Influences on My Early Academic Career

Anna Ingeborg Pétursdóttir¹

Published online: 25 July 2015

© Association for Behavior Analysis International 2015

Anna Ingeborg Pétursdóttir (Fig. 1) received her Ph.D. in psychology from Western Michigan University and is currently an associate professor of psychology at Texas Christian University. Her primary area of research is verbal behavior and its acquisition. Her applied research interests include strategies for enhancing verbal behavior acquisition of children diagnosed with autism, whereas more basic research interests include typically developing children's language acquisition and how research and theory in this area may translate into effective language interventions. Dr. Pétursdóttir's research has been published in the *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis* (JABA), the *Journal of the Experimental Analysis of Behavior* (JEAB), and *The Analysis of Verbal Behavior* (TAVB), among other journals. She is past editor of *TAVB* and the current Publication Board Coordinator of the Association for Behavior Analysis International (ABAI). She also currently serves as the associate editor of *JABA* and an editorial board member of *JEAB* and the *European Journal of Behavior Analysis*, in addition to having served on the editorial boards of various other journals. Dr. Pétursdóttir is a past president of the Texas Association for Behavior Analysis.

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?

Many influences converged on this decision. As an undergraduate student at the University of Iceland, I was exposed to B. F. Skinner's original writings in courses

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

✉ Anna Ingeborg Pétursdóttir
a.petursdottir@tcu.edu

¹ Department of Psychology, Texas Christian University, Box 298920, Fort Worth, TX, USA

Fig. 1 Anna Ingeborg Pétursdóttir

that I took with professor Magnús Kristjánsson. I remember reading *About Behaviorism* and “The Operational Analysis of Psychological Terms,” among others. Then I found *Walden II* and *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* among my grandfather’s books, and I read those too. I didn’t understand half of what Skinner was saying, but I was fascinated. Most of psychology seemed disjointed to me; it seemed full of theories and findings that only applied to some small subset of human behavior. Skinner addressed *everything*, and I found it appealing.

There was also a required course on behavior analysis that I enjoyed, and then an elective course on single-case designs with Gabriela Sigurðardóttir, where the readings included most of Sidman’s *Tactics*. That was an absolutely phenomenal course. There were seven of us in it, and most of us ended up getting involved in behavior analysis one way or another. Four of us ended up in behavior analysis graduate programs in the USA, including Einar Ingvarsson, one of my fellow *JABA* Associate Editors. And I don’t think it was something any of us had considered before we took that course. I enrolled in the course because I was a little bit of a methods and statistics geek (incidentally, although I don’t recall any mention of behavior analysis in my statistics classes, the professor I had for most of them was Þorlákur Karlsson, a behavior analyst out of West Virginia). I found myself fascinated by the single-case approach, and what little I understood of Sidman’s book at the time had a profound influence on me.

That same semester, which was my last one as an undergraduate, I interviewed Dr. Sigurðardóttir for the psychology students’ annual newsletter, of which I was the editor (with Einar Ingvarsson as a sidekick). After writing up the interview, I remember thinking long and hard about behavior analysis as a grad school option. The following fall, I started working as an in-home therapist for a child with autism (once again, with Einar Ingvarsson as one of the child’s other therapists) and then there was no return. This was in the mid-1990s and one of the first children in Iceland to receive intensive behavioral intervention. I stayed with the family for two years, and it was an incredibly enriching and influential experience that became a huge factor in my decision to pursue behavior analysis, although a couple more years went by before I made the leap and started applying to graduate programs.

I also want to mention that during the years leading up to graduate school, Gabriela Sigurðardóttir was hosting potlucks at her house once or twice a year, to which she invited all of her current and former students who were interested in behavior analysis.

Each year, one or more students left for the USA to pursue behavior analysis at the graduate level, and each time, they got sent off with one of these potlucks and a special t-shirt with a drawing of B. F. Skinner on it. I won't lie—I wanted the t-shirt badly! Gabriela also made sure that we met every prominent behavior analyst who visited Iceland (Gina Green, Phil Chase, Ed Fantino, and others), and these encounters helped solidify my interest as well.

You Attended Graduate School at Western Michigan 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.)?

The psychology department at Western Michigan, of course, is a major powerhouse of behavior analysis. I didn't think I was going to get accepted there and was excited beyond belief when I received my acceptance letter. The years I spent there were the best years of my life. I don't know how many graduate students were there, probably somewhere between 50 and 100. There were behavior analysis students, clinical students, I/O students, and school psychology students (at least the first year or two I was there), but behavior analysis permeated everything because all of the faculty were behavioral. It was a great time to be there because the faculty included both prominent senior leaders in the field and highly productive, up-and-coming folks. I also had the chance to be around and make friends with many excellent graduate students, including many people who have been highly successful in their early and mid-career endeavors.

At Western Michigan University, Who Was Your Major Professor and How Did This Relationship Influence You?

I worked with three different mentors, and each one of them had a profound influence on me. I started out with Dick Malott, who taught me new way of thinking. I then went on to work with Jack Michael, for the last two years before he retired, and he obviously sparked my interest in verbal behavior. Finally, Jim Carr was my Ph.D. mentor, and he taught me to do good research, to think as a scientist and a clinician at the same time, and a great many other things as well. Nine years later, I still find myself thinking “How would Jim handle this situation?” or “How would Jim phrase this?” all the time. He probably doesn't know this, though, because I hardly ever stop to actually ask him.

Were There any Other Professors in Graduate School That Strongly Influenced You?

Absolutely, I think every professor I had contact with in graduate school had a strong influence on me in one way or another. I almost hesitate to mention specific individuals because that means I am leaving out others who also deserve mention. But one of them was definitely Linda LeBlanc, not just because of what I learned from her formally but also because she served as a role model for me, as a young, talented female in academia who also became a mother while I was there and seemed to handle both roles perfectly. In addition, there were a number of courses that I took with faculty other than my mentors that I find myself thinking back to a lot because I learned something in them

that still influences me: for example, an EAB course with Al Poling, a course on childhood psychopathology with Scott Gaynor, a psychology of work course with Alyce Dickinson, an ABA survey course with John Austin, and, last but not least, three excellent statistics courses that I took with Brad Huitema. I had a pretty decent statistics background before grad school, so I already had a pretty good idea of which tests to run in which situation and how to run them, but Dr. Huitema's courses added an important layer of conceptual understanding of statistical inference that I have found extremely useful for planning, conducting, evaluating, and interpreting research, including behavior-analytic research (my own and that of others) that does not make use of inferential statistics at all.

Early in Your Career, Who Were Your Primary Leadership Role Models in the Field?

Besides my mentors and my other professors, my role models have always included people who produce high-quality research that advances the science or application of behavior analysis. When I was in graduate school, there had already been a huge influx of women into the field, but a large majority of the high-profile researchers were still male (see Shabani et al. 2004), and I don't know how much that has actually changed. So I always very much looked up to, and still look up to, strong female researchers like Dorothy Lerman and Rachel Thompson, among many others.

Describe Your First Job in Behavior Analysis After Graduate School

My first job after graduate school was my current job at Texas Christian University (TCU). However, I had previously spent a year back in my hometown in Iceland, teaching at the University of Akureyri while working on my dissertation. TCU was the first job I interviewed for. It seemed like an excellent match for what I wanted—a smaller university that places a heavy emphasis on quality teaching and undergraduate student engagement, but also provides excellent support for research and, in my case, an opportunity to mentor Ph.D. students. It has turned out to be a fantastic place to work (not to mention the great football team!), so I am still here. I am the only behavior analyst in the psychology department, and I often get comments on how hard that must be. But I see it as a good thing. I have plenty of opportunities to interact with the behavior analysis community by going to conferences, reviewing manuscripts for journals, serving behavior analysis organizations, and collaborating with behavior analysts outside of TCU. Not having behavior analysts around me every day at work broadens my perspective, as it allows me to interact with and learn from a more diverse community of researchers who study human and animal behavior. It forces me to think about my research and about behavior analysis in general from a different point of view. I also think it's good for my graduate students. My students are not in a behavior analysis graduate program; instead, they are working toward a Ph.D. in experimental psychology. They typically come in having completed Master's degrees or some amount of graduate coursework and supervised experience in behavior analysis. During their time here, they take a small set of core psychology courses, a few additional courses in learning and behavior analysis, and then just do a lot of research. I think a major strength of the experience they get here is that they need to learn to explain their research, why it

is important, and why the methodology makes sense, to a general academic audience, while minimizing behavior-analytic jargon. That, I think, is a hugely valuable skill to have for any behavior analyst considering an academic career. It sometimes means learning to use language that would cause failing grades in any behavior analysis course, but there is a time and a place for that language. Audience control is important.

Advice and Guidance

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

I try not to be an aversive stimulus; I think that's my primary approach. Honestly, managing people is not one of my strengths and not something I particularly enjoy thinking about. My approach to it is largely contingency-shaped, and I make many mistakes.

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

I find myself constantly influenced by various pieces of advice or wisdom from my mentors. For example, I feel like in every single lab meeting with Jim Carr I picked up a piece of important information that has stuck with me and influenced either the way I do research or some aspect of my professional development. But because you are focusing on women, the one I am going to share is a piece of advice that I got from Jack Michael. I don't think it was directed at me personally, it was more of a general comment on the underrepresentation of females in academia and factors that may influence women's graduate school and early career decisions to a greater extent than men's. I won't be able to replicate the way it was delivered, which was pretty humorous as I recall, but it was to the effect that your degrees and early career moves stay with you for life, whereas there is no guarantee that a man will!

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

Two of the roles I have enjoyed the most have been serving as the editor of *TAVB* and an associate editor of *JABA*. These roles have provided me with the opportunity to interact with a lot of people in our field in their roles as authors and reviewers, as well as an opportunity to assist authors with shaping the final products of important and innovative research. What I always enjoy the most, of course, is being able to accept a good paper for publication.

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

Do what you can to follow your interests (e.g., try to scope out potential mentors who do work that you feel like you can be truly passionate about) instead of choosing based on convenience (e.g., a program close to home). You will encounter many more reinforcers that way. It's hard to become good at something you don't care a lot about.

Is It Important to Have Some Experience with a Same Gender Role Model?

I think only data can inform us of its importance in general. But anecdotally, I feel like it was important for me as an aspiring female academic to have female role models. As I mentioned earlier, successful women in academia have always been very salient stimuli for me. When I was an undergraduate, I made the observation that full-time faculty at my institution were mostly male, whereas female instructors were mostly adjuncts. Even *Gabríela Sigurðardóttir*, who had such a strong influence on me at the time, was an adjunct at the time I took her course, although she later obtained a full-time position. And it sounds crazy to me now, but at the time (perhaps assisted by comments from other students), I seriously came to think of it as something that men do. So yes, I think it was hugely important for me in graduate school to observe multiple exemplars of accomplished, tenured female faculty (*Linda LeBlanc*, *Alyce Dickinson*, *Lisa Baker*) who were not just good but great at what they did. I also remember being impressed with the fact that ABAI had had not just one or two, but many female presidents elected by its membership.

What Are Some Leadership Characteristics That Have Been Most Valuable to You?

There are many leadership characteristics that I value in other people, including fairness, transparency, flexibility, and willingness to listen. But my own leadership skills are very much a work in progress.

Can You Speak to any Barriers That You Faced and How You Dealt with Them?

It is rare for me to feel disadvantaged by my gender as I go about my work on a daily basis. But that does not mean that barriers do not exist. In academia, it has been shown that men tend to receive more favorable teaching evaluations than women. There are also data showing that parenthood has differential effects on the careers of male and female academics. And whatever the reason, it looks like service responsibilities in academia fall disproportionately on females (*Misra et al. 2011*). Then there are little things like the fact that I often receive email from students in which they address me as “*Ms. Petursdottir*,” whereas my male colleagues report always being addressed as “*Dr.*” or “*Professor*” (at least to the extent that students still bother opening email messages with a greeting). We’ve come a long way since *Mary Whiton Calkins* was denied a Ph.D. at Harvard on account of being a woman, but we still have a long way to go. Of course, as women become more powerful in behavior analysis and elsewhere, we also have to watch out for the fact that future social constructions could as easily affect males in a negative manner.

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

These are definitely exciting times for behavior analysis. While the growth has been driven by demand for services, it has resulted in a great many new graduate programs around the world, which means more academic manpower with the potential to

advance our science and help it reach a wider audience. My first piece of advice is to be bilingual. Know your behaviorese, but please be able to translate it into the way that other people talk, not just laypersons but also scientists in other fields. My second piece of advice is to avoid dogmatic thinking, which is unfortunately something I encounter all too often among junior (and sometimes not so junior) individuals in the field. Behavior analysis is a science, not a religion, and there is no place for dogma in it. Be sure you allow data to change your mind, and keep in mind the distinct possibility that B. F. Skinner may not have been right about everything he ever said.

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?

I make mistakes every day and try to change my future behavior as a result, sometimes successfully and sometimes not. It probably depends on the consequences of the mistake, doesn't it?

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

I find it difficult to answer this question without going on a rant about the lack of resources available to working parents in the USA. Where I come from, paid parental leaves are mandated by law and high-quality child care is subsidized until school age. Those were the resources I grew up to expect to be available to me in the future, and it never occurred to me that careers and children might be extraordinarily difficult to combine, beyond the logistics of figuring out when to get the laundry done. In the USA, having a baby typically means that either one parent has to leave the work force or the parents have to pay exorbitant sums of money for strangers to care for the baby, and worst of all, this starts when the infant is only a few weeks old. These aren't choices that anyone should have to make.

I work in academia, and I would advise all females who are considering an academic career and also planning to have children (or already have them) to read a book called *Professor Mommy* by Rachel Connelly and Kristen Ghodsee. This book contains a lot of good information about working in academia and is full of useful and fairly optimistic advice for women who want to combine academic careers with motherhood. Obviously, parenthood affects women in ways that it cannot affect men because of the physical realities of pregnancy and breastfeeding. Even the healthiest of pregnancies brings fatigue and major loss of productivity, and that's before things even start to really get busy at home with the arrival of the infant. The fact also remains that although mothers and fathers are increasingly splitting child care responsibilities, and it is increasingly common for women to be primary breadwinners, women are still less likely than men to have a spouse who stays at home entirely or has flexible hours. So all things considered, it is not surprising that having children is more likely to disrupt the academic career of a woman than a man, and yet their work gets measured against the same standards, as it should. One problem with academia is that an academic career does not start until you are in your late twenties or older, and you don't get tenure until your mid-thirties or later. If you plan to have children, you have to make a choice

between having them pre-tenure, when setbacks to your productivity leave you vulnerable, or waiting until after tenure, when it is getting very late, biologically speaking. It is a very difficult situation for women. I echo the advice that Connelly and Ghodsee give in their book, which is to ask a lot of questions of potential employers and make employment decisions in part based on things like maternity leave policies and the possibility of tenure clock stoppage for childbirth. These types of policies can really make a huge difference in terms of minimizing career disruptions. In general, it is important to plan ahead to minimize disruption and to adopt time management strategies that help make up for any loss of productive time.

I want to emphasize that although I have pointed out some obstacles, I am not advising anyone against combining motherhood with a career. I have two young children myself, and it has been nothing but an improvement to both my professional and my personal life. In terms of productivity, I spend far fewer hours in front of my computer than before, but a much higher proportion of these hours are productive hours. I have for a long time now collected data on the number of productive hours that I allocate to different professional responsibilities. It turns out that even though I spend much less time working than before I had children, I have almost as many productive hours overall, and during those productive hours, I am getting more things done in less time. This semester, for example, with an infant and a toddler at home, I have managed to spend more time on my own research than in any semester since I started my academic career (except during a sabbatical), even though my teaching and service responsibilities are just as heavy as before. I just work faster. And meanwhile, I'm actually taking every weekend off to hang out with my kids, which is a great improvement over all the weekends I spent working before. But things may be a little different for me than they are for many others, as I have a pretty family-friendly employer, and I had my children after tenure, when the pressure was off and I also had enough experience to be able to become more efficient at my job than before.

Compliance with Ethical Standards Human or animal participants were not employed for this manuscript, so informed consent was not necessary.

Conflict of Interest The author declares that she has no competing interests.

References

- Misra, J., Lundquist, J. H., Holmes, E., & Agiomavritis, S. (2011). The ivory ceiling of service work. *Academe*, 97, 1. Retrieved from <http://www.aaup.org/article/ivory-ceiling-service-work#.VNz8xfnF98E>
- Shabani, B. D., Carr, J. E., Petursdottir, A. I., Esch, B. E., & Gillett, J. N. (2004). Scholarly productivity in behavior analysis: the most prolific authors and institutions from 1992 to 2001. *Behav Anal Today*, 5, 25–43.