**Division 17 Fellow Statement**

**Stefanía Ægisdóttir**

**Ball State University**

I am greatly honored to be selected as a Fellow of Division 17 of the American Psychological Association. This honor would not have been bestowed on me without the mentorship, nurturing, and influence of numerious instrumental persons in my life. In this statement, I will explain my sentiment in addition to briefly describing my life journey as an international counseling psychologist.

I am a first generation college student from Iceland. Born in 1963 to a working class entrepreneurial parents and oldest of my parents’ five children, I became independent at a very early age. My parents (Ægir Bessason & Guðný Arnbergsdóttir) instilled in me that I was free to do with my life as I wanted; my life journey was my choice and they would support me no matter what! After quitting school at the age of 16 to work in a small fish factory belonging to my grandfather, a fish factory where I had worked during all summer and winter breaks from school since the age 13, I realized after about 9 months that I should go back to school to expand my career options. I enrolled in a 4 year secondary education school in my hometown and graduated 3.5 years later with a diploma majoring in natural sciences, which allowed me to enroll at the University of Iceland (UI).

I began studying medicine at UI in 1983, but switched to psychology due to my greater interests in studying abstract ideas. There were several scholars at UI who influenced and encouraged me become a critical thinker: the late Dr. Friðrik H. Jónsson, Dr. Erlendur Haraldsson (who was my BA thesis chair), and Dr. Magnús Kristjánsson. These men were incredible thinkers and scholars who pushed me to expand my thinking repertoire and resarch skills. In addition to these professors, I came to know the first Icelandic Counseling Psychologist, the late Dr. Sölvína Konráðs. She was an adjunct professor at UI finishing her Ph.D. in Counseling Psychology from the University of Minnesota. I took both of her classes as electives: Individual Differences and Vocational Psychology. Dr. Konráðs was amazingly smart; she was a tough cookie, and a good researcher. I wanted to be like her! As a result, I began considering a Ph.D. in counseling psychology.

At this time in Iceland, one had to study abroad to get education beyond a BA degree in psychology, and a degree in counseling psychology could only be obtained in the USA. Thus, my next stop was the USA! In 1993, I was accepted into the MA and later Ph.D. programs at Ball State University (BSU) after receiving a Fulbright grant to help finance my travel to the USA. I was a mother of two children at this time. My children and my (now) ex-husband came along with me on this new, exciting, and scary journey which continues to this day. At BSU, I met many individuals who encouraged and mentored me, among them: Dr. David Dixon, Dr. Mark Kieselica, Dr. Sharon Bowman, and Dr. Larry Gerstein. Dr. Dixon was the chair of the Department of Counseling Psychology and Guidance Services at BSU at this time. During the first week of my master’s program, he called me into his office to welcome me and informed me that he had received a phone call from one of my professors in Iceland (Dr. Jónsson), who urged him to accept me into the program. Dr. Dixon also said he hoped BSU would fulfill my expectations and teach me something. This meeting was encouraging and provided me with a boost to tackle the challenges ahead of me. Thank you, Dr. Dixon, and BSU did teach me!

I thank Dr. Kiselica for believing in me. He had the challenging “honor” to read and edit my first ever paper written in the English language. It was in the counseling theories class. A week after turning in the paper, Dr. Kiselica called me into his office to hand it back to me. It was all covered with red markings with options for how to improve my writing. Surprisingly, he informed me that he gave me an A for the paper and that I did not need to rewrite it, despite all the grammatical errors. He informed me that he spent one wakeful night editing my paper, but stated that he could easily see my thesis in the paper, which made it strong enough to deserve an A. I rewrote the paper for myself. This was the best lesson I have ever had in English writing composition.

Dr. Sharon Bowman is another important mentor. She has been an incredible support throughout my studies and work in the USA. She realized very quickly upon my arrival as a student at BSU that I would experience a lot of culture clash, and was open and supportive throughout the process. Her support in my multicultural class during my first year and throughout my career at BSU has been tremendous, as was her influence as my clinical supervisor. Dr. Bowman has enouraged me, pushed me, and believed in me. I could not have done all I have done without her support. To this day, Dr. Bowman continues to be a strong role model and a friend. Thanks, Sharon!

In my research class my first year in the MA program I met my most influential research mentor, Dr. Larry Gerstein. In Dr. Gerstein’s class, I developed a research proposal outlining a cross-cultural comparison between U.S. and Icelandic college students’ expectations about counseling. Dr. Gerstein encouraged me to conduct this study, which I did with his mentorship. This was the beginning of our long and ongoing relationship, first as a student/mentor, and currently colleagues and friends. I collected data for this study in 1994 -1995. At this time, international issues and topics were not commonly published in U.S. counseling psychology journals. In fact, in many ways international issues and topics were frowned upon in the field! However, with Dr. Gerstein’s encouragement, vision, and mentorship, we finally published it a few years later. Whereas it could be argued that this publication might not be that significant and something that is a common product from a mentor-student relationship, I disagree! During this time, counseling psychology was not open to international research. In fact, it took a few years of writing, rewriting and a lot of persuasive arguments to finally have this project published. This task required a lot of stamina and encouragement as we experienced great resistance from journal editors and reviewers. Yet, despite receiving comments from journal editors about the lack of interest U.S. readers might have in learning about counseling expectations of Icelanders and the lack of relevance knowledge about Icelanders might have for theory and practice in the U.S., Dr. Gerstein encouraged me to continue with this line of research and not give up as the day would come that the field would be ready. This project resulted in our continued research and writing advocating for the value of international topics for the field of counseling psychology and the importance of good quality international research. Without Dr. Gerstein’s guidance, encouragement, and mentorship I would not have been in a position to successfully advocate for an international focus in counseling psychology. Thank you, Larry!

Now, two decades later the counseling psychology field is beginning to acknowledge, at least to some degree, the merit of international research for the counseling psychology profession. It has begun to understand that U.S.-centric thinking does not advance knowledge. Instead it has come to the realization that not only can U.S. scholars share their knowledge with scholars from other countries, but they can also learn from scholars around the world and apply this knowledge in the United States. At this time, I would like the field to continue with this development and allowing the broader international “voice” to be heard. I encourage editors of counseling psychology journals to keep this in mind. It will only strengthen counseling psychology as a discipline if we allow ourselves to be humble and learn about the development of psychology in all different corners of the world. Reciprocal dissemination of knowledge leads to advancement, cultural understanding, and increased social justice for all.

In closing, I thank the Fellowship committee for accepting my nomination for Fellow status in Division 17 and allowing me to share this honor with my U.S. mentors, who all are Division 17 Fellows. I also would like to convey my deepest gratitude to my parents and sisters in Iceland; my ex-husband Smári Gissurarson, who supported me during my first two years in my graduate studies with his numerous trips to libraries in Indiana to copy articles for my papers; my current husband Dennis Lee, who has been with me through thick and thin since 1997; and my five children: Guðný Helgadóttir, Arnbergur Smárason, Ellen Björk Dennisdóttir, Lilja Björk Dennisdóttir, and Eric Lee, who have loved, tolerated, and supported me in my journey to become an international counseling psychologist. Thanks to you all!