Lessons from a Female Academician: Some Further Reflections on a Glass Ceiling

Ruth Anne Rehfeldt¹

Published online: 5 March 2018
© Association for Behavior Analysis International 2018

Abstract

Much discussion has occurred in recent years regarding the participation of women in behavior analysis. The purpose of this article is to share lessons learned as a female academician and impart helpful information to other, newer female university faculty members.

Keywords Academia · Behavior analysis · Females

A fair amount of discussion has ensued in recent decades regarding the participation of women in the discipline. For me, the most poignant and elegant considerations on this topic were raised by McSweeney, Donahoe, and Swindell (2000) who, after analyzing the involvement of women as authors in and editors of behavior analytic journals, noted that the differing levels of participation between the genders did not necessarily reflect an inequity. McSweeney and Parks (2002) further identified the possibility of a glass ceiling following a similar analysis of nonbehavioral journals, yet suggested that the causal factors of a glass ceiling may be subtle and not necessarily deliberate. Odum (2000), with equal elegance, argued that although fewer women than men participate in the experimental analysis of behavior, the finding is colored by the fact that fewer women than men participate in the sciences in general. Odum (2000) encouraged efforts towards the recruitment and retention of female scholars within the discipline. I have long been grateful for the scholarly contributions by these prominent women authors. Given that I began my own academic career shortly after the publication of these articles, their conclusions have given me much to consider over the years. My goal in the present paper is to share lessons I have learned over the course of a nearly 20-year career in academia that I believe will be helpful to new scholars about to embark on such a career. I do not have data

to share on the participation of women in this venue or that venue, nor do I have a specific conclusion about a glass ceiling, real or hypothesized, and its presence in my own career. What I do have is two decades of experience, insights, and opinions as to what may help other women be successful in their roles as university faculty members and enjoy the niche that a career may fill in their lives. I'm grateful to the guest editor of this special issue for the opportunity to contribute on this topic.

After having a mix of male and female faculty members in college, I have to admit that at that tender age the thought of gender inequity never occurred to me. Looking back, I recall that my female instructors were often in laboratory instructor or teaching assistant roles and the number of tenured female faculty who I encountered was definitely not equivalent to the number of men. Nonetheless, my studies at the University of Puget Sound motivated me to pursue a doctoral degree and ultimately a university position. Thus, I began and completed graduate school at the University of Nevada not particularly cognizant of issues of gender disparity. Much of this may be due to the fact that my graduate school advisor and mentor (who is still very much a mentor and cherished friend), Linda Hayes, was and is very much a visionary, who at that time (and since) has occupied a number of important leadership positions within the university and the discipline. Linda has never been one, I believe, to wear the "woman" card on her sleeve, but has rather led from the perspective of an accomplished behaviorist and scholar who often sees a bigger picture than most. I also began a professional relationship with Maria Malott, president and CEO of Association for Behavior Analysis International, another visionary female leader, at that

✉ Ruth Anne Rehfeldt
rehfeldt@siu.edu

¹ Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, IL, USA

time as well. I simply never considered that female academics might be treated differently than their male counterparts or that the academic experience might be completely different for the two genders. Not everyone has the opportunity to be mentored by women such as these over the course of their professional development, so I would encourage others to keep their eyes open for such potential mentors and strike up relationships with female visionaries when an opportunity presents. I believe that having such relationships may prevent a cycle of self-defeating thinking from developing and standing in the way of one's performance. Moreover, should one be lucky enough to develop such a relationship, whether as a student or co-worker, *STAYING IN TOUCH* with one's mentors is expected. I was not very good at this earlier in my career. Only because I am shocked every now and then by the students who graduate only to never be heard from again have I come to appreciate this. Believe me, a time will come around where you have mentored someone who disappears without a blink of the eye or a Hallmark card. Don't be that person: Show appreciation for those special mentors and stay in touch. I'm lucky to still be in a position of collaboration with my former advisor.

When I was hired at Southern Illinois University, there were only two other females in the large department of 17–18 members, and most of the males were middle-aged or older. At times, I could say that the department had a bit of an “old boy's network” feel to it. Despite all of my publications and early career success, there were many occasions where for the first time in my academic and professional life I felt I was treated like a “little girl.” This was a new experience for which I was not prepared. I do not know that I would have come to call the Rehabilitation Institute “home” had it not been for the amazing bond I developed with one of the scarce females in the department, Paula K. Davis. Paula was a fantastic mentor to me, particularly where navigating the sticky political issues in an older-male dominated department came into play. As an award-winning course instructor and program director, Paula conveyed high standards and did not deviate when departmental colleagues may have disagreed. Having her to watch during interactions with male colleagues, for example, showed me how a woman could easily be assertive and share her ideals in the presence of something approximating an “old boy's network.” Fortunately, over the years, the composition of the department has greatly diversified since the time of my hire. I do think that if I were a new professional applying for academic jobs today the number of females in a department would be an important consideration for me, as well as what opportunities for further diversifying the department the future may hold. Clicking with people on an interview is also important. I immediately clicked with Paula when I first interviewed at SIU, and that is in fact one of the reasons I was excited to go to work there. I should mention that I had outstanding male mentors over the years

as well, and there is no reason to think that similarly invaluable relationships can't arise with male colleagues. Anthony Cuvo, a senior faculty member in the Rehabilitation Institute, was a fantastic research mentor and a fun, wise colleague to work alongside. In fact, I credit Tony for my mastery of single-subject methodology. I wasn't embarrassed or ashamed that I had more to learn on the topic as an early professor and accepted his tutelage graciously. Outside of my own institution were other important mentors: Doug Greer is a scholar whose work I have admired for years who has shared several important life lessons (some of which I had written on post-it notes and taped to my computer monitor at one point!). My point is, having a female mentor with whom one clicks interpersonally can make all the difference in one's happiness and desire to remain in a particular academic position, but gender isn't always the defining feature of a good mentor. I would advise all new faculty members to make themselves humbly and graciously available for mentoring. Academic life could be a very lonely existence without collegial relationships and collaborations. And, although one's behavior is evaluated alone for promotions and tenure, one's behavior as a part of a team is what is required for the execution of a degree program. I firmly believe that being part of a supportive team can contribute to one's longevity in a position, but it is a symbiotic arrangement. Being a diva and a new faculty member are not roles that go hand in hand.

There is an interesting repertoire in some colleagues that I noticed early on in my career that I continue to notice as the years go by. Although the organisms change, the repertoire is the same and it has become even more aversive to me as I've aged! That is the behavioral repertoire of speaking at a volume louder than everyone else in the room, contributing far more frequently than everyone else in the room, and emitting statements that may sometimes be of questionable substance. For whatever reason, I have observed this repertoire very infrequently among my female colleagues and I have known a number of females who are intimidated when they encounter this in others. After years of observation, I feel that I can safely reassure others that success is not measured by how loudly, frequently or convolutedly one speaks during meetings. I would hope that those quieter, more thoughtful colleagues are not dismayed when they encounter this repertoire. I am far more impressed with the graduate students I have known who sit quietly thinking things over until they have something truly profound, intellectually solid, and worthwhile to contribute, and in my opinion, it is at that moment that a leader emerges. (In fact, my oldest daughter is this sort of person; in Spanish the name “Monica” means “great leader.”) I would advise others to feel comfortable with this latter repertoire. The long-term consequences will be greater than otherwise.

Since the beginning of my time at SIU, there has often been a variety of university politics at play, be it structural reorganizations, potential departmental mergers, academic program

prioritizations, and the like. Scandals, drama, and disruption will always be a part of academia, particularly as funding for higher education continues to dwindle. I have seen new faculty become emotionally involved in such issues, to the point of allowing such issues to become the forefront of their day-to-day existence. Such stuff can be distracting from one's real work, and I have seen others overlook the wonderful reinforcers that a faculty job has to offer because they are so wrapped up in the latest drama. Recognizing that bureaucratic turmoil may always be present in any job but with little to no bearing on one's day to day functioning is an important lesson. I would advise those new to the academy to take this sort of business for what it is and stay focused on what is important. When I have found myself befuddled over department politics or bickering, all I need to do is have a meeting with an enthusiastic student full of ideas and energy. It is an easy reminder of why I pursued the career in the first place.

Just as female mentors and advisors were important early in my career, so too were female colleagues and collaborators in more recent years. I have of course also had fantastic professional friendships and collaborations with a number of male scholars, but I do think that there is something to be said about strength in numbers. To this end, I have valued my collaboration with Yvonne Barnes-Holmes on our book *Derived Relational Responding: Applications for Learners with Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities*, and Karen Lionello-Denolf, who held a leadership position with *The Psychological Record* during my 12-year tenure as Editor and played a critical role in the journal's evolution. Collaborating with women outside one's institution creates more opportunities for other women in the science and establishes networks that one might not have in their own department. Such relationships may also provide the social support that a newer academic may need when navigating issues such as childcare, family, and promotion and tenure.

A recent article suggests that women faculty devote far more hours to university and professional service each week than do their male counterparts (Flaherty, 2017). In addition, fewer females faculty occupy the rank of associate professor or higher, and the more prestigious an administrative position in a university, the less likely it is to be occupied by a female (American Council on Education, 2016). It is important to pay attention to statistics such as these, just as we cared about the McSweeney et al. (2000); Odum (2000) analyses. What is not clear is if fewer women aspire to these top ranks or if they do aspire and are turned down more frequently than men. Either way, I would echo Odum's (2000) calling for more efforts to not only retain women in high-ranking positions of higher education, but also support their pursuit of such positions as well. Importantly, university accrediting bodies establish a commitment to diversity as a criterion for accreditation

(Higher Learning Commission, 2013). To this end, Peltier (2010) argued for the need for greater professional development activities in the workplace for women, stating that gender differences in many workplaces are real and significant. Peltier (2010) further contended that the *performance of organizations with greater gender diversity is stronger than those with less*.

And now for my perspective on the potential for a glass ceiling in my own career, I've seen impressive women who have worked hard and gotten ahead based on their work, not because they are a female or because they had special arrangements. I am happy to say that I haven't observed that many official instances of gender disparity: Women and men get papers rejected; women and men are denied tenure; and women and men face challenges of balancing child care and work. It is certainly naïve, however, to think that there are not subtle, possibly nondeliberate, stereotype factors at play in the day-to-day existence of female faculty. I have met many females who believe they are more frequently solicited for coordination or organizational tasks than their male colleagues. I have also witnessed very few department chairs or college deans who are female. Whether or not these observations represent a glass ceiling I'm not sure. We do live in a time where the status women scholars have achieved in our country may be on precarious footing. I hope the lessons I've shared will help new female colleagues adapt to the challenges of academia, and experience success and job satisfaction as behavior analysts, scholars, and women.

References

- American Council on Education (2016). New report looks at the status of women in higher education. Retrieved from <http://www.acenet.edu/news-room/Pages/New-Report-Looks-at-the-Status-of-Women-in-Higher-Education.aspx>. August, 2017.
- Flaherty, C. (2017). Relying on women, not rewarding them. *Inside Higher Ed*. Retrieved from <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/04/12/study-finds-female-professors-outperform-men-service-their-possible-professional>. August, 2017.
- Higher Learning Commission (2013). *The Criteria for Accreditation*. Chicago: Author.
- McSweeney, F. K., Donahoe, P., & Swindell, S. (2000). Women in applied behavior analysis. *The Behavior Analyst*, 23, 267–277.
- McSweeney, F. K., & Parks, C. D. (2002). Participation by women in developmental, social, cognitive, and general psychology: a context for interpreting trends in behavior analysis. *The Behavior Analyst*, 25, 37–44.
- Odum, A. L. (2000). Reflections on the glass ceiling: women in the experimental analysis of behavior. *The Behavior Analyst*, 23, 279–283.
- Peltier, B. (2010). *The psychology of executive coaching: theory and application*. New York: Routledge.