Psychology's Feminist Voices Oral History Project

Interview with Beatrice Wright

Interviewed by Sara McLelland, Alexandra Rutherford, Michelle Fine & Susan Opotow
Toronto, ON
August 5, 2009

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BW – Beatrice Wright, interview participant
SM – Sara McLelland, interviewer
AR – Alexandra Rutherford, interviewer
MF – Michelle Fine, interviewer
SO – Susan Opotow, interviewer

BW – Beatrice A. Wright, December 16, 1917.

SM – You were starting to talk a little bit about your early choices in going to school and things like that. I would love to know a little bit about why psychology? What drew you? Were there things that were going on? What was that decision like for you?

BW – I was an undergraduate at Brooklyn College in New York and one of my professors was Abraham Maslow. You've heard of him. For his work on peak experience I was one of his subjects. He was interviewing people about peak experiences. The psychologists with whom I was [1:58], worked with, or did research with is like a book of great psychologists. At that time they weren't known. Abraham Maslow was a young guy. Max Wertheimer, I'd studied with him, was a wonderful person. Carl Rogers, I spent a year with him. Can you believe it? Of course, Kurt Lewin; I was his graduate student for four years. But to come back to your question, how come I got involved in psychology. Well, I mentioned Maslow, and I thought, "That was pretty interesting." When I began to approach graduation with a BA, there was a professor there named Austin Wood, and I didn't know which end was up. I was a kid. I was twenty years old when I graduated from college. So he says, "You should go to graduate school and you should go to study with Kurt Levine [Lewin]." His name was German at that time. "He's doing interesting things and you have a conceptual mind, so you go to him." So I applied to the University of Iowa. [It was] the only school I applied to, not even appreciating anything about discrimination against women. But at that time, Kurt Levine [Lewin] was at what was called the Child Welfare Research Station, where you got training in nursery school education and so on. My private thought, with no evidence for it, was that I probably was admitted just because it was the Child Welfare Research Station. Austin Wood wrote a tremendous letter that probably had some influence. But looking back and knowing about the discrimination against women, that is my inference. I may be all wrong. I could choose which professor with whom to work so I chose Kurt Lewin. I will change referring to him as Lewin and as Levine because he is currently known as Lewin. His spelling is "Lewin", but when he came as a refugee from Germany, he called it Levine, so we called him Levine. I have so many remarkable anecdotes as a graduate

student about Kurt Levine, and I'm glad that, in some way, they could be preserved because many of them reflect the kind of human being he was. I can tell you one or two.

SM – Please!

{6:12}

BW – The first class I attended was called Topological Psychology. He called it Topological Psychology because it had to do with the person in a certain region, like we're here in this room. Say if I'm the person, I may have goals. He would talk about the goals, but the goals were in a separate region, and what regions you have to traverse to get to the goals. In 1938, psychology, as a historian you may know, conditioning theory was the way to do it; reinforcement theory and contingencies of reinforcement. Behaviour was a function of rewards and punishments; a full stop. You didn't investigate, or weren't even interested, in what the person thought or felt or perceived or anything. When Austin Wood said he's doing amazing things, Kurt Levine's contribution rocked psychology because his formula about behaviour was behaviour is a function of (the person and the environment). He brought in the person and the environment, and his was a phenomenological approach. He meant by "person" what the person felt about the self, and how the person felt about the environment. It was all perception psychology from the perspective of the person whose behaviour you're interested in. So you can imagine how the people like Skinner resisted his approach and there were really big battles going on.

SM – Yeah.

BW – So that was where I landed. One of the anecdotes is in this class called Topological Psychology. He gives us an assignment. He writes on the board the assignment; K. Lewin Topological Psychology, the name of his book, chapters so and so. The next day the student comes up to him and says, "Dr. Levine, I have trouble understanding you in class and I can't understand this man Lewin any better." Kurt Levine had a very heavy German accent. When he left the University of Iowa in 1945, he left to go to MIT. At that point he decided to refer to himself as "Lewin". That little anecdote tells you the kind of trouble he was running into. At MIT he gathered around him numbers of grad students, all men of course. But unfortunately he died two years later, so they did not get their PhD with Kurt Lewin. I would want to add that my PhD was with Kurt Lewin, and I would like to include Tamara Dembo, of whom you may have heard. She received her PhD with Kurt Levine in [11:45] and went to the University of Iowa as some kind of, I don't know what they called it then, maybe a lecturer. I have no idea. But she was wonderful in helping the grad students with their work and so I like to always mention her. I'd like to mention was they called the [12:15]. That was a German term. We met weekly with a brown-bagged lunch. We called it Hot Air, the Hot Air Luncheon Group. It was all the grad students, and we took turns presenting our research and everybody chimed in; what about this, what about that, how to make it better, and so on. The student whose work was being discussed understood that he could take it or leave it, whatever he heard. The Whole point was to have a group discussion. That reflects Kurt Levine's attitude that you benefitted bouncing ideas back and forth and that the students really are colleagues.

About that statement, that students really are colleagues, I'll tell you this anecdote. I went to his [Kurt Lewin's] office. He says, "Beatrice, call me Kurt" [In Shock] I think, call you Kurt? He's a professor! You don't call professors by their first name. So the first time I met him and felt like saying "Hello Dr. Levine", it's stuck in my throat. I couldn't get the word Kurt out! [Laughs] But that shows you how he included his students on an egalitarian part with himself. He was really truly amazing as far as that. Where would you like me to go from here?

{14:30}

SM – I would love to know what it was like for you as a woman in graduate school. Were there other women with you?

BW – There was one other woman. I think she did get a PhD with Kurt Levine, but before me. The rest were men. [15:00] was there, and Leon Festinger was there. I should tell you a personal story that should go down in history in some way. This topology class was meaningful in many ways. It was my first class with Kurt Levine, and I met my husband there. He also was a student of Kurt Levine. He got his PhD in 1940. I received my Masters Degree then, and according to the rules at that time I had to remain on campus for at least a year to take all kinds of, you wouldn't believe it, qualifying exams. Eight hours worth in your major and your minor, and two foreign language exams. It was really [a lot] when I look back. My husband got his first position at Ohio State University in Columbus Ohio. We discussed it and decided we'd commute during vacation time, holiday time. You commuted by bus, not by plane. So in 1940, I signed up for the graduate program and had to get it signed off by the dean of the graduate school, a man named George Stoddard. He looks at my registration, he looks at me glaringly, and on no uncertain term admonished me, "Don't you know that your place is by the side of your husband. A wife is very important to him. This is his first teaching job." I must have mumbled something about how we discussed it. Of course he was forced to side.

SM – Do you remember how you felt about that at the time?

BW – Well, how I felt about it? It was a combination of complete dismay and a little unnerved. I knew I was going to stay. I was absolutely determined and my husband was very supportive, so that took place. Some 55 years later, it was 1996 maybe, I was invited by the University of Iowa as a distinguished alumni. It was a surprise. I wasn't prepared for it. I was invited to do a presentation just in an ordinary way. Then they escorted me to a big auditorium that was filled with people and made the announcement. Of course I was delighted, and the occasion was such a positive, enjoyable one that I told all kinds of wonderful stories about the university at that time. And they were wonderful. When I got home I thought, "I should have told them about George Stoddard," but somehow it didn't enter my mind then. A negative experience didn't fit with the holiday, ceremonial occasion. I regretted that because I would have said, "We've come a long way since then, but we have a long way to go." I would have said that, but I'm sorry I didn't. That's a bit of history. The MIT group, they got their PhD eventually, but not with Kurt Levine. But they were very important because when I was at [University of] Iowa working with Kurt

Levine, remember the war is brewing, Hitler is marching over Germany, I knew that Kurt was trying to get his mother out of Germany, but failed. She died in the concentration camps, and he was desperate. I also have a story about how he came to the United States., you can remind me of that.

{21:28}

[21:32] was at Iowa, he already began to think in terms of group work. The country was having [21:52], out for cream and sugar. There was a food shortage because of what was happening. He got a grant to study changing food habits. The study took place in the neighbouring town, Cedar Rapids, and I was one of the recorders of the research. What it involved was two groups of housewives who met separately. In one group, a nutritionist gave a standard lecture of why it was good to eat organ meats. At that time we didn't know about high fat, cholesterol and so on, so it had to do with brain and liver and so on. They were given a recipe to try, and a month later they would be asked about how they found the recipes. In group 2, they got there separately. The same nutritionist gave the same lecture and there was group discussion about it. The recipes are handed out, there is group discussion about it, and then there's a show of hands for how many of you are willing to try the recipe. Then there is a show of hands, and they are told that in a month they will be interviewed. The results were so dramatic. Those who participated in the group discussion and made a group resolution outdistanced the other group in trying the recipes. So that was the basis of what became known as action research since Kurt Levine was interested in real life issues to see what can be done to affect social change. That's why he's an integral part of the society of [25:04] because he was geared to that. [It also became known as] group dynamics. The PhDs from MIT, I'm not sure whether they got their PhDs at MIT or moved as a group to the University of Michigan and Ann Arbor and set up the Institute for Group Dynamics and maybe they got their PhDs there. I am not clear about that. But the result is that I am the last PhD student of Kurt Levine, and I am certainly the only living PhD, of that I have no doubt. [Laughs]

So, I asked you to remind me about how Kurt Levine came to the United States. Now Kurt Levine, being Jewish, could not occupy in Berlin a professorial position or a faculty position, but he was some kind of lecturer or I don't know what it was. He was invited to Japan to give a lecture, a presentation. In Japan, he learns about what's happening in Germany. He realizes that he'd be in big trouble if he returned to Germany. A man named Fritz Heider, whom you may know. Do you know the name Fritz Heider? By the way, he's another one with whom I worked and actually helped him write his book, along with this litany of greats.

AR – I noticed his name on your …. [27:22 – 27:25]

BW – Yeah, okay. Yes. Now, Fritz Heider came from Austria but had gone to Berlin and did some work with Kurt Levine, studied with him. Fritz Heider at that time was at Smith College. So Kurt Levine writes a telegram to Fritz Heider in code saying "Gertrude land impossible", Gertrude being the name of his wife. "Can you get me a job in the United

States?" So Fritz Heider invited him to come to the United States and vouches for him. Fritz Heider really looms large in saving the life of Kurt Levine, I think.

SM – Yeah.

{28:51}

BW – Unless he could have found another way to come to the United States. He got a job at Cornell University also in a child set-up.

AR – I think it was home economics or something.

BW – Home economics, that's it. In home economics, you are right on that one. But he's not exactly happy there in home economics. That is how he then, I think because he was in home economics, the child welfare station at Iowa thought that was a good fit, but maybe I am inferring [Laughs]. There was a psychology department at the University of Iowa at that time, but it was not friendly to Kurt Levine's ideas and he never moved to the psychology department. Years later, long after Kurt Levine had left and I was graduated, the Child Welfare Research Station and the psychology department blended because child psychology had been done at the Child Welfare Research Station. One thing that made him [Kurt Lewin] qualified for the Child Welfare Research Station was that he made many, many films involving children. Somewhere there are historical films. Do you know about them?

AR – They might be at the archives from the History of American Psychology.

BW – Yeah. I remember one film where he shows how a little child is trying to sit down. But to sit down, you have to look at what you are sitting down on. So the child circles the chair and cannot do it blindfolded so to speak. This is a very funny one and very cute. So that is how Kurt Levine came. In 1942, I got my degree and therein hangs a tale. Let me back up a bit. In 1941, during holiday time, Christmas, I'm in Ohio to be with my husband. On December 7th 1941, Franklin Delano Roosevelt's voice comes on the air. We were in our apartment listening to the radio and he announces the day of infamy, Pearl Harbour, and declares war. The draft is on. We knew immediately that my husband would be drafted because anybody without kids would be drafted, eighteen [years] and up. I then returned to Iowa. In '42 I get my PhD. My husband was, I think, in the Merchant Marine or in the Navy because he ended up in the Navy. A phone call comes in the office. Kurt answers. I hear him say, "I have just the right person for you, Beatrice Wright." He tells me that Wolfgang Kohler, the great Gestalt psychology teaching at Swarthmore College. David **Crutchfield** was there, that's how I met him. [34:15] calls Kurt up and says all their men are being drafted and they need somebody to teach, so do you have anybody? It's a very good example of how adversity sometimes can bring about some kind of positives. It was just by luck, because for me to get a position otherwise, as a woman in the psychology department or in any university, it would be very, very difficult. That is how come I got my first teaching job. It was at Swarthmore College

SM – What had you been planning on doing?

BW – What was I planning on doing? What I was planning on doing was to figure out where my husband was going to be stationed. At that time it was on the east coast, so I thought Swarthmore College is a good fit, in Pennsylvania. I land in Pennsylvania, at Swarthmore College.

{35:33}

It wasn't long before, well now he's in the Navy, and now he's shipped to the west coast 3,000 miles away. He is stationed at the Oak Knoll Naval Hospital in Oakland. He had a PhD in psychology and when he is working in the hospital as hospital personnel. Later on he got an MD but at this point it is a PhD. When Christmas vacation comes around, I get a ticket on the train. The only reason I was given a ticket was because I was the wife of a service person. It was jammed. It was soldiers, sailors, **whacks**, and waves, and me [Laughs]. I remember changing trains in Chicago and then going on to Oakland. It took hours and hours, 3,000 miles, and then all the way back. What to do? My husband felt that [37:15] a good college. He'll be shipped out soon anyway to stay at Swarthmore so I stayed for a while. But he's not shipped out. They have plenty of naval personnel they need to have psychological service. We decided that I would go and leave Swarthmore. I remember going to the president and he understood why I wanted to leave. At least he was very nice. I should interject a very funny story.

{Conversation until 39:53}

SM – Where were we? A story within a story, the larger story was that you were on the train to see your husband in Oakland because he was in the Navy at the time during the war. You had gone to the president of Swarthmore to let him know that you were leaving Swarthmore.

BW – That reminded me of a "story".

SM – Right.

BW – I remember walking on the campus of Swarthmore and there is the president with two dogs. Now it happens that I love dogs. One was a big dog and one was a little dog, and I admired them. He said, "The amazing thing is that the little dog is the mother of the big dog," and I thought, "Wow, what a birth that must have been!" [Laughs]

AR – Beatrice, the year you were at Swarthmore, you'd mentioned Kohler being there, who else was at Swarthmore, who else do you remember from that year you were there?

BW – Well, Crutchfield and a couple of others. They were all men, of course, but I don't remember their names.

AR – Was Max Wertheimer there for a period or was he at Smith, I can't remember?

BW – Max Wertheimer? I don't think. I think maybe he was at the other Quaker college. Not Swarthmore, but Bryn Mawr, I'm not sure.

{41:43}

AR – Okay, because you mentioned him earlier so I was wondering.

BW – Oh, Max Wertheimer, he was not at Swarthmore. He was at the New School for Social Research, I think, or NYU, or somewhere. I'm not sure.

AR – Okay.

BW – But I took a course with him because I was interested in Gestalt psychology.

AR – I want to know a little bit more about the development of your own research, your interest in disability and rehabilitation. Is that a good place to go?

BW – Yeah, that again is happenstance, and we are actually at the brink of answering your question because it is now WWII. I'm on the train having left Swarthmore, heading to Oakland, California, to be near my husband who is in the Navy as a psychologist at the Oak Knoll Naval Hospital. At the University of California in Berkeley they gave a party for psychologists who were in the war, so my husband and I are invited, and I had just arrived. There are the party is a woman named Barbara **Kirk**. I guess you would call her a counselling psychologist. She says to me, "Would you be interested in taking a position as a psychologist in the United States employment service in San Francisco to help place hard to place workers?" I had just arrived, I didn't have a job. I said, "Sure". Another example of how adversity can have positive consequences. The factories were so short of help with all the men being drafted, that they wanted to place hard to place workers; a positive outcome. I get to San Francisco, the United States employment service and I'm given a big file of hard to place workers. I'll give you two examples. I go through the file and there's this guy who they call "severely mentally retarded". I don't know, IQ - 50. I call him in and interview him. I noticed that he came on time, he was reasonably dressed, he tried very, very hard, and by certain stances, was not bright. I called up the factory person and said "I have a man here." You see, I figured that an IQ of 50 is roughly the mental age of seven or eight. Just think about how bright a seven or eight year old is. They can do so much! He could be a fine worker. So I called up and I said, "I have a man that I think would work very well in your factory. He doesn't know how to read so maybe you could pay another worker a little extra to work by his side and keep him on track because sometimes he forgets a little bit, and to read any messages of information that he should have, as a buddy. And so he was hired. They call those reasonable accommodations. You asked how I got into it. By accident! Barbara Kirk, WWII, completely happenstance! The next example was a man who used a wheelchair; very bright, hard to place, as much because of prejudice and stigmatization as anything else. I called up a factory and declare all his strengths and assets going for him, that he does use a wheelchair, and they said, "How will he get into the factory? The stairs are a big

problem." How many stairs are there? I think there were three steps. I said, "Figure it out. You could get some men to help him up the stairs or carry him up and get his wheelchair in. They're desperate for labour and I said, "You won't be sorry." "But in the factory the counter is very high. You have to stand as things are fed to you." So I said, "You need a good worker? Figure it out. Get a countertop that's lower or lower it in some way." They were desperate for help, and they figured it out. He's hired. So that's my introduction [to disability].

{49:01}

That's my introduction. I forgot to mention, among my litany of great psychologists with whom I worked, studied, wrote, did research, add Roger Barker. Do you know of Roger Barker? Roger Barker happened to be at Stanford University at that time. He got a grant from the Social Science Research Council to do a review of the literature on physical disability and handicap. Now he studied with Kurt Levine two years before I got to Ottawa. He came in '36, left in '38, and did not get a PhD. I think they called it a General Education [Board] Fellow at that time. I had never met Roger Barker but we had something in common; Kurt Levine. He somehow or other knew I was in the Bay area, and he invited me to join him in writing this book on physical handicap and a review of the literature. I said, "Sure, I could do that." I left the United States Employment Service and worked with Roger. That first edition of that book came out in 1946. Then another serendipitous thing happens. Tamara Dembo, whom I mentioned, is on the west coast and she got a grant, a very important and interesting one, to interview returning, injured serviceman on their first [52:01] home. They were stationed at Bushnell hospital in Utah. At that time I was pregnant with my daughter who was born at the Oak Knoll Naval Hospital in **1945**. Tamara Dembo invited me to join that research. She knew me from Iowa. Remember I mentioned her?

SM – Yes.

BW – I could not go to Bushnell Hospital to do the interviewing, but the interviews were taped and then transcribed so I could, at home, go over the records. That's what I did. Now that research to me is landmark research and I really give almost all the credit to Tamara Dembo. Though I was a full participant, it was her inspiration. She was not interested in what it was like on the inside in terms of physical problems, medical problems. These were servicemen injured in the war. Many had amputations, some were blind, some had facial disfigurements, burn injuries, et cetera. She was interested in interpersonal relations, what it was like. As the result of examining those interviews, there were over 100 interviews. In categorizing and coding it took a lot of work. I use "we" because it was a group effort. The third person was Gloria Ladieu Leviton, though I give the bulk of the credit for Tamara Dembo. It was the three of us began to realize that what they were talking about were issues of curiosity; "How did you lose your leg?", sympathy; "I am so sorry,", pity, and even help could be a problem. They talked about somebody grabbing your arm and almost knocking you off as they accompany you across the street. Even help, a very positive, socially-sanctioned interpersonal relationship, is a problem. We wrote it up as a monograph talking about each other those and a discussion

of the injury as well. All of those topics were unheard of in psychology. Nobody talked about sympathy and curiosity and pity and et cetera. We were, as again, stemming from Kurt Levine's orientation, interested in practical application, how to make things better. Remember I mentioned Kurt Levine with action research? We always, on the basis of trying to sense what the respondent was trying to tell us, began to have recommendations for the recipient, meaning in this case, the injured person or the recipient of that interaction.

{56:59}

The giver of that interaction we called the donor. Today I think they are called the actor. There were many, many recommendations. For example, about curiosity, you know people will be curious about how you got your injury. It is visible. Be prepared. We got a lot of reactions; "I got mad and said it's none of your business," so on and so on. There were a whole slew of reactions because strangers on the street would stop them. It's none of your business as a stranger. Our advice as a recommendation was to just know that you will be asked so be prepared, and be prepared to change the topic. For example, "How did you lose the leg?" "I lost it in Iwo Jima. Now I am looking for tomatoes in the grocery store." You know, just to change the topic. That is just an example of recommendation. For an example to the donor let me give an example of helping. People are very eager to help. It easily is taken as self-aggrandizement by the recipient; "They are so superior, they can help me, I need help." It is an unequal and up and down social relationship. The advice to the donor was to ask but don't persist. "May I help you?" But don't persist. So for each of those things we had recommendations for the recipient and the donor. To this day there are two disability books that APA has designated as among the most distinguished books for the 20th century, one in 1960, "Physical Disability: A Psychological Approach", then 1983, "Physical Disability: A Psychosocial Approach". They are full of recommendations, and conceptualization straight out of Kurt Levine. In a way, if you pursue what Levine was about, if you really pursue it as I did, you get all kinds of ideas conceptually, dealing with person issues and environment issues. Each time based on that understanding, call it theory, call it conceptualization, call it an understanding, I offer recommendations as to how to make things better. In 1956, I think, it was accepted by a journal called "Artificial Limbs," now [1:01:11]. It's not a psychology journal. Once it was in print, psychology began to reprint it and it was reprinted in several different psychological publications. Psychology began to be receptive to what is now called qualitative research. This was basically qualitative, though we had some frequency data but not any big high [1:01:50] statistics. Don't forget, even to this day, statistics is the hallmark of good experimental research. You know that. It is still an issue. That tells you the story of how I got into the field. Now it continues. The war is over. My husband, on the GI Bill, takes advantage of that and goes to medical school at the University of California. Roger Barker, who was at Stanford, becomes Chair of the psychology department at the University of Kansas. You begin to see how come I came to Kansas. Roger Barker was interested in establishing a clinical psychology graduate program. Clinical psychology came of age during WWII, very strongly in demand. He had a relationship with my husband through Kurt Levine. Though Roger didn't need us in Iowa and was interested in Eric becoming director of the clinical

psychology training program, he invited us to spend the summer in Lawrence, Kansas, just to see what it was like. I guess we had two children by then, my son **Eric,** who is Madison's professor, was two years old, and my daughter was four. We went to Lawrence, Kansas and felt that it was a very child-centred city and that appealed to us. We became interested. Roger waited until Eric got his MD, he waited for us.

{1:04:49}

So we left Oakland, California, and by that time our third child was born. The three children, and my husband and I drive to Kansas. We drove from Oakland and went south for some reason to Los Angeles. There was a big drought in California at that time. Everything was brown. As we approached Lawrence, Kansas, it was so green. They had floods. It was so green from the floods. There was even a car that had floated down the river and perched on top of a roof. That is how we entered Lawrence, Kansas; very green because of the flood. We saw people with sandpaper sanding off the roughs from tools and so on. That was 1951. We get to Kansas and we get located. I am not able to be on faculty because of nepotism restrictions. My husband was on faculty. It was a way to keep out women. I, having three small children anyway, was devoted to the family, but I did odds and ends of things. It started off at the medical centre which was in Kansas City, 40 miles from Lawrence, Kansas. It had a program for parents of young deaf children. These parents from all of Kansas recently discovered their child is deaf because their child isn't talking. They are two year-olds, but they are not talking. They would have a two week program when the mother and the deaf child would come to the medical centre. There was a nursery school for the children, and they would be examined by medical people as well. During the day I would work with the parents about how to be a parent of a child, but a child with a special limitation. So I did that. That still is somehow related to disability. Then my own children were in a cooperative nursery school in Lawrence, Kansas. The head teacher got the idea that it would be good if once a month, all the cooperative nursery school teachers would meet together at that particular nursery school so that it would be between Lawrence and Kansas City, 40 miles away. We would rotate. It would be once a month and we'd rotate from school to school. The head teacher of that particular school, before school started, would give us something to watch out for. It was a cooperative nursery school so parents were there. The head teacher of that particular school, before school started, would give us something to watch out for. It may be how a particular parent was relating to her own child or children, or whatever it was, and we observed through a one-way vision screen for one hour. Then we met and discussed what we observed. That is how we rotated from school to school. I will tell you that I was blessed with a wonderful situation that made all of this possible. I had a supportive husband, and my parents first moved to California when we were still in California because they wanted to be near children, and we were the one. Then when we moved to Lawrence, Kansas, they moved and lived a mile from us. Whenever I had to be at a cooperative nursery school session in Kansas City, they came and took care of the kids. I never had a babysitter ever. They were raised with four doting, adoring parents! Can you believe it? Each one with special skills to offer. So when I took two weeks off to work with parents of deaf children (I did come home, but it was two weeks all, and not once a month), my parents were there, I want you to know. I gave a talk at the University of

Kansas, in a special way. My son, Erik Olen, a sociologist, was invited to help celebrate the hundredth anniversary of the sociology department at the University of Kansas. Now he never attended the University of Kansas. When he graduated high school he went to Harvard.

{1:12:38}

But he grew up in Kansas, so they felt that he was legitimate and invited him to give a keynote address. By that time, I am a professor at the university. I should tell you how I got to be professor.

SM – We want to know that, yes.

BW – This is a big leap, but I'm on this. So they knew I was on campus as a professor. They ask me to talk about Erik growing up in Lawrence. I gave a talk which I entitled, "A Kid Growing Up in Lawrence," and gave credit, so much credit passed around. I said, "Whatever my husband and I did in terms of genetic contribution and parenting, we are grateful. But let me tell you that it's only part of the story. Can you imagine a community where any ordinary nice thing a kid does, the kid's picture gets put in the paper?" This is about Erik, he is in kindergarten, and he is with the kindergarten band banging on this and banging on that. There were pictures in the paper. Thank you, *Lawrence Journal World*, the name of the paper. Then I said, "I must tell you that the schools themselves really weren't challenging for my own children, but they allowed my children to go to the library whenever they wanted." Can you imagine that, for trying to meet the needs of children? "Thank you, elementary school." Then high school; the kids would do science fairs. There would be national science fairs. They'd have a science project. They could walk up to the university and go bother some professor with their project in mind. The professor would take time, help them and clarify them. "Thank you, University of Kansas." They did calculus in high school because the university allowed the high school students who wanted to take calculus to take it at the university. "Thank you, university." Erik wrote a symphony consisting of seven instruments; a harmonica, a flute, a violin, etc. Why seven? Because they were his friends, they played the instruments. The high school had a special program attended by all the high school students to listen to those seven people playing. "Thank you, high school." Then I mentioned my parents. What does it take to raise children in a healthy way? It takes all of that. There is a gap there because how did I get to be a professor, right?

SM – Right.

BW – Now I'll fill in that gap.

MF: – Can I just say a word on the importance of your work on disability?

BW – Yes.

MF – Years later, Adrienne Asch and I started doing work on disability, and we did this special **volume** of the Journal of Social Issues. As you were speaking I remembered you being connected and I thought, "Was it Tamara Dembo?" Then you say Tamara Dembo. Your work was amazing for many reasons, but mostly for the dignity that it gave to the people who had disabilities.

{1:17:50}

They weren't defined by the disability in the way that both Freud and Goffman later who sandwiched you, really, because this was a heavily neglected area. It was very staccato scholarship. Your work, when Adrienne and I wrote about it, we said that there were, I don't know, two views of disability, the kind of medical and the social, and understood that this embodies having relationships and conversation and interactions. It is interesting to me to hear that it is a Lewinian trace, and even the way you are talking about raising children, that you need a whole community to lift. But there was a dignity with which you, Tamara Dembo, and I don't remember the third woman, Gloria.

BW – Well she died at an early age from breast cancer. That is probably why.

MF – Anyway, it was just such a unique moment in psychology, to take seriously the lives and contexts of people with disabilities as capable and having a limitation. Rather than Freud who argued that if your body is blind, your soul is blind.

BW – Yeah, yeah.

MF – Then Goffman, who wrote about stigma, entirely from the view of the [1:19:26] strigmatized, presuming you just internalized it.

BW – Right.

MF – Anyway, you were like this oasis in the literature that didn't dare to see the whole person.

BW – I think maybe that was why I had a certain passion for my work, for just that reason. To this day, well, maybe we should fill in the gap of how I got to be on faculty, and then remind me of something you were saying afterward. We'll pick that up.

MF – [1:20:06] [Laughs]

BW – How did I get on faculty? Because I was excluded and did all these fill-in things. I got a grant from the Association of the Aid of Crippled Children, I think it was called, to write a book. I began writing the book that turned out to be Physical Disability: A Psychological Approach. I began writing that and then interrupted the writing of that. You see, we came in 1951. I did think pick-up stuff. I got this grant, so I could keep in the field. Then Fritz Heider got a Guggenheim [Fellowship] and asked me to help him with his book. What to do? Now Fritz had an amazing conceptual mind. In fact, his book,

Interpersonal Relations, is in the distinguished [1:19:55]. I decided I could keep my own book on hold, help Fritz with his book, and then return to my book because I don't have any other job anyway. So I worked with Fritz on his book.

{1:22:24}

What I worked with were really lecture notes and folders. Fritz spoke German. He was from Austria. As you know my writings are easy to read. He had these long sentences, reverbs at the end, and so on. So I agreed to help him. When it was over, now this shows how great a man Fritz Heider is, he said, "Beatrice, lets have the authorship read Fritz Heider with Beatrice Wright." I said, "No Fritz, you've been working on these ideas for twenty years now, they're your ideas. It should be Fritz Heider." Since I wrote the book, in a sense, of course an idea or two of mine would creep in, in trying to clarify things and give examples which I always felt was important. In fact, once I remember giving an example and changing it because I thought, "This has to be a Fritz Heider example, not a Beatrice Wright example, not a feminine example. It has to be a masculine example." [Laughs] But in the acknowledgement he gives full weight to my contribution. I wanted you to know that he offered. Then I went back to my own book. My husband had a Fulbright [Scholarship] in 1959 I believe. Again, I would just have to check the CV. So off we went to Australia. My book was finished in 1959, but actually published in 1960; "Physical Disability: A Psychological Approach." We came back, and I could not teach because of nepotism. My husband suggested that I apply for a grant to work at the Menninger Foundation. At that time they were in Topeka, Kansas, twenty five miles away. I did, and worked at the Menninger Foundation as, I guess you might call it a Post-Doc. today, it was basic clinical psychology. They are psychoanalytically oriented, so I decided to drink up psychoanalysis and take of it what I wanted and leave behind what didn't match my world view. In 1963 (I joined the Menninger Foundation in '62), we had returned from Australia. After a year Menningers invited me for a permanent position. I accepted. With it being twenty five miles away, I could negotiate that. In September of '63, I am driving home from Topeka. I get home and the *Lawrence Journal World* has headlines to the affect "Nepotism Resented." That night the Chair of the department called me up to join the faculty. No search committee! [Laughing] I didn't have to present any resume. All along between '51 and '63, I would join them in seminars and did a presentation or two, and so on. So they knew me. Now what had happened was I found out that the then Chancellor of the University of Kansas went to the Board of Regions and said, "Beatrice Wright's book is being taught at the University of Kansas, and she cannot teach here. It does not make any sense." So they resented it. Since I had committed myself to Menninger, I felt that I could not join them in '63. I couldn't switch. I had to give them notice. I stayed for a year at Menninger and then joined the faculty as an associate professor, and then became full professor in 1964. So that is the way life guides us. Every life is amazing in that way. That is how I became a professor at the university.

SM – When you saw the headline, did you think that there would be a call?

BW – I thought, "Gee, now I have a chance." I must have thought something, I don't recall. But then I got a call right back that night. No letters of recommendation, no search committee. That was 1963.

{1:30:19}

MF – You were on a twelve year interview. [Laughing]

BW – [Laughs] Right.

AR – We have been taping for an hour and a half so I am trying to be a little conscious of time. What would people like to ask? Would either of you like to jump in and ask something?

SO – I find your narrative so engaging. You said life has a flow, but your stories had a beautiful flow, and so I was wondering about what kind of conceptual thought and theoretical thought interests you now?

BW – Now?

SO – Yeah.

BW – You know, the issues I dealt with in my book, the implications... [Lapse in time around 1:32:06] …the award because she did her dissertation on my life and work. She is not a psychologist.

SO – What is she?

BW – Well she is a Unitarian minister. She was, and still is, at the University of Tennessee as a pastoral counsellor guiding your pastors, and decided to do a master's degree and a PhD. I forget what department, she'll tell you the department. Life is so amazing. She had, at the retirement community where I now live, you'll become acquainted with that…

SO – I will, I cannot wait! What is the name of it?

BW – Capital Lakes.

SO – Alright, I'll find it.

BW – It has many things that will be personal to you. That's another thing. There was a man named **John Thomas**, I think a Presbyterian minister, who kept the books on the protégées of all pastoral counsellors who trained other pastors. After ten years, he decided it is time to give it up. Who takes it over? Sheryl Wurl.

{1:34:11} – Here is where the knock on the door happens.

{1:36:22} – Conversation picks up again.

SM – What are you passionate about these days?

BW – Oh, it is something picking up that you had said. I had said that I think that is why I have a certain passion for my work, in terms of what you had said. As you may know, I began to think, you've heard this story Sheryl, "What makes my writing so different from other people in the field?" Every time I'd get an idea, I'd write it down. It turned out that it had to do with values. So it grew and grew. In the preface of the 1983 book, I titled it, "Value-Laden Beliefs and Principles," which, to me, explained why my writings were different, just plain different. It turned out that there were twenty value-laden beliefs and principles, each of which was explained in one or two paragraphs. To this day, I am sorry that I didn't have that as chapter one because people don't read prefaces. It just explains why they're meeting the things they are going to be. I remember the very first one; everybody needs respect and encouragement, no matter how severe the disability may be. Then it explains what that means, and so on. That explains why my writings are different. Until then, there was so much negativity of shortcomings and limitations and pathology. You couldn't win for trying. In the whole area of what the person has going for him or her, in terms of strengths or assets, you have to dig them out and discover them just as hard as you look for the negatives. Then, what about the environmental side of the behaviours, the functioning, the person, the environment? That is where the Levinian [Lewinian] thing comes in. What about the barriers in the environment that hold you back? What about hidden resources in the environment that you can claim toward fulfillment of human potential? There is a lot of probing for the positives in the person and what happens in the environment, et cetera. So that is, I think, where the passion comes from. Susan, I think you asked what, today, my interests are. I think more of the same because, conceptually speaking, the book applies to all disadvantaged people, all stigmatized people, that would include race, religion, ethnicity, poverty. Wherever, on any of the social issues, I make use of what I've learned in [1:41:15] out the social psychological situation of people with disabilities. Occasionally in the book I would refer to another group of people that were disadvantaged by society. Certainly it would include gays and homosexuals as well, if you make a whole list of everything. So that is what continues my interests in general. Wherever you go, the social issues apply, and I make use of what I have learned through my own [1:42:04].

AR – Is there anything else that you would like to have on the tape that we haven't asked you about?

BW – You asked why I moved to Madison?

AR – Oh, that is okay. That was kind of a personal, curiosity question. I am just a little bit curious about how the beliefs that you have just described for us and the importance of values and dignity, how in fact did that mesh with your time at Menninger? How did you deal with psychoanalysis and your exposure to that, and how did it all sort of fit together, or not?

BW – When I went to Menningers, I decided this could be a very important learning experience. In writing up reports, because I had a clinical position and worked with children, I did not use the psychoanalytic interpretations because it was my report. But I wanted to learn as much as I could about psychoanalysis so I could pick and choose. To be really tuned in to unconscious motivation, that is not part of your awareness and that is hidden, that is an important idea that psychoanalysis has stressed.

{1:43:55}

One big problem with psychoanalysis was in their interpretation of symbols as meaning, of course, castration complex, or whatever the theory was. I could object to that. But to be sensitive to how the person uses language, and what is implied by that person, asking the person (because I am a strong believer in the insider vs. outsider perspective), "So what was your experience like for you?" I came away with respect for psychoanalysis up to a point. The rigidity of interpretation; we parted completely. Dream analysis; dreams do mean something, but it doesn't have to mean what the psychoanalyst would interpret it as. They are not just meaningless.