Psychology's Feminist Voices Oral History Project

Interview with Diana S. Fleischman

Interviewed by Sarah Radtke
Portsmouth, England
November 9, 2011

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Alexandra Rutherford, PhD
Project Director, Psychology's Feminist Voices
alexr@yorku.ca

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DF: Diana S. Fleischman, Interview Participant
SR: Sarah Radtke, Interviewer

SR – So first I need you to state your full name and your date of birth, you don't have to be exact if you don't want to.

DF – Okay, my full name is Diana Santos Fleischman and my date of birth is April 22nd, 1981.

SR – I will start with the questions, what attracted you to psychology, particularly evolutionary psychology, so how did you get into it?

DF – So when I was a little kid I always wanted to be a biologist or some kind of scientist, I was really, really interested in science and I read it a lot. When I was in middle school one of the teachers said we should have a Science Friday where we all bring in articles, and I brought an article about Java Man, at the time I think that was a find and so that was an evolutionary article and I loved evolution. My favorite book was the evolution book and I actually carried called the evolution book by Sarah Stein like a teddy bear, I took it with me. I was really queer that way [Laughs].

SR – [Laughs] I'm not going to follow up on that one…

DF – [Laughs] in the conventional sense not in the…okay, so I brought in this book and the teacher, because I grew up in the Southeast of the United States and that was very Christian-y and creationist kind of a place. So the teacher said to me, or said to the whole class that "Evolution is just a theory" and that we don't have to believe any of this stuff if we don't want to. Being the argumentative type that I was, I argued with her in front of everybody and said "No, you are wrong." I also argued with other students about that and I developed this name 'Monkey Girl'.

SR – Oh.

DF – Yeah, so, I was called Monkey Girl into high school I think.

SR – That's a cool name.

DF – It did wonders for my graduate school entrance essay [Laughs] and David Buss and other people said "You are the Monkey Girl." So that was an odd kind of a thing, but I really loved science to the detriment of my social development and I thought I was really into human nature but I didn't know what one could do with psychology besides doing therapy so I thought it would be great to be a therapist. Now I realize I would never be cut out for it, if people didn't do what I suggested I would just lose patience with them, but I thought I could be a great therapist at one time and when I went to undergraduate I got into the [arts] university I was in and the only guy who was interested in evolutionary psychology who had been there died the year before I got there. There was nobody in evolutionary psychology when I was an undergrad and I remember I read up on some evolutionary psychology stuff on my own and it was really fascinating because we were doing theories of personality, and one of the chapters we were not going over was evolutionary psychology. I mentioned one day to my professor, are we going to go over evolutionary psychology? She said those people are idiots, they think men like to see women in high heels because it's easier to knock them over and inseminate them.

SR – Wow.

DF – That was all I knew about evolutionary psychology and so I went to see London and I took an evolutionary psychology course and I just fell in love with it and it really melded together my childhood love of evolution and biology and my more adolescent interest in psychology, that was a perfect blend of all the stuff that made me intellectually excited and that's what I ended up doing.

SR – Was your family Christian or anything like that? Since you grew up in the South?

DF – Not really - my mom's family is Catholic, I was baptized, I went to Synagogue when I was a kid and I went to church, but I stopped going to church when I was about 9, I think. I just told my mom I was not interested. She even had me in Catholic education on the weekend; she had me in the Catholic school, kind of a class thing, Bible study thing. I don't remember much about it, I just remember thinking the activities were not very interesting, but I don't really remember anything about it. So I didn't grow up in a very religious household.

SR – So they were not angry at you?

DF – No they were fine. My family was very…I mean I didn't grow up with parents who were scientists, they did care about science, they did buy me any book that I wanted, they liked that I liked to read. They were just encouraging in that way, they didn't discourage me from anything.

SR – So that's how you got into evolutionary psychology, so let's just go into feminism now. Tell me about the emergence of your feminist identity.

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DF – So my dad's sister is a very, she sort of is like a second wave feminist, Gloria Steinem kind of, she read me feminist fairytales when I was a kid. She was very, very instrumental in my upbringing, I spent a lot of time with her when I was a kid. My dad sent her away to Germany and she stayed with her parents and took care of her elderly grandmother for years. So I went to visit, and I remember, I had this fairytale book called "the girl who stood on her own two feet" and the fairytale I remember best was about a princess who had to marry this prince and he was shorter than her, and he made her walk around in flat shoes and hunch over so that she wouldn't be taller than him. He was just, not a very nice misogynistic character, and they were supposed to get married on this specific day and she had a dog that she loved very much. On the morning of her wedding the dog died and she was distraught and she could not get married. Her husband to be could not understand at all why she would be interested in the dog so much more than getting married. He was very upset with her, and she buries the dog in her wedding dress and then the dog is immediately reincarnated as the perfect prince [Laughs]. And that was one of my favorite stories.

SR – This is for little kids, this book?

DF – I had this fairytale book, there was also cannibalism in it. I remember four of the stories. I also read Grimm Brothers and all that kind of stuff. It was definitely a children's book. So I remember my aunt was very instrumental and she always said "You as a woman, you stand on my shoulders, so you can see further than me, you don't have to be an idiot as long as me." My aunt gave me a diamond ring when I was a teenager if I promised her that I would not get married until I was twenty-seven. She said this is your engagement ring from me.

SR – That's awesome.

DF – She is super instrumental in my becoming a scientist, she is really the only person who cared that I went to graduate school in my family and she had been a literature professor, she had taught an erotica course. She owned *Our Bodies, Ourselves* which I remember finding when I was fourteen or fifteen. She gave me Anaïs Nin when I was fourteen or fifteen, she just had an incredible impact on me. My feminist identify is very much caught up in her. Also my grandmother, this is not necessarily the nicest thing, but she was telling me not to get married, never to have kids, to do my own thing and I would be much happier that way, that she wishes she had done that, right in front of my grandfather, she would say stuff like that. Then also the difference between my aunt, my grandmother and my mom, who was very invested in being a mom and a wife and who I think was trying as I was younger, a young teenager, she was trying to recapture a lot of things that interested her to teach languages and things like that. I felt that she did not have enough time because she had put a lot of things on hold to have a family because she got married very young. So yeah, a lot of those things influenced me.

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SR – It seems kind of interesting that they are telling you not to get married, not to have children until a later age, but it seems a lot of women are doing that in North America anyways, they are not getting married until later.

DF – Yeah, but I think that part of, if I was a man I don't think I would have this fire under my butt to have gotten my Ph.D. out of the way, to do everything as quickly as possible because I have always been on the fence about whether or not I wanted to have kids, but if I had postponed my career to do another career or anything like that I think that I would have, even by four of five years, maybe having kids would have been a foregone conclusion. But I have been around women who tried at forty or forty-five to start a family because they were academics and I think at that point it can be very difficult. I actually donated eggs to one of those women, but that's another story though.

SR – Wow.

DF – Yeah [Laughs].

SR – I need to donate some eggs so give me the number! [Laughs]

DF – I will.

SR – Just in case I don't have my own.

DF – It's a very fraught experience, I have to tell you about it. It was a weird experience.

SR – That sounds kind of interesting, but okay [Laughs].

SR – So would you read your kids, if you ever had any kids, or nieces or anything, those fairytales?

DF – Yeah, definitely. I had all of these, my grandmother and my aunt, they lived in Germany, we read these German fairytales called "struwwelpeter"

SR – Struwwelpeter? The yellow book?

DF – I was given that book when I was a kid, it is all about the dangers of bad hygiene.

SR – Isn't wonderful though?

DF – It's really scary!

SR – There is the guy who cuts off the thumbs of the kid.

DF – Yeah.

SR – I had a real fear of that thing. I still get scared, but anyway, it also has some good animal lessons in there, like don't hit animals.

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DF – Yeah exactly. So scary stories were very much a part of my upbringing, scary depressing stories.

SR – Me too, it's the German part. Would you read your kids anything traditional, like Snow White or something?

DF – Yeah, I think I would. Those are good stories as well. I think the fairytales from around the world I had as well, I thought that that was really a great book because it had so many strange different lessons in it than you would get in a normal fairytale. I probably don't think I would read my kids the normal fairytales, I would read them the feminist ones and all different ones. But I read most of these on my own, I don't think my mom read them to me, my aunt did read me those a lot because I liked to be read to by her even when I was old enough to read.

SR – So we talked about the emergence of your feminist identity and how it started and evolutionary psychology, so have you merged the two in any way so far?

DF – Feminism and evolutionary psychology?

SR – Yes.

DF – Yeah, I think that, there are different camps of feminism, there is different feminists, but I definitely think that women's minds and how they are different from men have not been adequately explored and I think that is definitely a frontier and I think that is one way I merged those two things, a lot of my work has to do with the unique psychology of women, and how the recurrent struggles and problems, adaptive problems, that women have gone through uniquely have shaped our evolved psychology. Not just to do with mating but also to do with affiliation and disease avoidance, so yeah, I think that is one way that I have merged the two. I also, I have just always thought about humans as just a continuum from animals and so I don't… I just see women as another kind of female mammal and so I think an extension of feminism for me is regard for female animals, and to not exploit their reproductive functions and their maternal love for our own benefit there are some things that are really perverted about that in my view anyway.

SR – I am going to ask you a question about that in a minute.

DF – Good.

SR – So what kind of feminist would you call yourself? You said there are so many types so if someone asked you "what kind of feminist are you?"

DF – I think the basic thing all feminists have in common which is why, when I was in college, there was this organization called The Feminist Majority, because the majority of people would call themselves feminists, including men, is that women and men should have equal opportunities to succeed. I agree with that. I would go further and say that I think that women are, if you look at women's motivation, if you survey women and ask them what they want, they

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tend to be more family-oriented than men are a lot of times and I think one aspect of feminism is to give women opportunities to be fulfilled in all the ways, emotionally fulfilled, intellectually fulfilled, and to have flexible working situations and career opportunities for women so that they can be fulfilled. I would say I am a core feminist that women should be given the same opportunities as men, I would say I am a difference feminist insofar that men and women have unique skills and motivations and goals and that it is important to have individual, tailor to the individual, not just on the basis of sex and gender but what an individual wants and needs.

SR – There seems to be certain groups of feminists who kind of attack women who are family-oriented, you know what I mean? And I hear that a lot and it kind of frustrates me. I don't really understand it. They will criticize women who want to be family-oriented, maybe staying home or whatever with a newborn.

DF – Yeah, I have so many friends that are stay at home moms, they really love being stay at home moms. I sometimes think that if I had a different mindset or if I had been raised even slightly differently, I would be totally fulfilled with that as well. I don't think it's antithetical to my worldview at all, I could be that as well.

SR – A lot of feminist groups say that things are socialized in women, but as you said mammals, we are just in our mammalian instincts maybe.

DF – Yeah, I agree. I also think that, I don't know if this is standing in the way of anything but if we are going to change institutions to make them more friendly towards what the majority of women's evolved psychology is, which the majority of women want to partner up and to have a family or to be close to their relatives, then we can't keep saying women are no different from men in that regard because I think it undermines how important it is to most women.

SR – Great point. Could not has said it better myself [Laughs]. So have you heard of FEPS (Feminist Evolutionary Psychology Society)?

DF – I have.

SR – Any thoughts on this group?

DF – [Laughs] I have only seen what you and Maryanne Fisher post on Facebook.

SR – Are you a member?

DF – I like it, is that being a member? [Laughs]

SR – No, you have to pay! Just kidding. There is no paying. It is just a group that has come together.

DF – How long have you guys been around?

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SR – Well, it's really Maryanne's [Fisher] thing. At some conference, I can't remember because you know some conferences are kind of crazy. I am not sure when it started. It's in her transcript in her interview. So now I have a question about, kind of your animal stuff, you might get excited now.

DF – Good! Woo! [Laughs]

SR – So, you are a self-proclaimed vegan, is that correct?

DF – I think that if you are a vegan, that there is an objective definition of vegan [Laughs] I am a vegan by my own definition and most of the others definitions [Laughs].

SR – And you are an animal rights advocate, yes? I know you a little bit, I read some of your stuff. Can you discuss the interplay of feminism and animal rights? Do you see any connections between the two? And evolutionary psychology as well.

DF – Yes. In my view from an evolutionary perspective, Darwin said the difference between human and non-human animals is one of degree and not of kind and so we have a lot more in common, especially with vertebrates than what we don't have in common with them. I think the main thing we have in common with them [vertebrates] that is important is that we are motivated towards pleasure, we are averse to pain, we suffer, and we don't want to die. That is all programmed into us, as long as animals have been selectively bred to be killed for meat, you cannot breed out the desire to live, it's kind of an amazing thing.

So I would say I am vegan and it is an outgrowth of my evolutionary perspective because I think one of the pillars of psycho-morality is that we should not commit any unnecessary or inflict unnecessary suffering on others. I don't think it would make you suffer if I stole your wallet. Or let's say I enjoyed inflicting pain on someone, it would make them suffer if I did, so it doesn't matter how much pleasure I could get out of that, that's a very basic utilitarian philosophy. The vast majority of people who are secular basically their moral worldview is utilitarian, whether or not they would define it that way, that is pretty normal. So basically I don't think that if it's not necessary to use animals than we should not and I have been getting along very well being vegan for about four years and my partner has been vegan for over twenty years. I think that if it is not

necessary to use animals or exploit animals then there is no reason to. The vast majority of animals that are harmed in industrial agriculture are female animals so for instance in the dairy industry, cows have calves every year in order to produce milk. Cows don't just produce milk naturally, they have to be inseminated. One thing that I have heard a lot of feminists talk about is the way dairy cows are inseminated is usually farmers, they are not inseminated by a bull directly, they are inseminated by artificial insemination and what they put the cows on to be inseminated is actually called a "Rape Rack" which I know this does not upset the cows because they do not know what it is called but it definitely offends a lot of people. It is a window into the way that humans view animals as commodities in this particular way. I think that if you would not take, and of course because cows have these maternal instincts, they just get incredibly upset when you take away

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their calves, just like any female mammal would get upset if you took away her young that is something that we definitely we have in common with these animals. So I actually think that feminism does extend to non-human animals and that we should embrace what we have in common as females, this maternal instinct, this desire to affiliate and certainly the more global, universal desire to live and to not suffer or not to be brought into the world to simply lead a life of productivity and suffering.

SR – Again, going back to evolutionary psychology, so many things are, man-the-hunter, people argue that we have these instinctual urges to eat meat, those kind of things. I think from a lot of male researchers, the Paleo Diet, this kind of thing has really taken off. Any comments about that?

DF – Yeah. I just heard you say man the hunter and women the gatherer. I am definitely interested in answering that kind of question. As far as the Paleo Diet is concerned, I actually think that is super interesting. I had a lot of interest in that in particular because I think evolution can guide thinking on what is the most healthy way for us to live. However, most of the people I know who are on the Paleo Diet they don't follow it A) very strictly and one of the Paleo people who I know who is advocating it all the time who has got recipes and things on Facebook, the last few months I have seen him put dairy on everything, and dairy is not in the Paleo Diet. He has also told me that he eats an Inuit level of animal protein and he is not Inuit, so I think that is about eighty percent protein, animal protein in the diet, and some hunter gatherers get less than twenty percent of their protein from animal sources. On top of that, what I think a lot of Paleo people don't take into account is that we have domesticated plant foods as well and with the domestication with plant food they have much more caloric density corn or wild banana compared to a domesticated banana or a domesticated ear of corn is just an enormous difference and so given that, a vegan diet is totally nutritionally adequate. And that the two longest-lived population that have been studied are the Seventh-Day Adventists who are vegetarian and the

Japanese and they eat a lot of rice, and seaweed and drink a lot of tea and so this whole anti-grain aspect of it, I think it's very interesting but if we evolved to eat and drink dairy and we've been using and eating grain at least as long as that, then I don't see how we couldn't have evolved also to eat grains. One thing I do take from Paleo dieters is the importance of good fats so I eat a lot of nuts and seeds and coconut oil and avocado.

I think the Paleo Diet is very interesting, I think it's definitely the case that we evolved to eat meat, I know some people say that we evolved to eat a vegetarian diet; I don't think that's true. I do think there's a couple things that the Paleo Diet discounts, I don't think they take into account how many hunter-gather groups get the vast majority of their calories not from animal protein sources. There's a huge amount of variation in calories or what percent of calories hunter-gathers get from protein. I also think that they discount the domestication of plants, how much more nutritionally dense domestic bananas, corn, avocados are than their wild counterparts. Also the diversity of foods that we can get from plants foods versus the diversity of foods that our hunter-gather ancestors were able to get. You want to eat Paleo, you probably restrict yourself to eating from four different food sources. Certainly in the Pleistocene we couldn't eat a chicken one day, pig one day, and a cow the following day, in addition to those animals being domesticated and their meat being very different than they were. You know my friend who was bragging about eating Inuit levels of animal protein, but he's not Inuit, so obviously his ancestors didn't eat Inuit levels of animal protein. You know I think they're discounting the facts derived from evolution that animals suffer as we do and that inflicting suffering on animals because it better emulates the diet from which we evolved is based on tenuous evidence and, in my view that suffering has been conserved because of evolution, isn't ethical

SR – From my perspective it's really unnatural.

SR – So you publish a lot about hormones like progesterone, it seems like a lot of women get their hormones thrown in their face a lot of the time. Saying "Oh she's on her period" or "She has PMS" or she's acting like this or like that. And I've also heard the argument that PMS is socially constructed, from some feminist groups. Any thoughts on that sort of thing?

I don't think that PMDD is socially constructed. I used to think so because there was a study that came out that showed that women in Spain and women in the States didn't show the same cravings premenstrually and there was this idea that because women in the United States are always restricting themselves in terms of food consumption that that was why there was this difference. However, because I've worked for the Center for Women's Mood Disorders at University of North Carolina, we actually did a study about women's premenstrual dysphoric disorder and there is a very rigorous diagnosis procedure so they have to chart their moods every day for at least 8 cycles and when you put those ratings together you can definitely see if someone's premenstrual or not. They actually have someone else put these mood ratings together with the cycle so that they don't know what the whole pattern looks like is until the study's done.

They're more sensitive to clinical pain. And I have a short report that's going to come out showing that women who are high in rejection-sensitivity who have premenstrual dysphoric disorder have lower progesterone versus women high in rejection-sensitivity who don't have PMDD show high progesterone. And high progesterone is adaptive if you're rejection-sensitive because progesterone helps you affiliate with others.

So that's just the kind of stuff that I think PMDD does make sense within a genetic construct, but it is still an anomaly and it's a disorder and I have to wonder why the changes in mood exist when you have this reduction in hormones, potentially. I know my Grampa was on steroids after surgery once and I remember they took him off the steroids and he cried for a full day. And so I think if you put anybody on a high amount of hormones and then a low amount of hormones they are going to show some mood effects. But they still haven't demonstrated that women with PMDD have much greater swings than hormones, that's just not something that they've shown, which is interesting because it's what one would expect if one goes with this hormones hypothesis about PMDD.

As far as my other work is concerned, I've done some stuff on ovulation, so I'm interested in women's behavior across the menstrual cycle, I have a paper that's been going around to a couple different journals for a while now [Laughs]: women are less likely to engage in risky behavior around ovulation, sort of emulating this very controversial effect, that women are averse to contexts where they may be susceptible to rape around ovulation. That's a very contentious hypothesis, one that we have found some off the court for, that women are engaged in more mating behaviors around ovulation but fewer behaviors in which they might meet an unapproved and potentially dangerous male. So walking around at night, things like that. And the other work that I've done is on disgust sensitivity and progesterone; progesterone increases certain parameters of immunity because it's thought to be an adaptation to prevent the immune system from attacking a fertilized egg. So after ovulation the body doesn't actually know that an egg has been fertilized until the fetus starts releasing human chorionic gonadotropin, so every cycle the woman's body is preparing for this potential fertilized egg to be there and there's this immune change, so what we found is that progesterone is associated with disgust sensitivity.

I have a paper that I'm working on right now, showing that progesterone is associated with motivation to engage in a homoerotic behavior. Progesterone has been implicated as associated with affiliation and so the idea is that…well most homosexual behavior actually doesn't happen amongst people who are exclusively homosexual but amongst a large minority of the population so one idea about why homosexuality exists is that there's this whole reward system built around sex and so it could be co-opted or adapted or utilized to help cement alliances between people so it could be that there's homosexual behavior in order to affiliate. So what we found was that progesterone was associated with motivation to engage in same-sex behavior in women and there are other findings but they're a little more complicated with regards to men and progesterone, there's not a clear relationship. But we did do a priming study. And then I have a study going on

with a fellow Canadian Lisa Dawn Hamilton at Mt. Allison University showing that disgust decreases sexual arousal and that's measured through objective measure called a vaginal photoplethysmograph and that sexual arousal, we think, increases disgust sensitivity. So if you're sexually aroused you'll actually be more disgust-sensitive which is interesting because this is the opposite pattern that has been found in one study of men.

SR – Wow, I'll have to look into some that…

DF – So that's some of the stuff I look at mostly… well, I actually do all sorts of things, I have a paper coming about hand washing so I do a lot of really different stuff.

SR – Yeah, I saw that in your CV and thought, huh, that's kind of cool.

DF – Yes, it's more of an applied…during my two post-docs I sort of took a little mini tour of the applications of my research so I applied my understanding of disgust-sensitivity to the problem of getting people to wash their hands. Then I was also on a study about estrogen replacement therapy in menopause in women. I say in women… [Laughs].

SR – Well, you know it could be a man, who knows?

DF – Man-O-pause. I think Berry has a study called Man-O-pause.

So those are the kinds of things I work on. Now I have another study that I'm polishing up with my former advisor David Buss and Carin Perilloux about women and their resource-based friendships. So we ask women if they have a friend who brought them gifts or meals who they weren't romantically involved with and who wasn't a relative, basically. And so we called these resource friends but we didn't know if they were older or younger than them so we couldn't call them sugar daddies. We still call the paper the sugar daddy paper, but that's probably not going to fly because we don't know how old these guys are and sugar daddies are supposed to be older. But there's been a lot of research in evolutionary psychology about men being deceptive in the interest of having sex with women but we kind of show this turn table thing where these women who are very, very uninterested in having sex with their male friends who are giving them resources, their male friends are more often than not interested in having sex with the women and these women are sort of… well, I don't know whether to call it exploitation or if the men's over-inference of sexual interest is at work but these kinds of relationships exist. And we show that if the man, the resource friend, as we call him, makes a lot of sexual advances towards the woman, she's less likely to hang around with him when she's ovulating, which is also interesting because he's potentially a threat at that time.

SR – That's very interesting. So that's all your current projects?

DF – Yeah, the disgust and sexual arousal, the homosexuality study, and the sugar daddy study, those are the three things I'm trying to finish up writing right now.

SR – Can I ask a controversial question?

DF – Of course!

SR – Ok, I'm going to ask a question about rape.

DF – Oh good [Laughs]

SR – Oh good? Oh okay. [Laughs] No one ever says oh good!

DF – Yeah, it's fine.

SR – Ok. [There is] lots of research on rape both from a feminist angle and now from an evolutionary perspective. Lot of criticisms from feminism, not of the evolution of rape, but of the idea of that there's something predisposed in some males in condition-dependant circumstances where they sometimes engage in rape. I notice in the feminist literature they really try to rip this apart. I was at a party once where I said to this certain person "There have been some studies about the adaptiveness of rape for men" and she is a feminist who works in a rape crisis center and she looked like she wanted to kill me. And she asked "Do you believe that?" and I don't really know but said "No" because it looked like she was going to attack me. I was kind of scared, even though she was smaller than me. So I decided ok, I'm never going to talk about this again.

So what do you think about this? Should we not study all angles of things? I know it's a sensitive topic…

DF – Yes, it is a sensitive topic. I think that when people get upset about things like this I think what it fundamentally boils down to is that people in the socialization camp don't think that humans are like other animals. They would like to think that culture can change us so fundamentally that these predispositions, if they do exist, are irrelevant. I understand what it would be to criticize this rape adaptation hypothesis, of that science, and I do think that evolutionary psychologists can be sensationalistic and draw a lot of attention to themselves which is why we're such a darling of the media and why we're such a demon to so many different groups, but I think that's what it fundamentally boils down to. So if I was to tell you that male lions have an adaptation to kill all the cubs when they obtain a new harem of females no one would have a problem with that. But if I said that human women have an adaptation to commit infanticide people would have a big problem with that and I think that it also stems from a false dichotomy that biology is destiny and also from the naturalistic fallacy: because something is natural we're saying that it's good. We're not saying any of those things.

People have developed to do a lot of nasty things but I also think that these things will be a lot more difficult to discover because we have this attitude that humans are special and non-animals and because of this idea of culture superseding all else. And that we're condoning things by

saying that they exist, because we're definitely not. For instance, I think it's wrong to make animals suffer. But I also think that we evolved to eat meat. But I think we can develop an expanded circle of compassion. Even though we didn't evolve to care about animals we can develop an expanded circle of compassion.

And I also think we can develop an expanded circle of compassion about other people. So somebody who lives in Africa who is dying because they don't have clean drinking water, they matter nothing to me in terms of my fitness, from an adaptive standpoint they matter nothing to me. And yet I still feel motivation to give to charitable organizations that provide clean drinking water and sanitation facilities. So I do think we are flexible enough to expand our circle of compassion. But I do think there are a lot of very nasty fundamental human attributes that cause a lot of suffering and we have to understand those and also to make society go.

SR – Do you think it's the fundamental issue that we as humans in a lot of fundamental domains, in a lot of different departments, like academia, do not accept that we are animals? I think that's one of the most fundamental thing that people need to understand but still reject.

DF – Yeah, I totally agree with you. And given that I talk about animal stuff a lot, because I'm very invested in the idea that humans should be better to animals (mostly by just not using them, because I don't think that humans are good custodians to animals) I don't think that people like to imagine that they are the same. That we are fundamentally the same as they are. In great part because that's one of the foundations of our civilization, the idea that we are apart from animals. If we thought we were the same as animals, so people say that the animal rights movement if it was embraced wholeheartedly, if we really believed we are the same as animals, it would undermine all human morality. But I totally disagree, I believe nothing but good can come from expanding the circle of compassion to other people and other nonhuman species.

SR – Well, what about ants?

DF – Ants? No [Laughs].

SR – Or like big nasty spiders?

DF – I say I draw the line at invertebrates. It's just one of those things where I don't think that it counts. I ate a bowl of cereal once with an ant in it. I was really hungry!

SR – Hey, well, I've eaten ants and flies by accident before while I was running. It happens. Okay, well let's steer it back to feminism. Any backlash you've experienced with labeling yourself a feminist?

DF – Not really, I don't think. This woman that I'm very good friends with who's a very strong feminist, she had people tell her not to join the department at the University of Texas because David Buss was there. Like David Buss was some drooling caveman who is going to harm you

in some way. So I think it's really funny when I tell feminists that I've never felt excluded for being a woman, there's so many strong female personalities in evolutionary psychology and there's such a huge contingent of women who are doing amazing things. So many well-respected evolutionary psychologists are women, so if somebody were dismissive of them it would probably hurt them more than anything else. So no, I've never felt that way.

But I am small and an optimist and I think sometimes people take you less seriously if you look as young as I do or as large-eyed as I am. I think people have their mechanisms turned off…

SR – Did you say you have large eyes?

DF – I'm large-eyed.

SR – Yes, you do!

DF – I think more so than people looking past me being a woman, I think people do just have to get past their prejudices based on someone's appearance.

SR – And have you been criticized for being a feminist in the evolutionary field?

DF – I don't think so. I can only think of one time that I walked up to a bunch of guys at a HBES (Human Behavior and Evolution Society) conference and they made me feel unwelcome. Yeah, only one time has that ever happened and that was a very specific personality. I think that overall I could basically walk up to anyone at HBES and chat. People are very friendly there, it's a smallish conference, there's a lot of mutual respect. So I don't think so. I think once you get to be in academia, if there are people who think that women shouldn't be in academia or are lesser researchers or whatever, are not there.

Although it was funny cause David Buss at one time had all male graduate students and people thought that that was him being sexist. And then at another time he had all female graduate students and they called us his harem or Buss' Angels or other funny monikers like that.

SR – I've heard so many legends about David Buss…has that kind of impacted you? I mean he's David Buss and he's a big guy. He's like the head of evolutionary psych in a way, right?

DF – Yeah, he's one of the founders. I think my mentor was David Buss and one of my major collaborators have been Dan Fessler. So he and I work a lot together and he just has a totally different perspective from David Buss and so I think people have a kind of expectation about the research I'm going to do because I come from the Buss Lab. But I don't necessarily do that kind of work. I've done some work on mating but also on some other adaptive problems. I have had people ask me questions about….there was this visiting professor at University of Texas one time and I was talking to Kristina Durante and we both have very long hair and he made some

joke, because he thought Kristina was also a member of the Buss Lab, he made some joke about how we had our hair like that because David liked us to have long hair.

SR – I hear all these crazy stories about this Buss Lab, like are you all insane, like I have no idea what goes on there...

DF – It's totally typical of an evolutionary psych lab, we talk, we have funny conversations.

SR – But other people, I thought, were attacking it. And when I met David Buss, he was quite the man!

DF – He is so charming. I feel like some people have been won over to evolutionary psychology just by David Buss' personality. Especially because they expect him to be some kind of…I don't know what they expect, they expect him to…he just acts like a regular person and I think he gets a lot of ideas about research and things from talking to people. I have had him at a couple parties that I had in Austin and he is just an incredible listener. If you don't ask him, he won't even talk about evolutionary psychology. He will ask people all these probing question and then he listens very intently. And then you may see one of those anecdotes that someone told him in a lecture or in a research paper. He's just fascinated by human beings. And I think that's something that people don't really understand about him.

SR – I was going to talk about David Buss a bit and how some of his research has been attacked by this lady, Amanda Marcotte. And she seems to have a strong influence on evolutionary psychology and it seems almost venomous….

DF – Yeah, she is, definitely. Well, I wouldn't say that she is, definitely, but she has her…well, you can't really vilify people you consider everyone thinks they're fighting the good fight. And she's just a perfect example of confirmation bias and ideology and getting in the way of a full understanding of our branch of psychology, our perspective on psychology. I didn't really know much about her until a friend of mine went and saw her speak and she has a podcast called Story Collider and he sent it to me. And I was like "Wow, if you haven't had your head explode today this is funny to listen to."

You know I used to get—I'm going to use a totally sexist reference—I used to get my knickers in a twist big time when…I mean I'm an atheist and an evolutionary psychologist and I used to get my knickers in a twist when people would say evolutionary psychology is trash, or just-so stories or people would say that religion is important I would get really upset, but I don't really care about it now. If people want to say that evolutionary psychology is crap and they want to tell other people about it, I just think that eventually the tide of public opinion will turn and the more things get published, the more people focus on what's important, the research, the more the tide will turn. I just think that she has a lot of influence on people, and I think that's sad but I think there are so many things that are more important.

Like I think it's so much more important that people are kind to one another than it is that people believe in evolutionary psychology. I think it's so much more important (to me) that people stop eating meat than that they believe in evolutionary psychology. Everything else just kind of scales in comparison to all the bad things that are going on in the world. So she can tell people that evolutionary psychologists believe that there is a gold-digging whore gene.

SR – We're on the same page! I have the same quote here. This gold-digging whore gene. Where does she get this from? I never read that.

DF – Well, I thought it was hilarious, and she was being hyperbolic on purpose, obviously, and it was very amusing. More power to her! People just ate that up, some people ate that up, and they're never going to care about evolutionary psychology anyway. If you hear somebody say that and you take it on you're just not going to be someone who cares to be informed on this particular issue. And if you don't that's fine too. And you know, she has very lovely seasonal vegetarian recipes on her blog. I love those! So we have this thing in common! Yeah, I don't think it's a big deal.

SR – Well, that's good. You know when I read her, I think my face went red. Because she really annoyed me. She was talking about misrepresenting scientific data but she just did the same thing in her talk.

DF – Yeah, there's absolutely no evidence of that. And if someone wants to pick apart the study. I didn't hear her say anything about misrepresenting data but maybe I just missed that part. I just thought she was saying that there were these very simplistic ideas and that everything could be explained by socially constructed gender roles and that that's a more parsimonious and simpler explanation. Which some people have said…I read in this Salon article that oh, the causes of our sex differences are so much more mundane than evolutionary psychology, it's socially constructed gender roles. And I said "Wait a second, I think evolution is pretty mundane, it happens to every single organism on the planet. And every organism's psychology on the planet has been shaped by evolutions." So I think it's pretty mundane. And also I think feminists are usually on the side of saying that homosexuality is innate or people are born homosexual, and they also believe that something like reversal therapy, they say that that doesn't work. But if you come from a social construction perspective, and you think that little girls like to play with dolls and have this tend and befriend psychology because it's been socially constructed, then wouldn't you also think that it would be possible to change someone's sexuality? That seems like a very small…you can influence someone's whole global worldview and their personality, right down to liking pink, and liking to play with dolls, and two year olds are completely in the process of social forces. Then wouldn't someone's parents, desperately wanting them to be heterosexual make it so that there would be no gay people? I don't know.

SR – You know, that's a logical argument and they need to think about that. Okay, let's move on. But I had to ask about her.

DF – Yeah, she's really been in the evolutionary psych blogosphere lately. And she really had a problem with Jessie Baron's anti-rape adaptation blog post as well. But I've actually only read her…I was actually really curious to see if she would have a response to this Robert Kurzban article, so I cyberstalked her for a couple of days but she never posted anything about it or made mention of it. Because he basically takes her down point by point. And I did find out that we have six Facebook friends in common. We actually know a lot of the same people in Austin. But I never ran into her. We did live there at the same time. As far as I know. Maybe I did talk to her one night and just never caught her name. Or maybe we just never talked about evolutionary psychology, maybe we talked about something else, like shoes!

SR – Probably, that's what you girls talk about, shoes. You kind of girls. Okay, let's talk about mentoring. So who were your mentors?

DF – My main mentors have been David Buss and Dan Fessler. I had two post-docs and one of my post doc mentors is the only woman mentor I've had. And she's just an amazingly productive, high-powered, a UNC professor, but we don't really work the same way, she's got a very different approach to research than I do. But it was really very special working with her.

And I have to say that the person who I think I jive with best, in terms of our thought process is, in designing new programs of research is really Dan Fessler. He comes up with an idea, I come up with an idea, or even the way that I've come up with experimental paradigms, we just always…you know sometimes when we come up with an idea we both think "Oh, why didn't I come up with that idea?" We kind of have that rapport**.** Actually it's funny with this homosexuality paper I'm working on with Dan, when I first got the data in and I presented it in a lab meeting, and David Buss just absolutely thought…he didn't actually have a lot of critical things to say about my study design, he just thought it was totally wrong that one could influence one's homosexual motivation with priming. He just didn't actually believe the data as he saw it. So I think that's kind of interesting. Whereas Dan and I had just a totally different idea about it.

David just has this way of… he's always talking about things being crisp, about ideas being crisp. And the way that he writes and the way he conveys things there's a huge reason why he's so popular, and he's incredibly productive. But his view of evolutionary psychology I think is…those two main things he focuses on are the dark sides of human nature, which is murder, violence and then some of the dark sides of human sexual behavior. So…yeah.

So David's been my mentor and Dan Fessler, those have been my major mentors, even though I've never been at the same school as Dan. We met at HBES in 2004 and we've been collaborated pretty extensively ever since. And I was very lucky to have someone like David be my graduate advisor because, as I've realized more recently, not everybody's graduate school

advisor is happy to have them collaborate with anybody and everybody they feel like, not everybody's grad school advisor is happy to have them take on whatever projects they like. Mostly graduate advisors say "You have to do something that's a spinoff of something I've already done and then when you are ready to do your dissertation you can do something that's a slightly bigger spinoff of something I've already done. Whereas I was given complete intellectual freedom in David's lab. And that's such an shocking thing to have and I haven't gotten it back until now, as a lecturer, because as a post-doc, the cold, hard reality is that you're working for somebody and they generally want you to do things they way they do things and to try to see things the way they see things. Which is totally reasonable, I just wasn't used to it.

SR – Now are you taking on a role as mentor to students? Is that starting to happen?

DF – I'm here in the UK, with the tutorial system, so I have six first year students and six second year students that I run tutorials for. So I don't see them every week, I see them about every other week. So if they have problems then I help them out, we also act as in some ways as counselors, we talk to them about…with a couple of my tutees I talk to them about their personal lives, what they're going through, stresses that they have with school. So those relationships are probably as formal or informal as students need them to be in order for them to get the most out of it. But when I was in graduate school I was doing a lot more mentoring. I just got here. So in grad school I was doing a lot more mentoring where I had about 20 research assistants over time and I helped three research assistants (all women) get into graduate school and try to find a path that they would feel most fulfilled by. And I have to say that that was very gratifying to me, that mentoring that I did, more at University of Texas. And I look forward to getting back into that now, with projects with students, but no, I haven't really gotten into it yet. And hopefully I'll be able to fund a graduate student. Here in the UK you actually have to get funding to get a graduate student, you can't just get one through the department. It's slightly more difficult, it's not like there's a teach assistantship thing going on like there is in the US. So it's pretty different. But there are a few graduate students floating around here, and because there are not very many, then they can take on two or three mentors, and they can get a lot more attention from faculty. So I think that's a good thing too.

SR – So what would you say to feminists who really hate evolutionary psychology? Like what would you tell them?

DF – I would just say that you should get to know some of the research done by some of the high-powered women in our field. Because a lot of it is incredibly thoughtful and really regards women as special and unique and complex in a way that a socially constructed viewpoint I think misses. And I would also say that they should look at the fundamental reason why they have a problem with this nativist approach to human behavior. Why is there a problem with humans having inborn characteristics? And I guess that's pretty much all I guess I could say….I think people who are very against evolutionary psychology, they…there's been examples of women

who were very against evolutionary psychology, they read up on it and they became evolutionary psychologists! Who was it who said that specifically? That they read up on it and then they were converted?

SR – We'll look them up.

DF – I did read an article or something about that once. So yeah, that's basically all I could say about that. If you're very invested in the idea that evolutionary psychology is one of many forces keeping women down then it's not going to make yourself feel good to disabuse yourself of that idea so I don't think it's necessarily important except for people who might fund us and people who blog. [Laughs] If you are a feminist who is neither on a grant committee or writing a blog, you're just going about your daily life, then don't worry about it, just have a good time.

SR – [Laughs] Sounds good! So…What accomplishments are you most proud of?

DF – Hmm. Sometimes like today I was looking at this…because often you come up with experimental ideas so long ago you forget how you came up with them, and I was reading over the method for this paper that I'm writing and I'm like "It's just so good! How did I come up with this? This is really great! Who did this?" So it's funny how long it takes to write papers sometimes, you know you're looking back at yourself being like "That person, two years ago, what a genius she was!" I didn't get much done at a young age but I finished a PhD in a great lab with a great mentor, I think I'm proud of that. I'm proud that I managed to get a job in the UK so that I could be close to my partner, which was very difficult. Actually, I'm just so excited that as a human being I get to do something that I love, for money. My grandfather when he came to this country (meaning the United States, not the UK) was a dairy farmer, and worked on an underground tunnel and did construction and did all these different jobs and the idea that I can read and write and explore things that interesting me for a living is just cool. And we live in an era of time in the world in which we have the luxury of not doing something that is directly useful and the specialization of labor in civilization is an amazing thing. So I have to say that I feel both proud and freaking incredibly lucky that that's possible.

SR – One more thing and then we're done. Is there anything else that you want to talk about that I haven't mentioned?

DF – Yeah, you can plug my blog! My partner and I have started a blog and podcast, it's called theveganoption.org and that's my side project, consistently, and I even have a chance in the first episode where I break down some numbers and talk about the predictors of whether or not people decide after age 38 to be a vegan. So that's like my other passion, my two passions are understanding human nature and also how we can build a more ethical society with regard to non-human animals, so those are my two big passions.

SR – So do you think feminism has influenced that?

DF – Yeah, definitely, I think when people expand their circle of compassion and when people see fundamentally that as a woman I have so many things and other motivations as other females that I think that makes a big difference.