

Interview with Dr. Kara Federmeier, 2008

Dear Dr. Federmeier,

On behalf of the Interview Subcommittee of the Student Interest Committee, we greatly appreciate your willingness to take part in an interview for the Fall 2008 newsletter. We believe you have much to share with us about your early career experience. As winner of the 2006 SPR early career award, we wanted to specifically focus on your early career development and skills. Your experience and advice would be most helpful to students and early faculty members of SPR. Thank you for agreeing to take part in this interview. Let's begin.

Early Career Questions

When you began your first faculty position, what were some things that helped you to launch your career?

I benefited a lot from the smart, generous people I have always been fortunate enough to have around me. My mentor, Marta Kutas, allowed me to build on work we had started together, giving me the initial momentum I needed to begin developing independent research lines. My new colleagues, both junior and senior, were open to collaboration and provided new ideas as well as support and resources. Perhaps the most important boost, however, came from the motivated and talented group of students that I was fortunate to recruit into my lab during the critical pre-tenure years. I would be remiss if I did not also mention that having family support ... in my case, from my husband, my parents (who live nearby), and my children ... makes a big difference in allowing the time and energy to get through the sometimes grueling and always stressful (though also rewarding and stimulating!) first few years of a faculty position.

I think a lot of the rest comes down to organization, hard work, and a bit of luck. I tried to use my time wisely, to multitask effectively, and to keep long-term goals and priorities at the forefront. If you take care of the little things quickly and efficiently, say "no" to requests that do not advance your career (e.g., you don't need to review textbooks, though you will be asked to), and learn to sometimes spend time in order to save time later (e.g., organize and file your lecture notes, so you don't have to prep a course each time you teach it), you will be able to carve out the time you need to think, research, and write. The danger comes from allowing yourself to always be at the mercy of the many, little urgent things, such that you never really devote the necessary time to the activities that, in the long run, determine your success.

In moving to a new university, what are the do's and don'ts of the first year? What should new faculty concentrate on?

The answer to this question will depend a lot, of course, on the kind of university and the kind of position. For a research-oriented university, the most important thing is to get your lab set up and recruit students, develop collaborations, and begin active research. All of these things, however, take time and some patience. Thus, the first year can also be used to put things into place that will make it possible to devote more time to research once your lab is established. For example, while I was waiting for my lab renovations to be completed and my equipment to come in, I spent a lot of time developing my courses, focusing on creating resources that I could use each time I taught the course down the line (ultimately saving me a lot of time). To keep up the momentum with the research, I worked on writing up and presenting remaining work from my postdoc and I began collaborations with faculty with active labs. Working on projects with advanced graduate students and eager undergraduates can be a great way to get research underway before you have a well-established lab group of your own. And, in many places, it is expected that in your first year you will begin seeking funding for your work (though you are unlikely to be immediately successful).

In general, the first year is a great time to begin to learn about your new environment and build the foundations and bridges that will serve you in the years to come. Although new faculty are expected to have lots of passion and new ideas, I think it is really important to recognize that you are once again "at the bottom of the ladder" (not the smartest or the busiest person around!) and to spend time observing the institutional culture and taking advantage of the opportunity to see that there are different ways of doing things from what you might have been used to. It is also important to begin to develop independence, but perhaps not a great time to launch into risky, new projects whose outcome and timecourse are unpredictable. Instead, it is better to take small, but significant steps - combining the things you know well with the opportunities and resources that your new environment provides.

Applying for a position always requires a match between the applicant and the institution: How did you go about your search? That is, what characteristics of a particular department attracted you most?

My job search was unusual, so I probably can't give much general advice. Having just had a baby, I wasn't planning to look for jobs, but was told about an open position at the University of Illinois that seemed like a great fit. So I applied there and just a few other places. I did a couple of interviews and got a couple of offers, but from the moment I interviewed at Illinois I had a strong sense that this was where I wanted to be. Illinois has a world-class language group, a long history of strength in psychophysiology, and a large, diverse, interdisciplinary group of faculty interested in human cognition (including an interdisciplinary institute, the Beckman Institute, which houses my lab). I knew I would have a great combination of people to sympathize with me and people to challenge me, which I see as the ideal scholarly environment! I guess the general advice that arises from my experience is to be on the lookout for opportunities (even if they come at what seems like the "wrong" time; I was able to defer my position for a year to a time when moving was easier for my family) and to value fit - and institutional support - over other possible indices of what makes a "good" place to work.

And, on the other hand, from your experience, what are psychology departments generally looking for in job applicants?

I think successful applicants are getting more sophisticated even in just the time I have been in my position. They are more likely to have done postdocs (or other types of post-graduate work), often have multiple publications, and may have experience with multiple techniques (something that I think is becoming increasingly valued). So that can be a bit daunting. On the other hand, most people I know look back fondly on their experience as a postdoc, so I would encourage everyone to consider one, and having more experience before you take a tenure-track job makes it a lot more tractable. Thus, in some ways, the trend may be a good one. It is still hard to predict what any particular job search is going to be looking for, which is why it is important not to take rejection personally. But I think passion is a quality that will never go out of style. The best job talks leave you walking out wishing that you could study what the applicant does! And, although some people are, of course, better speakers than others, a lot of that feeling comes from the applicant simply revealing their own enthusiasm for their work. More general curiosity is also a selling point. Job applicants who can see the potential in *other* people's work - and even see links between that work and their own - promise to be colleagues one would like to have.

Research in Psychophysiology

What direction do you feel the area of psychophysiology is going? Do you see any particular method being popular that students should know and learn about?

I think the current interest in integrating genetic measures into psychophysiological work is likely to grow, as is the trend of employing multiple measures in tandem. And event-related optical imaging (EROS) holds great promise for providing truly spatio-temporal measures of function. But I guess I am a traditionalist because I wouldn't advise students to learn methods just because they are trendy! Of course, it

is indisputable that being at the forefront of growing areas can provide funding and career opportunities. However, as I mentioned earlier, I think that passion is a key ingredient for success. Therefore, I think students should pursue the questions that interest them, and use whatever methods - new or old - are best suited for answering them. For example, although electrophysiological methods are certainly not new, nor particularly trendy, I think they continue to provide some of the most critical data for building our understanding of the rapid, multifaceted neural events that underlie cognition.

You have an impressive number of 44 manuscripts on your publication record - on average about four publications per year - and you received the SPR Early Career Award in 2006. If you look back, what factors enabled you to such an impressively productive early career?

Again, I have to credit supportive mentors, great students, and patient family members. But, mostly, I just really love the work - almost all aspects of it - which makes it not only possible, but actually enjoyable to put in the long hours and deal with the setbacks that are inevitable along the way. The driving force for me has always been the questions, the experiments, the data that beg to be understood ... and the rest has followed from that.

Information for Students

When you think about your graduate student and academic career, is there anything you would do differently if you could?

I guess the answer to that is "no", which reveals how really lucky I have been! I've worked with incredibly smart people who are also nice to be around, been able to focus on topics that were of interest to me, and spent time in dynamic, supportive programs and institutions. If I had to go back and do it again, I would basically do the same things ... and just try to relax and appreciate them all more! But, maybe I would take a tiny bit more time for myself.

What are the major "chapters" in your career and what have been your biggest influences in terms of decisions you have made?

Although there are the obvious transition points - graduate student, postdoc, assistant professor (and also academia pre- and post- being a parent of one and then two kids!) -- a lot of my career growth has felt continuous rather than punctate. I've gained expertise and confidence, had increasingly rich experiences, and become *considerably* busier through the years. Perhaps the most important transition for me has been from being a member of someone else's lab to running my own, and the tremendous shift in responsibility that came along with that. I now see setbacks and successes in terms of their impact on my students' careers and lives as well as my own, which really ups the ante. In terms of influences on my decisions, I have always tried to heed the (consistent) advice of the people who have been most important to me, which is to do what you love and do it to the best of your ability and let the rest play out as it will. This is the advice that I give my students as well, not only in thinking about their academic careers but also in thinking about how to combine their careers with the rest of their lives. You have to do what is right for you.

Where do you see your career going? What are your career goals?

I've spent so much of the last decade focused on the next big goal ... dissertation, academic job, tenure ... that it is interesting to now be in a position to think more long-term. Of course, I anticipate that a lot of things will stay much the same. I want to continue to train good students, to advocate for methodological excellence, and to ask and answer interesting questions. Since the questions that I have worked on, about how meaning information is represented and processed in the brain, really lie at the heart of an understanding of human cognition, it is hard for me to imagine that a more interesting topic could come along! But I do see myself as now being in a position to be able to take on some riskier, bigger projects, perhaps using new methods, and to learn about new areas. I also would like to see my work develop in

ways that have more immediate applicability ... for example, perhaps by expanding my research on aging to include work looking at interventions.