

Psychology's Feminist Voices Oral History Project

Interview with Dr. Jem Tosh

Toronto, ON

March 31st, 2020

JT: Jem Tosh, interview participant

ZM: Zoë Martin, interviewer

What does it mean to queer psychology?

ZM (00:00): What does queering psychology mean to you?

JT: When I was thinking about this for me, and it's probably just because my research has kind of dominated this area for about a decade now. Um, for me, queering psychology is about de-pathologization. My work looks a lot at the history of psychology, and compares it to today. And it's just impossible to know that without being very aware of how queerness has been very negatively represented within psychology and a lot of the historical texts and works and the — observing those changes, but also being aware of how a lot of those negative representations are still carried through in certain spaces in psychology for that. So for me, queering psychology is addressing that, changing that, countering, that, producing discourses and narratives that center queerness in a way that isn't framing it as an abnormality. That's kind of one big part of it. And the other part, for me, is not just so much as creating more positive narratives about queerness, that moves it away from mental illness and all that kind of thing, but de-centering heterosexuality and deconstructing that norm that has been produced over such a long period of time — It's just so strong and so influential — that even in spaces that aren't, you know, outwardly homophobic or, um, framing queerness as, as abnormal, you still find that it's considered as like an extra on the side if it's considered at all. So I think there's been, there have been a couple of times where I've been really surprised and maybe I shouldn't be, but you know, I remember talking to a researcher once that was talking about parenting. That was kind of the research area. And I was chatting about the research that I do and they're like, “Oh, that's so interesting... but, you know, sexuality isn't really relevant to my work.” And I was kind of like, “is there a reason you don't think queer parents exist?” There's these kinds of decisions where people think that queerness is only relevant in sexuality studies and that queer people only belong in this little sub-category over here [*gestures to the side*]. So for me, **queering psychology is about** challenging that. I want to see [queer] people included in studies on bullying, on workplace harassment, on the most mundane topics. Because people exist and if you're not including them in your research, then you need to state why. If you're studying heterosexuality and parenting, then that's what you're studying. But if you say that you're studying “parenting,” then you need to have a broader kind of representation of people you're considering. So, um, yeah, that's for me de-pathologization and deconstructing that norm that excludes queerness.

ZM (03:02): Yeah. This is actually strangely relevant, just by chance. Um, last night I had a -- I'm in a feminist pedagogy class, and we talked about parenting a bunch. And one question that the teacher asked was, “Well, if we don't need to teach heterosexuality or traditional gender roles, like why do we have to teach about gayness or, um, trans stuff?” And I was like, ‘uh, I think we really do teach, um, heterosexuality and traditional gender roles, like very hard. Um, it's just not, it's just not noticed.’”

JT (03:51): Because that's, you know, it's the “default.” Like, there are people that come across who have never, studied or taken a particular interest in gender and sexuality at all in their research. And they would probably describe themselves as inclusive or not really, you know, hateful or homophobic or anything, but if you've never questioned it and you've always gone for the default, then what you've learned is harmful. Especially people who've gone through, you know, mainstream psychology training that doesn't have critical perspectives in it. It's changing, so hopefully it's getting better, but you know, particularly my training... if I had believed it word for word and not critiqued it and not challenged it, then the work that I would be reproducing would be harmful. Like that's just cause that's what it's based on. That's what the history is. So yeah, it's definitely important to teach it because you've already been taught a very harmful way and picked it up even if you didn't mean to.

Has psychology been queered yet?

ZM: Yeah. So like, what is the answer? Like, is it, is queering psychology, like aspirational? Has it been done?

JT (05:05): NO. *(laughing)* There's your short answer! I wouldn't say it's been done. I mean, I wish it was, and certainly a lot has been done, even in my career when I started out, like I said, it -- just, the training that I had, it just wasn't covered. It wasn't included, or it was completely pathologized. Um, whereas now we have trans studies, we have trans psychology, we have queer psychology. It's just, it's more visible. It's more *there*. There are more voices, there's more publications to draw on.

I mean, sometimes I still write things and there's just nothing on it. Compare that to the wealth of publications and research and institutions and everything around the other perspectives, the more... — either those that center heterosexuality and frame it as not only normal but better, um, [or] those that are literally producing harmful transphobic, homophobic kind of conversion therapy perspectives. So we're still not equal to those voices and those places of influence, but we're a lot better than we were and we're taken a lot more seriously than we were before. So I think it's good progress, but like I said, until that norm is challenged—which isn't just for sexuality—I mean, that's a harmful norm regarding everything — you know, race, class, ability, just... across the board it's, a very narrow, harmful norm. Until that's done, I think we're still going to be thought of as an afterthought. And when you're marginalized in that way, it just creates a context where framing you in a negative way is more likely to happen. And when you're framed in a more likely, kind of negative way, then it just opens the doors for harmful and abusive strategies like conversion therapies.

ZM (06:54): Yes—

JT: -- Maybe a more critical (?) answer than you wanted.

ZM (06:51ish): No, that's perfect. That's great. What does queerness have to do with psychology? Can you say again, why queerness is relevant to, uh, any psychologists studying parenting or any psychologists studying ... anything?

What does queerness have to do with psychology? Why is queerness relevant?

JT (06:57): Well, psychology is the study of what? People, communities, society. So who's in that? Who are people? You know, who is in your society? You're in these groups; you're in your communities. Everyone is. There are queer people in the world. It's back to that really basic, "Hey, queer people exist!" And that kind of shows how much more work we need to do in queering psychology, that we're still having those conversations of, "Hey, we exist. Hey, you need to include us" before you can even move on to, "hey, we're an equal." You know, "we should be treated as an equal, not as an afterthought and not as less than any other type of relationship or sexuality." So, if you're excluding particular groups from your research, even from an academic point of view, you need a justification for that! You need a reason for that! If you're only studying heterosexual, cisgender parents... cool, that's your topic area. Why? Why have you put those limits on your own work (which is perfectly adequate, you know, it's impossible to study everything. You know, I always put it in whatever paper I'm writing about the boundaries of the work that I'm doing. So it can become a part of that). But the problem for me comes when you say that you're studying parenting and you haven't done that because **you're masking the exclusion that you're doing**. The other area that I come across it a lot that comes closer to my own work, so I am a little more passionate about it, is the exclusion of trans and non binary people from research in violence. And again, I've come across people saying, well, I study violence and violence against women. And I'm like, okay, well, why don't you include trans women in your research on violence against women? Because we know it's a significant issue. It is a valid research area, and it is an important social change area. So you've made a conscious decision not to include them. So again, that's fine if that's your area, you're looking at cis-women, but again, you have to justify that. Um, so yeah, that's my little rant on that.

ZM (09:39): Yeah. To justify it or at the very least to name it, like to say "I'm studying CIS women" (if you're not studying any trans women). Um, yeah. I, I felt like that was a stupid question for me to ask, but I'm glad I did because that was like a really beautiful answer.

JT: No, I do. I do get asked that, and I get asked that mostly I would say -- or, you know—or, the kind of places where I come across, where people haven't considered, are usually those with the best of intentions who haven't made the conscious decision to exclude. But again, like I said, they've got that default training and they haven't realized that actually what you were trained in was quite harmful and excluded a lot of people. So it's, It requires you to unlearn a little thing, you know, relearn some other things, and make those decisions. And it's part of that change—we weren't having these conversations a decade ago when I started, but it's expected now. The same way we're seeing conversations about representation in the media. We weren't having these conversations a decade ago. We're seeing much better... —, not perfect by far, but you know — the conversations are happening. So if someone's been doing research on parenting for a decade and 10 years ago, this (*excluding queer or trans people*) was fine. I can understand why that person might feel awful now, if all of a sudden they're being criticized for it, but for me, everyone makes mistakes. It's all about learning. Academia is always about constantly learning and updating. So, there are things I've written at the beginning of my career that I would love to change how it was phrased or whatever, but ... you make a commitment to changing as you go *forward*.

Do you need to be queer to queer psychology?

ZM (11:04): Mhm. I like that. Oh, another question I had was... can you queer psychology if you're not queer?. Basically how much does your personal identity play in?

JT (11:35): Um, I think I am going to be controversial for this one and throw in a yes, you can queer psychology if you're straight. Um, don't quote me on that on its own, please contextualize it... because if I'm defining queering psychology as challenging homophobia and challenging those negative narratives and dismantling that norm that excludes queer people, then that's completely something that a straight person can do. You can in your writing challenge that, and you can deconstruct that norm and you can also center queer voices in your writing, when you're writing about queerness and sexuality. There are many queer academics, queer authors — *(waves)* hello, give me a cite! That's very easily done. So for me that, yes, it can. On the other hand, I think there's different ways of queering psychology. I guess there are limits in that sense. There's only so far that that can go because you don't have the part where the identity takes place. Another aspect for me, for example, um, as a queer psychologist and a bisexual psychologist, another part of queering psychology is simply taking up space... um, working in, shall we say “hostile environments” you know, mainstream psychology spaces, departments, conferences, —*oh so many*—we're simply taking up space. Being known as a queer psychologist either because that's what my writing makes very clear, the kind of position that I'm taking, or, you know, being out in my work, um, clearly (in my experience) has caused some discomfort to those who are very invested in those older historical narratives. So that's one way that I can queer psychology: just by taking up space and being visible and, and writing and voicing my concerns that would be harder or just not possible for a straight person to do... but that straight person could center my voice or give me platforms to be able to kind of share my views in that way. So they can still be a part of that aspect of it, but it's just slightly different. But yeah, I'd say queering psychology's open to everyone. It's just making sure that you're not taking up space from queer voices and you're not replacing those or taking opportunities from queer psychologists.

ZM (13:53): That's a really good answer. I agree with that. I like it. One thing that I like about the term ‘queer’, and I feel like there are other terms, but I don't remember them now. It's just like how complexity is built into it. Recently I've been hearing about the fact that individualistic cultures, like, uh, Western cultures tend to be more ... less tolerant of contradiction, I think. And I really like that idea and I feel like queerness is more tolerant of contradiction.

What can queerness offer psychology?

JT (14:36): That's fair. And that maybe answers another question you had in your email about **what queer perspectives or queerness can offer psychology**. And it is that complexity, that comfort or a celebration of contradiction, difference, fluidity... um, ambiguity, unclear answers, and specifics. And celebration of the individual, because on the one hand, what I find with psychology, especially around the norms and, you know, quantifying perspectives that want to generalize is, is losing the individual and the uniqueness. And, you know, the way I experience gender fluidity is going to be completely different to how another person experiences gender fluidity. So if I do a massive project and do a survey on gender fluidity, and then try and generalize, you lose that uniqueness and difference and complexity. And that's something that I think queerness celebrates.

ZM (15:29): So do you think like, uh, case studies have more potential to be queer than, uh ... can quantitative methods accommodate queerness?

JT(15:44): I'm very biased as a qualitative researcher for that question... Um, I would say, I don't want to say no. I mean, queerness— you can certainly queer stats. I would love to see some queer stats. Maybe I would have. I mean, I've taught a lot of statistics. Um, yeah, I would be up for being taught some queer stats. I like case studies for that reason. I mean, that's my interest. My interest is experience and I like to center those who've been silenced and marginalized. So they do tend to be the smaller groups that are positioned outside. And I don't like to generalize because, I mean, my main research area is sexual abuse. And while you can generalize a lot of things about sexual abuse and trauma... everyone's experience is unique and individual. So for me, case studies work, or smaller groups, or looking at those narratives that are discourses that are silenced. So for me, there's a place for everything. I would never say that case studies are better or that's what everyone should be doing because that would be problematic in itself. So I'm sure there's a place for queer stats. It's just hard, I think, because quantitative approaches have been historically used so much to create harmful narratives about marginalized groups and generalizing and creating norms and all that kind of thing. So I'm, I'm not jumping on board, but totally happy for someone to really do queer stats and get me on board [*laughs*].

Stories, Narratives, and Queer(ing) Psychology

ZM (17:09): I'm definitely going to Google that [*laughter*] after we're done; I've typed it into the search bar. I feel like you foregrounded the importance of your own stories and experiences in your work, and part of that is like challenging the idea that objectivity is something to strive for, or [is] better than having personal experience, which is clearly, as you said, helpful and relevant and like enriches science. I'm really interested in storytelling and narrative as a tool for education and learning and *doing* psychology. And I'm wondering if ...that so in general, about like how you feel about narrative and storytelling and whether it has a place in psychology or queer psychology and then also... personal stories, our own stories, and how that fits in with self-disclosure. I accidentally asked two questions. Do you want me to split them up?

JT (18:28): I might need reminding for the second one, but I want to answer the first one: yes, I would say storytelling and narrative certainly have a place in psychology and in queer psychology. My whole work and analysis is on discourses and narratives and, and how we frame topics and represent. And on the other hand, everything in psychology is a story or a narrative... even if, you know, I hate to break it to quantitative researchers (*laughs*), but even if you do a very hardcore quant paper, *you're* writing it and *you're* interpreting those numbers... so *you* are telling a story, it might be a story you feel is objective—I'll just confirm I agree there are problems of objectivity with you —, but, you know, and you might just be drawing on a story that's already been told hundreds, maybe thousands of times by other researchers. So you feel that your story is more valid or whatever, but you're still telling the story, you know, unless you're not using any language of any kind and even then you're getting into symbols. So there's just no real way of avoiding telling a story or a narrative. So it's there whether you want it to be or not, and not reflecting on the story you're telling? That's for me when we get into the problems with objectivity. If, if you believe that you're neutral and you're just reproducing the narratives you've already

heard, um, I have a problem with that as opposed to transparency and reflecting on potential harms of the narratives that you're sharing.

Personal narratives—I did remember the second question! — also definitely have a place because for me it's about different types of knowledge. Knowledges, plural. [inaudible] academic that's based on research from other people, but you can also draw on your own experiences and I think those are a really interesting way that the profession or academia devalues personal stories as biased, which isn't the methodology that I use. (20:21) But on the other hand, as long as an academic has listened to a personal story, all of a sudden it becomes valid. So, if I'm a participant in a research project and I tell an academic who has no lived experience what I've lived through... for some reason it's more valid coming from them than from me. And I have a problem with that. You know, my lived experience from my voice and my perspective is not only valid, but deserves the credit and recognition that [is afforded to] an academic who has listened to it and transcribed it and applied a methodology to it. When you look at it that way psychology is filled with personal stories. We're just not giving credit to, or listening to, the actual people that said them [*chuckles*].

ZM (21:05): Cool, as somebody who's really into reading and stories... I love that answer. Like, actually everything is stories!

JT (21:17): Everything is a story [*laughter*]!

ZM: Just admit it [*laughter*]!

ZM (21:21): Um, I, I feel like that's going to make my studies a lot more fun — to, uh, think of things that way. Oh! one thing I didn't ask was about like, uh, psychology versus like psy-adjacent disciplines or like, um, I feel like I've gotten this narrative of you kind of rejecting Psychology with a capital P. Is that true?

JT (22:11): [*laughter*] “Jem *rejects* psychology” (*both laugh*).— [inaudible] Um, yeah, because, because I study discourses, narratives, stories, um, from historical to present, like it's such a big topic area that I look into and there's so many narratives within that, but they cross those kinds of disciplinary boundaries a lot. So I've written articles and publications and editors will kind of come back to me and say, “can you just say ‘psychology and psychiatry?’” or, you know, we get kind of into these discussions because it crosses the — I'll study, the DSM, technically a psychiatric text. But I mean, you come across that language in so many psychology spaces and, you know, you talk about different therapies and that comes up in psychotherapy spaces and, you know, I'm tracing the story that's being created about a group. So I just follow where it goes, and it tends to kind of go around a lot of those different professions in very similar ways. (23:14) ‘Cause I mean, people tend to be more loyal, shall we say, to the perspective of the issue than their profession. So if they think that queerness is “abnormal,” then they're going to draw on the psychiatric literature that says that even if technically they're, you know, a psychotherapist. Psychoanalytic work, I've looked at in several of my publications. It's never the main focus probably cause I have so many problems with it, for issues around trans... but when I looked at the narratives, when I have analyzed Freud and you know, and kind of older texts regarding gender and sexuality—while the language might be slightly different, the main story that's being told about people being particular ways

can be very similar. So, I generally include examples from different professions to show that it's not, it's not an individual problem. For example, it's not Freud, he's not *the* problem. We can't just solve it by ignoring him. We can't just ignore it by getting rid of the DSM, you know, it's a much broader problem. So I included examples, yeah, from all kinds of psy-disciplines and discourses in that way.

ZM (24:26): Cool, yes. That makes sense. So basically like: queering disciplines probably necessitates not worrying too much about the borders between disciplines?

JT (24:39): I think that fits into the complexity, the contradiction, and the fluidity parts of it. From my research perspective, we look at the interrelationships between texts and discourses. We're actively looking for those pathways and connections between different ... I've compared psychology to law, I've compared psychology to medicine, because stories, if you like, you know, cross those boundaries. So if I'm studying the issue, I'm going to cross those boundaries too, follow and see where it goes. Um, that's, that's my methodology. But I would also say, like we said before, that queerness and complexity would fit into that. I don't think queerness would fit with strict boundaries. We don't like strict boundaries around our identities. That's harmful in some ways; it closes off possibilities, it excludes people, so it would make sense that queering psychology would have a similar approach.

ZM (25:37): Cool, agreed. **Do** do you have any final thoughts or questions for me?

Personal Experiences

JT (26:00):

Uh, there was one question in the email that I thought about before and you can delete in editing if it's of no user interest, but there was one about, um, how people related to gender and sexuality and like personal experiences or whatever. And, um, it made me laugh because something came to mind [laughter]. So I was an over-invested ally for quite a period of time. And there's just one moment that came to mind when I realized that I wasn't as cis as I thought I was [laughter]. We were in this, um, conference and there was like a panel and we were talking about trans health, trans issues. And they got us in little groups and said to talk about our experiences of mis-gendering and how they made us feel. And I went first, and I started reaming off like, loads of examples of being mis-gendered. (26:55): Um — With my fluidity, I can kind of go from in androgynous to kind of soft-butcht to femme — and, um, I was reflecting on my periods of being soft-butcht and being mis-gendered like “Hey, sir,” and all that kind of stuff. And I talked about how much it upset me. And I really didn't like it. And when I finished speaking, just the looks on the people in the group I was in made me realize that this wasn't a shared experience with these people. They were very surprised to hear about it. They couldn't relate at all; had never been mis-gendered, or if anyone had ever done it, it was considered funny and it wasn't upsetting. And that was kind of a moment for me when I realized I wasn't as cis as I thought I was, and that my experiences were much more closely, uh, shared with, uh, people from trans/non-binary/genderconforming communities. But that literal split second of explaining my own experience, not really realizing it was different to cis people, and then looking up and seeing people's faces and being like, “Oh, I'm different from you.”

ZM (28:03): Cool! That reminds me of like, I started to feel very queer, but hadn't like... shaved my head, ... but, um, trans and nonbinary felt very incorrect. Like, I felt very cis. But I *loved* when people, um, would call me “sir,” or say, “hey man,” or something. And I thought it was like a great story. I don't know.

I just, I thought it was so great and it took me a while to realize like part of that is just like, I would like to be able to do that all the time. Like when people corrected themselves afterwards, I was like, “no, no, keep going with that. That's fine...!”

JT (28:51): For me, because I've reflected on this too, that on the one hand it would have been nice to not be read immediately as female or ‘she,’ but every time I was mis-gendered it was, it was combined with humiliation or hostility. Um, there was “hello sir” and then when they took a second glance or realized, you know, laughter, like it would be still absurd to think of me as [a ‘sir’]... So that was kind of the experience. And maybe that's why ‘he/him’ has never...I’m ‘they,’ or ‘she;’ never a hundred percent happy with either of those — we'll see how that goes — but yeah, and that's what I mean, these different—and this is the uniqueness about being non binary people, experiencing things in different complex ways!

ZM (29:39): Hm. Yeah. I feel like there must be so many things involved in that. Cause I think part of it is probably the culture in Toronto, for example, because I think that's the only place where I've been consistently, like, gendered as a man and almost always it's this sort of like, um, pally, um, response from other men. Like once literally I dropped a glove and a guy came up behind me and was like, ”hey buddy.” And then when I turned around, he was like, “OH, sorry!” ... I was like, “I can be your buddy!”
(*chuckles*)

JT (30:12): My experie — I grew up in Northern Ireland. So this happened in the 1990s, rural Northern Ireland.

ZM: Oof; yes —

JT: We were taught, um, the Bible instead of science when it came [time] to teach about the Big Bang; our sex ed was being read a poem from the perspective of a baby being aborted;

ZM: [*interjects*] Nooo

JT: ...homosexuality was an abomination, um, and trans/non-binary just wasn't even..it just wasn't... it just didn't exist. It just didn't happen. It was, it was lumped in with queerness and gayness and that was all sinful and awful. That was, that was my experience. So when I was breaking gender norms and um, just existing as a queer person in that space. Yeah. You get some stuff hard stuff from that!

ZM (31:05):

Yeah. I feel like that's really impressive to be able to get to that place in that environment, to be able to, like, listen to yourself enough, to act so strongly against — or like, so, uh... 180 degrees away from — what you're being told is the right way to be.