Joy and Fulfillment as a Female Behavior Analyst

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A background in elementary education set the stage for Dr. Beth Sulzer-Azaroff's search for methods to promote productive student performance. Once introduced to the power of applied behavior analysis as a science and technology, she used it to conduct research, consult, and teach across a broad range of populations. She first taught at Southern Illinois University, subsequently at the University of Massachusetts, Florida International University, the University of North Texas, and Florida Gulf Coast University. She frequently consulted on methods for promoting performance quality in business, service, and educational and training organizations. Author or co-author of 17 books or major book revisions, 100+ published papers and text chapters, she also served as the first female president of *ABAI* and co-founder of the *Berkshire Association for Behavior Analysis and Therapy*, member and Chair of the *American Psychological Association's (APA) Division 25 (Experimental Analysis of Behavior)*, *Board of Scientific Affairs and Committee on Continuing Education*; Chair of the *Cambridge Center for Behavioral Studies* and others. She has been Associate Editor of the *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis (JABA)* and an editorial board member for numerous other behavioral journals. She was elected to the *Connecticut Academy of Science and Engineering*, Fellow of six divisions of APA, plus the *Association for Behavior Analysis, International, Academy of Behavioral Medicine*, and the *American Psychological Society*. In addition, her colleagues have been gracious enough to award her several awards as well for her work (Fig. 1).

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Fig. 1 Beth Sulzer-Azaroff

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?

In the mid-fifties, my husband, Edward Sulzer, was pursuing his doctoral degree at Columbia University. Fred Keller's course acquainted him with *the analysis of behavior*. Ed would relay what he learned and we discussed how such concepts as effective applications of positive reinforcement might heighten my effectiveness as a grade-school teacher. In testing those ideas, I was more than gratified by the results in terms of student learning and deportment.

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

I actually participated in two programs—first in Clinical Psychology, later in School Psychology. The clinical program included about 40 students and a renowned faculty. The curriculum was fairly fixed, the students all clever and competitive, and the faculty heavily involved with their research or writing. The student drop-out rate was quite high and few completed their doctoral studies.

Given that I had two young children at the time, I felt overwhelmed by those conditions and switched to the School Psychology Program. There, the subject matter was closer to my own areas of interest and the faculty seemed more supportive.

At the University of Minnesota, who was your major professor and how did this relationship influence you?

Robert Orlando was my major professor. Having studied under Sidney Bijou at the University of Washington, Dr. Orlando was well versed in the field of operant behavior. During his weekly seminar on “mental retardation” [sic], we read and discussed journal articles in the field. Most of the participants, I included, began to formulate our ideas for our doctoral research. Dr. Orlando was quite enthusiastic about my intention to pursue methods for assessing children's preferences for various categories of reinforcers. Together, we developed a research protocol for assessing those preferences among “retarded” (developmentally disabled) and typically developing children.

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

Certainly Kenneth McCorquodale, who taught courses in the *Analysis of Behavior*, helped me to expand my knowledge in the field. Travis Thompson and Wells Hively assisted me in my research and of course Ed Sulzer, then a professor of Clinical Psychology guided me every inch of the way. Jan Duker, Head of the School Psychology Program was very supportive of my work and assumed the role of dissertation advisor after Dr. Orlando left the University.

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

While I was writing the results of my dissertation research (on a comparison between the match-to-sample behavior of typically developing children and those with developmental disabilities), Ed was invited to and agreed to assume the Directorship of the *Behavior Modification Program* at Southern Illinois University (SIU). At the time, SIU was a mecca for behaviorally oriented psychologists: Nathan Azrin, Teodoro Ayllon, Harris Rubin, Robert Campbell, Donald Hake, Ronald Hutchinson, and others. With Ed at the helm of the department, we interacted closely with all of those stellar behaviorists and many others who stopped by to meet with us and/or to offer colloquia. I also was deeply inspired by visits to the labs of Sidney Bijou and Howard Sloane at the University of Illinois, and of Baer, Wolf and Risley, Etzel, and others at the University of Kansas.

Describe your first job in behavior analysis after graduate school.

During an informal lunch that Ed, I, and several of his colleagues attended, Tom Jordon, then Department Head of Educational Psychology, mentioned that he was searching for someone to teach educational psychology. When informed that I was in the process of writing the results of my dissertation, he immediately offered me a position. Unwilling to be away from my new little daughter, Lenore, I refused. Tom then followed up by asking me to consider teaching just one course (3 hours, one evening a week). To this, I agreed. Apparently, the students enjoyed and valued the course and before I knew it, Tom talked me into working half-time in the department. That included spending several hours in the Child Development Clinic, teaching the educational psych course, and mentoring a couple of graduate students. By the time Lenore began attending pre-school, I had become a full-time assistant professor.

Advice and Guidance

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

This being one of my major areas of emphasis, I generally followed a problem solving and intervention scheme. Thanks to Dwight Harshbarger, my “Brown’s Group”¹ partner for several years in the 1990’s, we distilled and simplified this scheme into the rubric below.

- 1) What is a good job? Key parties (students/advisor; workers/managers etc.) discuss and agree on

¹ The Brown’s group is an organization that has worked with numerous international corporations to implement successful behavior-based performance improvement programs.

- Long-term goals, e.g.:
 - i. Obtaining a degree
 - ii. Rates of production (within what temporal parameters?)
 - iii. Reductions in injury rates
 - Short-term goals, e.g.:
 - i. “A” quality quizzes
 - ii. Principals’ visiting classrooms once each week and commenting positively on meeting standards for outstanding student performance
 - iii. 90 % or above adherence to safety standards
- 2) Am I doing a good job?
- Reliable and valid measures are designed and instituted according to a pre-set regular schedule.
- 3) How do I know if I’m doing a good job?
- The measured results are fed back (often in graphic form) to the performers and others involved at all levels.
- 4) What happens when I do a good job?
- Performers gain something they like and/or value, i.e., praise/compliments, good performance evaluations, promotions, special events, such as parties, snacks, and perhaps other symbolic or tangible rewards (e.g., trophies), preferred schedules or assignments, bonuses, promotions, pay raises, etc.).

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

In graduate school, Robert Orlando taught us by example and shaping how to read, comprehend, critique, and make use of the findings of published journal reports. We also became acquainted with the early ABA literature within the field of developmental disabilities.

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

Without a doubt, *teaching and mentoring* were my most rewarding activities. I felt the content of the courses I taught was valuable and the behavior-analytic-based pedagogic methods I used were especially powerful and effective. That is, many of my undergraduate students continued on to graduate school in behavior analysis or closely related fields while the vast proportion of my graduate students have become major contributors to the areas of research, development, and service in the field of Applied Behavior Analysis. *Engaging in research* also has always infused me with excitement. As applied behavior analysts, we attempt to design and precisely define the most effective and efficient *independent variables* (intervention methods) and valid *dependent variables* (indicators of change) and test the former’s impact on the latter. When individually and socially important outcomes are achieved and demonstrated to

be functionally related to the change procedures, we are elated. Writing textbooks and instructional manuals, a technique I found to keep me updated on new developments in the field has also been a source of deep satisfaction.

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

1. Refer to the data, by searching for the results the program produces, such as number and proportion of students graduated within what time range; the nature of the positions they secure, the data on high-quality post-training contributions made by faculty and graduates in terms of client progress, research and text publications, and other contributions to the field and to society.
2. Attend local, regional, national and international ABA conferences to familiarize yourself with the breadth and depth of the field. Arrange, in advance if possible, to attend presentations and/or meet with faculty and students affiliated with academic programs of interest.
3. Prepare to visit the programs that interest you with your list of question and concerns, and meet with faculty and current students BOTH individually and in groups.
 - Try to discover what kind of financial support might be available for students
 - Inform yourself about local cost of living, living arrangements, funding opportunities, access to learning resources, and so forth
 - Consider fees, travel costs, and time

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

It helps, though is not essential. When I attended graduate school, most university faculty positions, including those at the University of Minnesota, were occupied by males. In general, the very few females tended to be more understanding of my need to balance familial and educational priorities.

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

I would look to leaders with a history of success in such areas as motivating and managing behavior, especially being specific about what behaviors and results they were seeking; specifying how they did or would assess my performance and provide me with related specific and constructive feedback; following through intermittently though fairly often and pairing their feedback with reinforcing statements and/or other reinforcers, such as preferred assignments, resources, and so on. At the university level, a cultural norm seems to prevail among peers and supervisors of (other than subjective student evaluations) rarely providing faculty with valuable feedback. In my own case, I only knew my peers and supervisors appreciated my work when I received my annual report, was promoted and/or awarded a raise, or when my students said something complimentary. I would have appreciated more specific feedback from colleagues and supervisors.

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

In teaching, I managed to avoid problems by designing essentially all my courses according to Keller's *Personalized System of Instruction*. That included clarifying in advance explicit grading policies, students' objectives, assignments, mastery requirements of 85 or 90 % (they had to re-take different forms of the same quiz and achieve

that mastery level before being allowed to move on to the next unit), providing very frequent performance assessments, and lots of specific, immediate, and merited positive feedback.

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

Look at both the small and the big pictures—that is, examine presenting challenges as just one aspect of a far more complex network of contingencies. For example, as a practicing behavior analyst, you will have an advantage if you consider not only the central concern, that is, the nature of the goals and objectives set by the program and the potential rates of progress of your client(s), but also in terms of your own powerful reinforcers and those reinforcers as your colleagues, supervisors, clients' significant others (parents, other family members, friends), and try to discover to what extent they will be obtainable contingent on your progress in the educational, research, and/or service setting you are considering. That will permit you to better able to predict the supports and/or impediments to your own progress as well as those of your clients or students within the situation you are contemplating for yourself.

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.

In the 1950's, I knew no man who undertook regular responsibility for child care. So, as a graduate student with two pre-school aged boys, I was able to provide for their care by sending them to pre-school and/or by arranging to have a baby-sitter for the hours when I attended classes. As for studying, the moment the boys left the house, I turned to my school work. Other than filling the kitchen sink with hot soapy water (we did not have a dishwasher in those days) and depositing the soiled breakfast dishes there to soak, I immediately began to work on my studies, no talking on the phone (I warned my buddies), no other housekeeping, no TV (PCs were yet to be invented) etc.

We did plan for another child after my studies were completed. To our extreme pleasure, we became parents of a lovely little girl. Fortunately, as planned and hoped, she arrived after I had collected the data for my dissertation. Without actually applying for a position, I was offered one at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale (to where we recently moved). At first, I refused because I wanted to spend as much time with my daughter Lenore, as possible. But my husband, Ed Sulzer, more liberal in approach to gender roles, offered to care for the children for the one evening a week during which I was able to teach a 3-hour class. That worked out well for all of us (by the time Lenore was ready to attend pre-school, I signed on as a full-time faculty member). What can be gleaned from these experiences? If you as a woman want both children and a career, be as certain as possible that

- You and your partner and/or other key people involved have considered your list of personal and professional priorities. Is having and raising children very high on *both* your lists?
- You are realistically capable of and prepared to plan and follow through with both your familial, study, and/or work responsibilities
- Your mate or surrogate is capable of and willing to contribute jointly to the endeavor

- You are willing to invest significant resources to obtain and continue the best quality care and support for your children
- The timing is as auspicious as possible. Personally, perhaps it would have been easier for me to have completed my doctoral studies before starting a family, though the children I have are kind, generous, thoughtful, and accomplished. Did the fact that I had a myriad of responsibilities during their early years possibly enable them to become the way they are today?

In contemporary American society, within which gender roles have been evolving, I think these questions are becoming just as relevant for men to address.

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

As far as I know, I did not distinguish between males and females in terms of my *general* practices as a mentor. I did try to be a positive role model to *both* my male and female graduate and undergraduate students by seeking and (fortunately) often receiving extra resources (e.g., grants and contracts), by carefully scheduling and husbanding my own time, and by including my graduate students as peers in teaching and research activities (of course with lots of feedback and merited reinforcement). Some examples include

- Scheduling group and individual meetings weekly
- Attempting to demonstrate the value of taking data on my own and their progress
- Shaping progressive steps toward excellence by involving them in numerous conceptual and applied activities (seminars, research, assisting in, and teaching courses, lab/clinical work etc.)
- Using their progress data as a source of posted feedback and associated reinforcement (i.e., on a posted progress chart, we broke down the major steps they needed to accomplish toward their degrees—courses completed, project proposals submitted/accepted, data collected, reports submitted, and so on, and displayed their accomplishment of these milestones). Regularly, we celebrated those and other major achievements, often by arranging for group recognition within parties or other social events of feats accomplished
- Periodically providing the group with *non-contingent* reinforcers, such as parties, picnics, partial resources to attend conferences, and so on

I was quite aware of my various roles as a wife, mother, professional, educator, and scientist. Perhaps, then, I served as a useful role model, especially for my female students, who may have seen me as a woman who could balance those various roles: of a wife, mother, scientist, and professional.

Probably the one saving grace was my *willingness* (not eagerness) to say “no” when I felt my professional and personal resources were being stretched too thin. For example, at one time I was offered but did not accept the position as chief editor of a highly prestigious journal, while, at the time, coordinating a graduate training program, teaching, participating in a number of research projects, serving on two national-level boards, completing writing projects, and more.

Please do not conclude that I feel everything I did was ideal or even close to it. Certainly, of regrets, there are a few: the school performances by my children that I

missed; the time I spent away from husbands, family and friends; the early financial sacrifices we would not have had to make if costs of child care and the potential early income I sacrificed instead of preparing for my degree, and so on.

Nonetheless, in general, I believe the path I took probably was fruitful. Just Google my own children (Lenore S. Azaroff, Richard G. Azaroff, David L. Sulzer) and former students! Certainly at this point in my life, given the circumstances, I think had I to do it over again, probably I would repeat most of the paths I had followed. (See also *Behavior and Social Issues*, 9, 55–60 (1999)). © 1999 Cambridge Center for Behavioral Studies, *Meeting Life's Challenges—Strategies and Stories: A View From the Far Side*).

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