

Psychology's Feminist Voices Oral History Project

Interview with Eleanor Maccoby

*Interviewed by Alexandra Rutherford
San Francisco, CA
May 24, 2009*

When citing this interview, please use the following citation:

Maccoby, E. (2009, May 24) Interview by A. Rutherford [Video Recording].

Psychology's Voices Oral History and Online Archive Project. San Francisco,
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EM: Eleanor Maccoby, Interview participant

AR: Alexandra Rutherford, Interviewer

AR – ...Okay Dr. Maccoby, why don't we start where we left off, then.

EM – Okay. Well after that experience, discovering about my lower salary and so on, as I say, this hit the campus newspapers and my name became known and so women began to come over and talk to me. There was a group of three women graduate students, first-year students in math who had already decided to leave at the end of their first year it had to do with sexual with harassment. Which startled me, I had no idea that such things were going on and also I had become sensitized to issues about salary and we put together a committee and began looking into the situation. The most acute situation was in the med school; where it turned out that wives of eminent mail professors in medicine who were doing excellent research, published a lot and whatnot, never somehow got faculty appointments. And there were lots of lecturers in H&S who also were very well-qualified women, but their husbands were on the faculty. I think one of the reasons for low salaries for women was that the university kind of thought, they added together the salary the husband and the wife and thought these people are very well taken care of when it comes to raising a family on the campus. Stanford, by the way, is absolutely wonderful in the fact that they had set aside pieces of Stanford land for individual faculty members to

build their homes on, which is what we did too.

So, I became kind of an activist and then a group of women came to me and said they wanted to start a center of research on women and gender, I was hoping they would just have it on gender! I don't see why it had to be young women in particular, this was because I still wasn't a very avid feminist although I had been woken up to some of the situations that women actually were in on the campus even though I didn't feel I'd experienced very much myself. And, however, these women came and they needed some help in raising money to start their center and so Jim March and I agreed to go ahead and be the figureheads on the applications for money, we help them raise money to start the Center for Research on Women, and I was a member of their executive board for a while. But actually I told them, and so had Jim, we didn't plan to be really very active in the research that would go on in the organization because we had our own research programs very busily going on. So I was active campus wide in other words with the respect to a number of things and was appointed to a campus wide committee on sexual harassment, heard some very interesting cases brought before us, one thing I noticed, I think, the thing that the men accused of this had in common was the quality of ego that said "Nobody could possibly be unwilling to accept my advances!" [Laughs] So anyway...

AR – That's...

EM – And the research that I had been doing I hadn't thought of as particularly pertinent to gender. When I got sex differences in some studies I was irritated because I had to

factor it out in doing the analysis of the things I was really interested in. And, however Carol Jacklin came and wanted to be a post-doc with me, we had a long talk. At that time I was having a disagreement with Sandy Bem who was in our department and she had come to me and said she thought that I should not publish certain things that I had been publishing because this was information which might conceivably go down to the disadvantage of women. And I did not feel that way; I thought that what science said was you published any interesting solid finding that you had. And when Carol came she and I discussed this because she was much more intensely feminist than I was. And we agreed “the truth shall make you free,” is the way she put it. And we felt, we agreed, that if we did research together we would publish what we found.

AR – Now what, do you have a sense of what Sandy Bem was referring to specifically when she said certain of your research could be used against women?

EM – No I don't remember at this moment. No.

AR – So you published a 1966 a book on sex differences?

EM – Right.

AR – Was that what she was referring to?

EM – I don't think so because the chapter that I had in that book was on intellectual

differences of which there are very few indeed. So, anyway, Carol and I started to work on parent-child interaction with little children and this time instead of counting on interviews with parents we were doing observations of parents interacting with kids of you know, three months, six months, nine months, twelve months, and so on and this got to be very demanding and very interesting stuff. And meanwhile we became more and more irritated about some of the stuff that was being said about women. Now I remember particularly when I read a clinical psychologist, Freudian, who published this business of the sensual difference between the sexes, is that men are, males are active and females are passive. I said "passive!" What in the world could anybody mean? And I had a colleague in psychiatry had also done work as an anthropologist in Africa, he had shown me his slides, and here was this picture of a woman trotting fast across the compound carrying a heavy bucket of water to start preparing lunch for her family, there were women in the fields with the baby on the back busily tilling the soil or planting rice or something. And a woman coming back about five o'clock in the morning from having gone out to gather wood for the day's cooking, this huge bundle of wood on top of her head walking around, briskly – and then a picture of the men in the community sitting around, as you're sitting right now, passing on the oral traditions of the culture [Laughter]. And I admit that my selection of their slides was a little bit biased but I wanted to make that point. I used to use that in lectures when I said how outrageous it was to talk about women as passive, maybe dominated and subservient but that's quite different. Anyway, we began to notice other things where we were doubtful about this and we finally said well let's see if we can put together the evidence for what sex differences there are!

And so we began to comb the literature and then we hired a little group of three undergraduates I believe it was – Carol supervised them mostly – to go over all the literature and then we began to realize, we knew about studies that had been done where there had been both male and female subjects, but we couldn't, we'd look at their publications and there would be nothing in there about sex differences. We started calling them up and they'd say, "Oh yeah of course we analyze for gender, but there were no differences so we didn't publish them." And this turned out to be a huge source of bias in the literature because, there was one study, let me think, yes, it was on the prisoner's dilemma, and women were said to sell out their partners more often than men would. There had been almost 30 replications of that, that found no difference and they didn't publish it. So we began systematically calling people who were doing studies that had gender comparisons potentially, to find out if they'd looked for them, to find out if they were positive or negative.

Now obviously we could not do a very systematic study of that – we will, nobody, none of us will ever know how many "no difference" findings there are that weren't published, but we put in as many as we could find, and it did really help to balance the picture a lot. And as you know the upshot of that book – its basic message was – most of what we think about as differences, essential differences between the sexes are myths! They aren't true! Well, now this came out at just the time when it was... the field of women's studies was perfectly ready to receive this message. This was what feminism was all about in those days, men and women are alike! Let's stop stereotyping them with all these labels

which are not true.

So then Carol and I went on for a number of years with our work and we were doing a longitudinal study with three cohorts of kids. We felt that since we couldn't do experimental work on most of what we wanted to do the least we could was replicate on new samples. And so we made that as our criterion, we had to do that before we would publish something. So by the time our children had grown up to almost 3 years old we decided it was time to see them, observe them in the presence of other children, not just with interaction with their parents. And the big question was, well, does it matter what other child you put in with, in the room with the child? And so we did that study of 33 month older, not quite three, and we would bring them in pairs of two boys, two girls, or a boy-girl pair. And I think you probably know what the outcome of that was. We compared first of all the total amount of social behavior that girls would use toward an: "this is an unfamiliar little playmate," and the total amount of social behavior that a boy would use. Identical, if you compared the boys with the girls. Then we analyzed according to the sex of the partner, wow! The differences that emerged, both sexes were twice as active with a partner of their own sex as a partner of the other sex.

And we began - this really turned my thinking around because I thought, "Oh my God, what good does it do to just compare averages?" What average boys do, what average girls do, this gender is a situational thing! And it depends so much on the situation, the social situation, the partner and particularly the sex of the other! So that is a different way of thinking, and I began to work on the issue of gender segregation and find out whether

it was true as we were finding, that children in the playgrounds when we followed these same kids into preschool – people, kids were spending 11 times as much time with children of their own sex – no wait, at preschool it was five times as much, at first grade it was 11 times as much with kids of their own sex versus the other. And these were not, if you looked at distributions, you know you expect a normal curve, these weren't normal curves, both sexes, the largest amount of, the majority of the cases were in the zero category – never played with a child of the other sex. So that it was Allport used to call a J curve. I don't know if you, you probably don't go back that far in your memories any of you [Laughs]. But this was just an order of magnitude different kind of issue than the sort of things where we take two normal distributions slightly displaced from each other. Not at all! That wasn't what was going on!

And so we reviewed all the literature we could find anywhere, particularly cross-cultural samples to see if this was true all around the world wherever it had been looked at. Now there weren't very many, good, well done studies of gender differences because anthropologists never worry about sampling, you know, they just do, sort of whoever's there, so to speak, convenient samplings. So whatever we could find said “absolutely it is universal.” Why should that be? So I worried about that for years and finally published my last book in 1998 called, *The Two Sexes: Growing Up Apart Coming Together*, now I seriously entertained the possibility that there are some biological factors here. So we, or I, had become no longer the darling of the feminists [Chuckles]. There are some, I think third wave feminists, now I don't know what you would say about this wave-business but I certainly switched over from the idea that gender didn't matter, to the notion that it

matters a hell of a lot! But you have to think in terms of what. And certainly, while we in our own work have discovered that if you observe the child of two years old, or three years old, and you have the child individually in a playroom with the floor marked off in big squares with masking tape and you just counted the number of different squares they entered as a good measure of activity level; if boys were alone in that room or girls were alone in that room – gender didn't make any difference. If two boys were there, their activity went whoosh – sky-high Two girls it didn't, there what you got was talking.

And this was happening so early. It didn't look to me like something that had been drummed into these kids by parents. We started watching parents as they dealt with gender-specific kinds of behaviors. And we weren't able to find, we tried fathers with little boys who are in a risky situation, did they encourage them to just be strong and manly – no! Now these were fathers of kids in big nursery school and mostly they were for professional fathers but if the little boy didn't want to scoot across the elevated rail or something, or he wanted to scoot across instead of standing in walking across it, his father would say, “Well, you know, he doesn't like heights very well.” A little girl would get up and dance across this thing and do a ballet pose [Laughs]. And so it was a risk-taking situation and the parents were not behaving in ways that looked like reinforcement of gender stereotypes. So I began to be fairly skeptical about the idea that this was being produced by socialization, and that too was really against the zeitgeist of feminist thinking I think. I don't know where I stand with them now, to tell you the truth [Laughs].

AR – Well you know you've devoted so much of your career to trying and understand the

complex interaction of socialization, gender-cognition...

EM – Yes.

AR – ... and biology and how that all works together to produce gender differentiation.

Can you summarize for us where you stand on that?

EM – I'm an interactionist. And I got heavily involved in the issues about behavior genetics and their efforts to say, "60% of this behavior is genetic and 40% is environmental." Nonsense! You can't do that! They absolutely ignored interactions and they are the name of the game. And I'm so pleased that real genetics, biological genetics, are now coming in and making the statement, "well you may have a predisposition but it may never show itself if you don't ever encounter the situation that will encourage it." It's entirely a matter of the expression of genes not having them! And what your environment is that brings out the expression of this or that. And the way that different genes work together in different ways and you inherit such a different pattern of genes from, what your parents had. I won't say that the twin studies were absolutely useless, but I think they were close [Laughs]. So that and my interest in gender stuff they are synchronized here.

AR – I have to ask this! Do you consider yourself a feminist psychologist?

EM – I don't want to answer that question [Laughter] I'll take the Fifth Amendment.

AR – Or maybe a better way of saying it is, what is your feminism, and how does it interact with your life as a psychologist?

EM – Well it doesn't interact with my life as a psychologist, even though I have published a lot of stuff on gender. I think it interacts with me as an activist, like the little kid that went out in high school and chalked the pavement. I hate to see discrimination. And I want to see it corrected where ever I can. So I'm pleased to see three women Secretary of States in a row, and that's marvelous. I was, when it came down to the push and shove I decided I was more for Obama than I was for Clinton, but I would have been very pleased to see a woman president. I just, I guess I have this meritocracy idea in the back of my mind and I've had that in the academic world too. I believe in affirmative action for women in getting them into the pipeline and getting them into the assistant-professorships and giving them a chance to show their stuff. When it comes to the tenure decision – nope, I don't believe they should have preference. So what kind of a feminist am I? [Laughs]

AR – Do you have any advice in terms of the work-family tension that all of the panelists today alluded to?

EM – Yeah, it's there [Laughs] and I think it's not at all surprising that having children slows up a woman's career more than it does a man's, demonstratively. I think one of the reasons I've had as good a career as I've had is that we didn't have children until I was 40,

and I had a chance to fully establish myself. And that isn't a pattern of living that I want to recommend to everybody. I think really there are all kinds of different combinations, I've noticed when I've had women graduate students who came back to graduate work at the age of 30 after having a couple of kids in their 20s, they are more focused, more dedicated to getting their academic work done and making progress. It's quite remarkable to see what they can do. So all I can say is, I know that the tensions exist. I bet it's time for me to leave?

AR – Looks like it is, yeah.

EM – Time for me to go!

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