

“Being Near Family and Friends Felt More Important to Me Than Continuing to Pursue an Academic Career”



Emily Batty



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Abstract In our interview with Emily Batty, she shares her journey from comparative cognition to police analyst and now city mobility analyst. Wanting to stay in her hometown and start a family, Emily did not pursue postdoctoral positions. She applied broadly for research jobs, finding a long-term role in the police service analysing complaint trends. Emily values the clear work-life balance and serving her community. She applies critical thinking skills placing data in context. Emily recently started a new role analysing traffic data to improve road safety, allowing her to keep problem solving. Emily advises deciding based on personal factors, as all paths have good and bad.

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Chris: Can you introduce yourself and tell me a bit about your current position?

Emily: My name is Emily Batty. I am 43 years old. I completed my PhD in 2009, studying experimental psychology (focus on comparative cognition). After completing my PhD, I took an analyst position with the local police service, where I have been working for the last 13 years. I work in the Professional Standards section of the police service, where we investigate complaints about police officers.

As the analyst for the section, I manage our database to ensure that we are collecting good quality data, analyse data, and create reports for our various stakeholders. This can include reports to the various divisions of the police service (so that they understand what types of complaints they are receiving and can work to improve service), reports to the public, and reports to oversight bodies (such as our police commission).

What was the focus of your PhD?

I completed my PhD in experimental psychology in 2009, studying at the University of Alberta. My research was focused on comparative cognition – that is, comparing the cognitive abilities of different species of animals. My main area of focus was looking at spatial abilities and learning, and whether animals used absolute strategies (for example, the food is 8 steps away from the landmark) or relational strategies (the food is in the middle of the two landmarks).

What I love about comparative cognition, and something that I think serves me well in my current position, is that it takes a ‘big picture’ approach to problems. Instead of just looking at *what* animals do, there is a focus on *why* the behaviour occurs; what are the ecological, evolutionary, and/or neurological constraints that would lead to a certain behaviour, and how would different constraints lead to different (or similar) behaviours in other animals?

In my current position, it helps to bring that ‘big picture’ thinking to the analysis of complaints. Regardless of the audience of my reports, they are rarely interested in just the numbers – people want to know why we are getting certain complaints or why certain trends are occurring.

As you were finishing your PhD, what were you thinking about your career plans?

When I started graduate school, I opted to stay at the school where I had completed my undergraduate degree (which is also where I had grown up and lived all my life). At the time, I knew I'd have to move away afterwards to do a postdoc and get some outside experiences, but starting out, that seemed like a long way away. I chose to stay at the same university because I already had experience in the lab and felt like I could hit the ground running (and I do feel like that worked out for me).

However, by the end of my PhD, I was realizing that I wasn't really interested in moving away anymore. I was married and knew I would eventually want to have children, and being near family and friends felt more important to me than continuing to pursue an academic career.

Beyond staying in my home city, I wasn't really sure what I wanted to do. I applied for a variety of analyst and research jobs and ended up here with the police. I kept my 'foot in the door' for a while by lecturing on the side and applying at nearby universities, but ultimately gave that up.

How did you decide what to do next?

Deciding what to do after my PhD was really just about the circumstances. I applied for a variety of jobs where I met the qualifications and landed here with the police. At the time, I didn't really know what the job was except that it had something to do with statistics.

For me, the 'what next' was focused more on my personal life. I knew I wanted to stay in the city where I was and (eventually) start a family. 'What next' in terms of a job/career was a bit more of an afterthought. I just wanted to get into the 'workforce' and figure out what I liked and what I could do.

Can you tell us a bit about what day-to-day life is like in your current position?

Since I manage our database, I am the one who knows how to find the answers to whatever questions pop up about our investigations.

I have various reports due on different schedules. I create 'case management' reports for our management team on a bi-weekly schedule (every 2 weeks) so they can track what investigations are ongoing and what stage the investigations are at. I create monthly statistical reports that are distributed within the police service so that other areas know what types of complaints we are getting (and can hopefully proactively work to prevent further complaints). There are quarterly reports and annual

reports that go to various stakeholders, such as divisional commanders or our police commission.

In addition to scheduled reports, I field a lot of ad hoc inquiries. For example, some recent requests for information included whether there has been a change over the past few years in how complaints are resolved (either through dispute resolution or with the Chief of Police directing a more ‘formal’ investigation), trends in complaints related to our canine unit, and a summary of criminal complaints against our officers.

While my primary role is being able to create reports and answer inquiries, I also do some more in-depth work when complaints are first received. Complaints against police officers are regulated under the Alberta Police Act, so when a complaint is first received, there has to be some analysis of whether the requirements of the Police Act have been met and what our options for moving forward are. I work with our Intake Team and Strategic Assessment Committee to analyse complaints within the framework of the legislation to ensure a fair process for everyone. This can involve summarizing the complaint, summarizing police reports, determining which parts of the legislation apply, and recommending the scope of the investigation.

What do you like most about your work?

What I like BEST is the clear delineation between work and personal life. Due to the confidentiality of our work, it isn’t super easy to access my work outside work hours. Until Covid, I wasn’t able to access email or work files at all outside of the office. I don’t get work emails on my phone or receive any work phone calls at home. Since Covid, I have been able to remotely log-in to my computer, but I have to actually sit at my desk and log-in before getting to any emails or work files. It makes it easy to focus on my personal life when I am not constantly reminded of work tasks.

I like the community aspect of my job, in that I am working with an area that is actively working to make our community better by holding police accountable.

I like being an expert in my field. I’ve been in my position long enough to know all the ins and outs, and I feel appreciated when people ask for my advice and expertise.

And what do you like least about your work?

I miss the generative, open-endedness of science. The best part of grad school was going to conferences and coming home with SO MANY ideas, and really nothing stopping you from digging into them. My work now is more reactive and restricted. Of course, I can still come up with ideas on how to improve our processes and do things differently, but then there is all the red tape in actually getting any change effected.

How do you think having a PhD has helped you succeed in your current position?

There are a lot of different skills that can be acquired during graduate school, and sometimes, it comes down to how well you translate or generalize those skills (or how well you can ‘sell’ them to potential employers). For example, you learn supervisory skills in mentoring other students or lab members, you learn presentations skills (oral, written, visual) through conferences and presentations, you develop time management skills, etc.

I think what helped me the most was the critical thinking skills involved in placing data into context. Generally, when completing any research or writing articles, it wasn’t enough to just say what we had done and what the results showed – you need the context of why we obtained those results and what they mean. In the area of comparative cognition, that meant considering ecological, evolutionary, and/or neurological factors that could affect behaviour. In my role with the police, it can involve considering what is going on within the city or specific policing units. For example, if a division recently launched a traffic safety campaign and increased the number of tickets they were issuing, that could lead to increases in complaints about that division.

Recognizing and presenting the context of data is always helpful.

If someone currently finishing their PhD was considering a position similar to yours, how might they decide if it would be a good fit?

As mentioned above, I think it comes down to how well someone recognizes how their skills can translate across contexts. Being aware of what they have really learned in grad school, aside from the facts and area expertise, would allow them to align their skill sets with the role. This also helps narrow down what someone might be interested in (e.g. do they like supervising and mentorship, or are they more interested in individual work like data analysis?).

If someone was interested in pursuing a similar career path, what would you suggest they do to better prepare themselves?

For pursuing a role in data analysis, knowing statistics helps but having an understanding of how data is organized and how to set up data to answer specific questions is more important. In real world settings, we aren’t often running full statistical analyses, but it helps to know different ways to find the data you need. Knowing

different databases or programming languages is definitely helpful – skills that can certainly be acquired in grad school by working with different types of data.

A lot of people like academia because they feel it gives them an opportunity to work on a topic that they deeply care about. Do you think this is also true in your current position?

Yes and no. Personally, I tend to get more excited about ‘solving the mystery’. I like to figure out why things are the way they are or discover the context behind data; the specific topic itself is not something I care as deeply about. In other words, I like the process of discovery better than the topic itself. My current position provides lots of opportunity for that process, but the topics are more limited. There is some space to suggest new research projects and topics, but I think there are more limitations and restrictions than in academia.

Another reason many like academia is that they feel it provides them with more freedom than they think they would get in other positions. How much freedom do you feel you have to work on what you think is interesting?

As above, there is some space and freedom to explore new work, research projects, or new topics, but I think there are more restrictions than in academia. Generally, any ‘new’ work needs to fit in around your usual workload and responsibilities, and there is more of a necessity to prove how the new topic is valuable and relevant to your current work. In my mind, academia has more freedom for straight exploration – though I guess that doesn’t really account for the pressures of publishing!

I know you have just started a new job, can you tell us a bit about that role and what it entails?

I’m now a Safe Mobility Analyst with the City of Edmonton. I’m still figuring out the new role, but basically, I will be supporting various areas of the city in providing data analysis to help make our roads safer. I will be analysing data from crashes and automated traffic enforcement to determine which areas of the city could benefit from various interventions (such as engineering improvements to intersections, or targeted education campaigns, etc.). We also do some before-and-after studies to look at how successful specific interventions are.

Based on your journey, what advice or suggestions do you want to pass on to someone who’s currently finishing their PhD?

Advice is so tricky because everyone is different! I guess I would just say that there are no wrong answers. I have trouble making decisions sometimes because I can’t figure out what I want *the most* – but there is good and bad in everything, and whatever the decision, you’ll adjust or you’ll move on with more experience.

Thank you for sharing your career journey with us, Emily!