf were extremely influential, both in graduate school and in the decades beyond. Our field has offered a rich array of role models and leaders. Those individuals, too many to mention, have been the beacons by which we all see and steer.

Describe Your First Job in Behavior Analysis After Graduate School

Having had superb training at KU and intending to pursue a career in research, Jim Favell and I thought a time-limited postdoc experience in the real world would be helpful to our future endeavors. We joined the staff of an institution for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities in North Carolina (Western Carolina Center). Our aim was to experience clinical issues first hand, and the facilities' goal was to discern what behavior analysis could do for its individuals. Our 20 "time limited" years at the Center represented the ultimate learning lab for both parties. From my experience in treating individuals with significant behavioral challenges, I was exhilarated and

humbled on a daily basis, experiencing the power of our behavioral tools and the realities and mysteries that limited our outcomes. From working within a complex organization, I learned the myriad of influences and counter contingencies that impact behavior change within that organizational context. I could go on and on. In short, in that first job, I learned about the point where the rubber hits the road: where behavior analysis meets the real world, hopefully to the benefit of both. Some of my lessons are described in my comments below.

What Did You Learn as a Result of Going on the Job Market for the First Time After Graduate School?

As I indicated earlier, I came from an amazing and pristine academic environment where behavior analysis was the organizing focus. We thought the KU environment was the way the world worked. To our shock, much of the world did not share our view. We had to learn how to navigate and negotiate in circles that did not agree with us. That was a revelation to me. It was hard to understand that people were serious about other branches of psychology, and that behavior analysis could be disregarded or disrespected. To effectively interface with the rest of the world, we had to change, not our values and principles, but our style. For example, we had to moderate our use of technical terms, we needed to be less dogmatic, and we needed to listen to others. We also had to learn what the conditions and contingencies were that made people behave and believe as they did (an early exposure to functional analysis in the real world). I also realized that I had to attend to what was around me and accept that other people had important, productive, and wise contributions to make. The principles of learning were true and valid and behavior analysis served us well. However, we also had to open our arms and understand that medicine, pharmacology, psychology, and other disciplines had contributions to make. I learned that behavior analysis does not need to have all of the answers; we need to know how to obtain the answers. Our strength is in using our science to gain those answers: formulate the questions, then answer them empirically and systematically in a scientifically and socially convincing manner.

Advice and Guidance

Describe Your Primary Approach to Managing People (e.g., Providing Feedback, Problem Solving)

Over a 40-year career, I have made many, many mistakes and hopefully learned a modicum of lessons about managing people. Through all of this, two basic tenants keep revealing themselves. First, approach managing people the same way we do with individuals we serve. This involves employing basic principles and methods that are well known to behavior analysts: functional assessment, shaping, fading, the use of feedback, positive reinforcement, and so on. While an essential part of behavior analytic practice, it is surprising to see slippages in their use with staff, colleagues, and generally in interpersonal interactions. Perhaps the most commonly neglected, in my view, is the use of positive reinforcement. While I surely do not claim to practice this perfectly or even well, I do try to use it as a goal and ideal toward which I strive.

The second tenant comes from a different literature but resembles the first. The Golden Rule is, I think, a wise and functional test of approaches to management and beyond. Asking whether we would appreciate or tolerate something done to ourselves will surely aid in decisions about how to manage others. I am convinced that practicing these two simple, tenants could serve as a foundation, if not a fix for many of the mysteries of good management.

What Advice did Your Mentor Give That Still Influences You Today?

I have had an amazing array of mentors and friends, whose advice has shaped my career and life. However, four words of advice from Todd Risley stands out: “Do good, take data.” This phrase encompassed much of what Todd exhorted us to do. Our job is to change the world in a positive, meaningful way: “do good.” It cannot be about what is popular, easy, self-satisfying, or aimed at promotions or publications. The focus must be on what is good for other people. That is the first part. The second is how to achieve those ends: “take data.” We must use our empirical and scientific tools to gain answers about how to do good, how to improve lives. In short, Todd’s mandate to us was to effect meaningful, measurable change, simple as that. I have heard many wise words over many years, none more parsimonious nor apt than that.

Of All of the Roles You Have Served in Our Field, What are Some of the Activities You Have Valued the Most?

I hope that there has been some level of value in roles such as policy development, governance (most specifically of the BACB), and administration. But to me, my role as a clinician has been the most valued and satisfying, both as a direct clinician and in the role of overseeing those services. It has allowed me to experience directly, to see, feel, and touch, the power of behavior analysis: the change that it can make, the outcomes it can achieve. Since my first days experiencing it in the animal lab, I have never failed to marvel at the effects of our principles and procedures, the wonder of the good it can do, the challenge of clinical problems left to solve. The further removed we become from the locus and process of this change, the less in tune we may become to our roots, our mission and our future.

What Advice Can You Offer to People Considering Becoming a Student in a Behavior Analysis Program on Choosing Training Programs and Advisors?

Other authors in this series have been far more intimately involved in training programs, including for women, and can offer much more expert advice. From my perspective, access to the right mentors is of paramount importance. Students are not only choosing a training program, they are launching a career. Negotiating the decisions and actions of that career is a complex task with significant consequences. I would hope that the role of a mentor can go beyond the usual academic and professional issues, providing help with questions of what career options are not only available but right for the student, how those options integrate with the student’s other plans and proclivities, what the student finds truly important, reinforcing, and sustainable among life’s other goals. At the training phase of life, it would seem that students could benefit from a version of life coaching, not only academic and professional counseling.

From this perspective, the gender of the mentor is less relevant than the mentor's ability to help students address these broader issues. Regardless of gender, I think it important to have access to people who have realistic grounding in the advice they are giving. Norms certainly have and are changing, but it appears to me that women generally still shoulder a broad array of diverse roles and activities in their lives. In an informal survey I conducted of KU grads some time ago, they reported that handling the multiple and competing role and responsibilities of their professional and personal lives was one of the most significant challenges they faced. Mentors should be able to support students in preparing for and navigating such challenges, and doing so from a position of "walking the walk."

What are Some Leadership Characteristics that Have Been Most Valuable to You?

As I review leadership skills and characteristics across professionals I admire, a number of dimensions rise to the top. To me, these are relevant regardless of the activity or enterprise, whether clinical, administrative, educational, regulatory, or other. Some of these I evidence, others I aspire to; all are important.

One is knowledge. It is very simple; you cannot lead effectively if you do not fully understand the content of the enterprise. The second characteristic is passion. The effort must be highly valued, absolutely vital to you in order to succeed. This is particularly true when the goal is difficult to achieve, and requires sacrifice, intense effort, and courage. Most important ones do. Third is elbow grease. Effective leaders work hard, typically harder than those they lead. They set the pace, they provide the model, and they help shoulder the load, all vital to both leading and enlisting the collaboration of their team. The fourth set of characteristics involves interpersonal skills that govern interactions between the leader and all associated with an effort. Of the myriad of behaviors to select from, responsiveness in communication tops the list, in my view. Being responsive to input and feedback is part of this equation; being honest and constructive in giving it is the other.

It is very difficult to distill my thoughts on this question, but these touch briefly on what kind of a leader I would like to work for and who I would like to be: knowledgeable, passionate, industrious, and communicative.

Can You Speak to Any Barriers that You Faced and How You Dealt with them?

I find it absolutely unconscionable that women, anyone, are continuing to face barriers to equality, particularly in settings that should be leading the way in advancing society and enforcing the law.

It makes me feel deeply grateful that my professors, colleagues, and staff over the years were wise, equitable, and expected and supported equal treatment for all. While I was surrounded by enlightened individuals, it was clear that others were struggling with a variety of challenges in their workplaces, including gender biases. In response, some years ago, ABAI instituted a mentorship program to assist women in dealing with concerns of this sort as well as providing advice and support on other issues. Though I found the experience worthwhile, I am not clear on the actual results or fate of this effort, but it may be worthwhile for ABAI and APBA to revisit the possible benefits of such a program today.

In this Time of Growth in Behavior Analysis, What Advice Do You Give to Behavior Analysts of the Future?

The future of behavior analysis is bright indeed. My simple suggestion rests on building on this momentum, not significantly correcting its course. First, I believe we must stay true to our scientific roots. The economic and social climate of today exerts constant pressure toward adjusting our methods and standards towards resorting to easy, popular, unproven, or quick “fixes.” Resisting these considerable influences and remaining faithful to our empirically sound, evidence-based strategies are critical to our future effectiveness and efficacy. Further, I believe we need to continue to insure our relevance. Autism is and will continue to be a legitimate focus of our efforts, but should not consume all of our attention nor convey to others that it is the only area in which we can contribute. Likewise, I hope our research and practice avoids replications that do not materially advance knowledge and practice, but instead that we “push envelopes” toward achieving ever more meaningful outcomes that substantially change lives and society.

The future of our profession rests on these and other basic foundations. But in addition, I would suggest that our future relevance and acceptance as a profession also rests on our behavior as individuals. We as individual behavior analysts can be living models of what our profession stands for and our role and importance in society. Our standing as part of society’s future rests in part on others’ contact and interactions with individual behavior analysts. Our behavior as “ambassadors” can convey the rational, relevant way in which behavior analysis can contribute to the solutions to society’s needs, modeling not only the best of our methods, but the results of our actions.

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

As I mentioned previously, sometime ago I surveyed professionals about the greatest challenges they faced in their careers. Across a broad spectrum of circumstances, the near unanimous answer was the challenge of balancing professional and personal responsibilities, notably with respect to having children. No easy or formulaic answers are possible, but a few very basic issues and suggestions may be considered.

Our profession of applied behavior analysis offers a rich array of alternative roles which feature differing requirements and commitments, some more amenable to the needs of child rearing than others. Thus, in addition to referencing one’s own skills and preferences against potential positions in the field, these should be evaluated for their suitability in caring for children. These dimensions would presumably include such basics as time requirements, typical schedules, and the flexibility that childcare requires. In my own career being responsible for services for individuals with high-risk and dangerous behavior on a 24-7-365 basis, their needs often competed with those of my own children. On the other hand, roles and schedules that have the benefit of being more circumscribed and routinized may not afford the flexibility that both your children and your own reinforcers require.

In addition to considering the requirements and commitments associated with potential professional activities, an appraisal of one’s “support system” is essential.

All parents, women and men, partnered and single, need help in raising children. Yes, it takes a village. Such support encompasses partners, family members, friends, paid caregivers, and others across a broad social spectrum. Maintaining that support in ways and to the extent a parent needs is indeed a substantial challenge. Challenging though it is, it certainly can be done. Part of the lesson is anticipating these realities and applying organizational principles familiar in our profession, now to one's own life.

Realistic and rational planning and decision making in both professional and personal domains is essential in child rearing. It must also be matched with a recognition and constant reminder that the expectation and standard is not perfection. Knowledge as a behavior analyst does not equate to flawless behavior. Uncertainty and mistakes are inevitable (and very instructive) and help make raising children the humbling and wondrous experience it is!

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