Psychology's Feminist Voices Oral History Project

Interview with Ellyn Uram Kaschak
San José, California

Interviewed by A. Rutherford
Dryden, NY (interview conducted by zoom)
August 26th, 2015

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AR: Alexandra Rutherford, Interviewer [Dryden, NY]

EK: Ellyn Uram Kaschak, Interview participant [San José, CA]

AR: Okay, now we're recording. So Ellyn, if I can ask you to please state your full name, place, and date of birth for the record.

EK: Ellyn Uram Kaschak. I was born in Brooklyn, New York, June 23rd, 1943.

AR: Great, to get us started, can you talk first about how you first became aware of feminism and what that meant to you?

EK: Well, I was in graduate school. I had gone to George Washington University for a Master's degree. They had a separate master's school. At the end of the Master's program, I had been in the top of the class, but they told me, "We don't accept women into the PhD program, it doesn't matter how good your grades are or anything." So, I went to work as a school psychologist for a couple of years; this was in the late 1960s, and the entire world was changing. During that time interval, Title IX took effect, and a lot of other things that compelled the graduate programs to take women. So I went back for my PhD at Ohio State University. The first year that I was there, NOW [National Organization of Women] put out the consciousness raising program they had back then and Naomi Weisstein's work came out, and Phyllis Chesler's. It just ignited everybody. So, I was already in psychology when I learned about feminism. So I hadn't set out to change psychology.

AR: So, it sounds like you hadn't really considered yourself a feminist before that time. It hadn't really been a part of your world or meaning making.

EK: It hadn't occurred to me. I couldn't imagine that I could have lived a different life than I was living. And a lot of us at that time, we thought, "whatever the discontent is, it's just me. I need to figure out a way to adjust to this world." So I married a man that was supportive of my career, was un-sexist, and so on. I did the best I could do without feminism. **[02:19]**

AR: Can you go back and tell me a little bit about your upbringing? I know I read that you grew up in 1940s and 1950s in Brooklyn. And you have written about yourself as an out-spoken young girl and about your love of books and so on. Can you tell me a little bit more about your upbringing and your family and the influences that they might or might not had on you?

EK: My family was very immersed in the values of 1950s and it was a highly gendered world. If you look back right now, it was a a most gendered decade. So, a lot of the issues that I had in

childhood were "You can't do that because you're a girl." And they would just say it like that. I would say, "I want a chemistry set." And they said, "No, it's not for girls." Some other toy. "No, it's not for girls." And so almost everything that I was, was not for girls. I hadn't heard of feminism, yet. I was a very good athlete and I asked them to buy me a baseball glove, but "not for girls." I'm left-handed and I learned to play baseball borrowing the boy's gloves and doing everything backwards. It was just, "You can't do it, it's your gender." I was rebellious because of that, but it never occurred to me that the world was going to change so I, I never could have seen it.

AR: What were the messages in terms of your education? As you say, you went all the way through a PhD. Was there ever any family messaging that that wasn't kind of the appropriate route for girls?

EK: Absolutely, and it was very overt. You couldn't go to college, never mind your PhD. You're a girl, why do you have to go to college? You marry somebody, hopefully, who went to college, but the most important thing is that you marry somebody. In my generation they had the thing, I don't know if they still say this, that going to school to get MRS degree?

AR: Yeah. That's one that I've heard.

EK: And so the girls started to go, I think it was the first generation of girls that started to go to get a MRS degree. And the way I negotiated it, my own little personal strategy, although I'm sure it wasn't only me, was to get an education and an MRS degree. So I'd tote home a husband at the end of it.

AR: Okay. So when were you married? Were you married during your BA. Or just after?

EK: I was married during the week of graduation. I went back home, got married, and went back. The marriage lasted for about 7 years.

AR: So, tell me a little bit about your entrée into psychology and what attracted you to psychology as a place you would pursue graduate work and so on.

EK: Well, in the first place I came from a crazy family, like a lot of psychologists do. Some of it was that I had to figure out what's going on in this world, it makes no sense to me. That was one level of my motivation. The other was, it seemed to me that that's where everything comes together, is in psychology. It could have been philosophy or literature, but I wanted to understand the mind and meaning. The meaning-of-life type [questions]; those big questions. **[05:49]**

And the years that I went to school were the years of behaviorism, the smallest questions. I'd navigate around it in funny ways until I could get through psychology. My undergraduate major was Russian literature. Therefore, I speak Russian. It was the middle of the Cold War, it was an interesting thing to do. I like to say that my first supervisors were Chekhov and Dostoevsky. They were good supervisors!

AR: So it sounds like you found a lot of psychology in literature?

EK: Yes. Literature and philosophy. I was trying to think what is this planet that I put down on about.

AR: So when did you actually turn more solidly towards academic psychology?

EK: I was always oriented academically. I remember that when I was fifteen years old, I wanted to be a professor. That was my thing. I loved learning, I loved teaching, I always loved school. School was my escape from whatever the insanity was at home. So, I knew I wanted to be a professor, and I knew I wanted to be a psychologist. I really knew all along, that the route was extremely circuitous to get there in terms of study. When I went to George Washington University for my Master's, I was following my husband at the point, who went to a law school. And they had a very traditional clinical program. And I spent two years learning how to administer Rorschachs, TATs [Thematic Apperception Tests], and WISCs [Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children]. And that's what my job was as a school psychologist. I carried a test battery around and administered two or three of them a day for years. It was horrible, it was the inner city schools of Washington D.C. So, the kids hadn't the slightest idea what I was talking about. They just ripped down the tracking system. So the schools were figuring out fancier way of doing tracking. Tracking was legal by sending in psychologists and these kids would never get a full scale IQ above 70. It was a horrible job. I felt like I was really doing evil in my first job as a psychologist.

AR: Do you recall at that point, were there any women on the faculty that you worked with? What was the situation like at George Washington at that point?

EK: All men. And very traditional clinicians immersed in years of administering Rorschach or whatever they had been doing. Even back in Ohio State, it was all men.

AR: Yeah. You were at Ohio State in the early 70s, so that was a wow, that was a tumultuous time.

EK: Actually I was there in the late 60s. You see in early 70s, that's when I finished writing my dissertation. The second year I was there was the year that Kent State happened. And so they shut us down also. We were tear-gassed, shut down and I got out of graduate school two months early.

AR: Well, I want to go back to how you embraced some of the feminist literature that was coming out at that time, but I also want to hear about your dissertation. What was your dissertation on?

EK: My dissertation was on communication in families as a function of the gender of the child. I managed to slide gender in at last. **[09:30]**

AR: Was that something that was really intentional at that point? Because you were becoming more aware of gender as a really important – for lack of a better word – construct to work with, or was that less intentional?

EK: The gender part was completely intentional. The rest of it was little bit less intentional because I had been doing family therapy and community psychology. So pragmatically I needed to do a dissertation in that area. Then I was completely conscious of gender and I wanted to focus on gender.

AR: And who were you working with at that time at Ohio State?

EK: I was working with **Jack Nasar, Toll Sigel??** was there, and my immediate advisor had been Danny Nolan. There's a lurid story about why I had to be switched. I'll tell it to you non-luridly. Basically when women started to go back to school, we had to deal with sexual harassment from the male faculty. They were really happy that there were women there, because they had more interesting sex lives. And Danny Nolan was one of them who practically physically attacked me. So I had to drop him as my dissertation supervisor and that's why it took me another year to get done.

AR: Yeah. Unfortunately, this is not an uncommon story.

EK: I hope it is now.

AR: Yeah. So, tell me then a little bit about your turn towards feminism at this time. You mentioned Phyllis Chesler's work was really influential to you. You've written about that too. How did you come across it?

EK: Well, we started doing a Women's Group at Ohio State. That was the first class into which they had accepted people of color and women in equal ratios to white men. It was a big, huge experiment on their part. It was a very radical and good program in a lot of ways. Somebody found the NOW [National Organization of Women] protocol that they used, it was kind of a guideline for how to do CR [consciousness-raising] group. And while we were in the CR group, we found Naomi's [Naomi Weisstein's] work and Phyllis's [Phyllis Chesler's] work. It wasn't a gradual process. It was like, What? Why didn't I see that? You know, we used to call it a click. It was like, "It's everywhere, how could I have missed that all of these years?"

So, it wasn't even a gradual process. We were starved for it. And the first thing that happened in those days is everybody became angry. And you know, there is always that thing about how feminists are too angry, but you became so angry because you realized how you had been duped all these years. How you were conforming to something that wasn't fair. It wasn't just you, it was [all] women. At that point, we asked if we could have a class in psychology of women. They told us that we could, but we had to organize it ourselves because there was nobody to teach it. Which we did. And you know, from then on I was a feminist, from one second to the next, basically.

AR: Wow, so a real immediate radical conversion in a way.

EK: Exactly! The heavens opened up and that was it. **[13:01]**

AR: Tell me a little bit more about that first group, or that first course. What kinds of materials did you read? What was out there?

EK: It's hard to remember what else was out there at that point. This was 1968-1969. So I'm not even sure what else we read. We found articles to read. Let me see. No, even Jean Baker Miller's work wasn't out, yet.

AR: Yeah. That was really early.

EK: It was quite early. And everybody in the group became a feminist. So we were the first generation. We didn't have any mentors, we were the first. And I was doing mostly family systems. I hadn't gotten all the way to epistemology yet. But I got there in the middle of that somehow. I just started epistemology on my own. It's a funny thing being part of that generation, because a lot of what I do is epistemology. What happened is, I had been studying behavioral modification and then I moved to family systems and Jay Haley's work and those people. It started to look to me like it was the same epistemology. Like it was all dealing with the outside, and not the inside and not gender and everything. [unclear] It was a major theoretical thing and I wrote about that. The men on the faculty were all like entranced, it never occurred to them. Nobody said go to the philosophy department, you're doing epistemology. And there was one person there named **Dr. Pepinski**, who was really involved in **hypnomethodology.** Which has kind of disappeared, but Harold Garfinkel had a very influential book, about ethnomethodology. That work influenced me a lot.

[end of Recording 1]

My recent work is ethnomethodology, which is what I really wanted to do from the beginning.

AR: Oh my gosh. We'll definitely talk about your recent work, which is just fascinating. I had to pry myself away from your book to come and do the interview here. But let me ask you, and this is kind of an abstract question, so it might not be easily answerable, but when you had this conversion towards feminism, how did that actually change things for you? Both personally and professionally. How did it play out in your life?

EK: I don't know if it changed things for me personally. I'm sure it did, in terms of what I was seeing, what I was feeling, but I can't cite any major shift. You know, I didn't leave Ohio, anything like that. I did eventually get divorced, but I don't think it was the function of that. I think I was on the path. But what it did was, I suddenly saw gender in every place. It was a perceptual change. I am interested in vision and making meaning. Because the kaleidoscope moved and meaning, everything changed. Every place I looked I saw gendered politics - the way we were treated by the faculty, the way women were treated within professions, and so on. Even the literature that I was reading, I could hardly read that literature anymore, because I recognized women were completely discriminated against in horrible ways. It was talking about the schizophrenic mother at that time (it was still in the literature) and refrigerator mother for autism and all that. It was like back to zero. What do I do then? I finally got into psychology and now I'm out again.

AR: You discovered how androcentric it is. **[17:08]**

EK: Yeah. Everything we discovered in the studies was: zero. What do I do then?

AR: Yeah, totally.

So you went from Ohio State and did an internship at the VA in San Francisco, Palo Alto.

EK: That was the center of family therapy, back then. That's where Bates and Hayley had been doing their major work.

AR: Oh, interesting. So what was your experience like at the VA?

EK: It was my first time in all-male institution. So, here I go again. The family therapy part was interesting, I enjoyed doing that. Now, in Palo Alto, I am 45 minutes away from San Francisco where everything is happening. But my supervisors were still male. There was one woman. It was a tough job, because not many people got better….There was one woman that was completely schizophrenic and being hospitalized long-term. There was a male psychiatrist - the female patients all thought that they were part of his harem, that they were married to him. And he thought the same thing. He would do therapy saying, "Well, if you were my wife. I would treat you well." Things like that. I never knew if it was a 1960s [inaudible] therapy or if he really believed that they were all his women. That was the power of the VA, back in the day.

AR: Yeah. Were there more women trainees by that point?

EK: Yes, 50% of the interns were women. It was our group that was starting to be half women. That's how it went. We didn't have any women mentors or supervisors. We had each other and we tried to figure out together.

AR: Yeah. Tell me a little bit about activism that you were engaged in at that time. There was so much going on in San Francisco. What did that part of your life look like at that point?

EK: Well, it was like totally having two lives. Being out in Palo Alto during the day and then going to San Francisco at nights and on weekends. All this radical stuff was going on. Women at the time were organizing around the abortion coalition, abortion was a big issue that was going on. It was way before AIDS, because the LGBT community got organized around AIDS, but that's 15 years later. And what happened, I don't know how people got together, but those of us who were were the psychologists that began meeting in San Francisco, talking about psychotherapy. And it was either behaviorism or Freud at that time. We began talking about how to make a psychotherapy that would be appropriate for women. I can't remember the exact details that got us together, but it was in the air, every place. Everybody was talking about the various professions and how androcentric they were. We were meeting as a group, but there were two or three other groups in San Francisco, as I understand now. As well as in New York and several places like that.
[21:12]

They were meeting and talking about "What are we going to do about psychotherapy?" We didn't really have any place to turn, so we re-invented ourselves.

Basically we began talking about gender, power dynamics, and the inordinate power that therapists occupied. We talked about a lot of things that I would do today, like trying to equalize the power between patient and therapist. We experimented a lot, tried to make people equal, equally transparent, and so on. Some of it worked. That's how we did it, we made it up.

AR: I'd love to dive into more deeply about the establishment of the women's counseling service. Who was involved, and exactly how did you get organized? I'm only going to ask one question at a time, so first of all, who was involved?

EK: I may answer three, even though you just asked one. (Laugh) There was **Sarah Sharick,** who is still doing feminist work, **Sue Cox, Pat Rush, and couple of other people including Laura Simmons.** Sue, already had a degree. She had worked with Naomi Weisstein. She was her student. Sarah and I were still at the VA, and the other two people were social workers who were already practicing. Two other people were Latinas in our group. So, you can't say it was all white women. Maybe it was in some places, but our group was sort of 50-50ish.

AR: How did you get started? You wrote about putting out some signs and people showing up and you expected twenty, but there were two hundred?

EK: It was just like that. It was just like the way a collective starts. We met and started talking, criticizing psychology and we said, "what are we going to do? It was just like the way a collective starts. We met and started talking, criticizing psychology and California at the time had a master's program in marriage and family counseling, licensed. So Sarah and I already got our license. I don't think most of the people that started in feminist therapy were licensed by the state. Sarah and I actually went to the exam and got those licenses. That's how we started.

We printed this thing out, which I still have copies of, and we drew a women sign by hand, and made a bunch of copies – Xeroxed, not mimeographed. There's not many leftovers. But we made hundreds of Xerox copies and we went to all places where there were cafes, where women hung out, Bud's ice-cream, and all popular places that we knew women were, and we posted them. And we'd say, "Next Tuesday, we're doing this, at the. Unitarian Church Show up." We really did expect ten or twenty women, we had no idea that a whole movement was starting. We opened the doors and there were like two hundred women standing there, waiting to come in.

AR: What did you talk to them about? What did you tell them?

EK: We told them what our critique was of psychotherapy. We told them that it didn't understand women. We told them that women were being held to a male standard of what is normal. We criticized disorders, we were already after the DSM and all the nonsense that was in there. And they were thrilled. They were nervous about it, because we had spoken in some other places. **[25:10]**

We had spoken in CSPP [California School of Professional Psychology], in traditional graduate schools, and the male faculty almost killed us. They would go crazy over talk about feminism. So, we girded our loins before we opened those doors we thought "here we go again." You know, we were going to get it. The women were thrilled and they were cheering. Some of them signed up for the therapy afterwards and it was just like a wonderful turning point that I experienced. Afterwards, what just happened?

AR: What have we done?

EK: We made $200. $2 a person. We couldn't have paid for the coffee pots, and all of a sudden we had all this money. I still have someplace this big wooden box, which was one of the first answering machines. It was a big wooden box with a wheel-to-wheel thing that would get stuck when people left messages. So we bought an answering machine, we put it in the house where a few of the people lived, and that's it. We were in business. We each worked in our own living room. It was as simple as that, it was totally ordinary.

AR: Well, tell me what kinds of folks you ended up seeing. What were the problems, what did they bring to you? Again, a collective portrait is fine. I'm just really curious about what you encountered.

EK: Everybody had different problems, but a lot of women had the same underlying thinking, depression. We saw a lot of lesbian woman. Lesbian women in that generation had been locked up in hospitals, some had been in shock therapy. Husbands of heterosexual women were allowed to sign their wives into psychiatric hospitals without permission. So we're hearing all these horrid stories and as we began to work with people, we began hearing their memories [of child abuse]. At the time textbooks said one in ten million families had a child of incest or something. The numbers were ridiculous. The disorganized families on the other side of the tracks and so on. Women began to coming to therapy we were charging on a sliding scale from $2 to $30. We had a lot of clients immediately. A lot of what we were seeing was that women had been in consciousness raising groups. And you go to a certain point and now, you feel crazy, what do you do? "My life is not what I wanted it to be, and what do I do?" that was the reason women began coming to therapy. I wasn't particularly pro-therapy. I think in a lot of ways feminist psychotherapy would have been stronger if we stayed with that model, with the collective model. Because it has really become a commodity, there are feminist therapists that charge $225 an hour.

So, that wouldn't have been my choice, but people needed it. Women began to coming to therapy. That's really how it started. And then, we started finding out what they were in pain about. They started remembered things that they thought they didn't remember, or they had been to therapist before and the parting line of therapy was that it was a fantasy. You know, the Oedipal [complex] and, you know, you father didn't molest you, and you wanted him to do it, it was a wish, and so on. Women who were raped and couldn't go to the police, because they'd be psychologically raped another time, it wasn't in the courts, yet. It was just the beginning of people really getting the strength to do all of this. That's what we were hearing.

AR: You were having to make it up as you went along in terms of what the therapy would actually consist of.

[29:15]

EK: Right. I think back on it now and I think, "How was I so brash as to do that?" I think back on it now and my friends and I were sitting and making up what we were doing with these people. But we were. We were young, we had that vision, and we wanted to do something about it.

AR: Absolutely. Tell me a little bit more about the dynamics of the Women's Counseling Service itself. How you organized a collective effort, and then what were some of the problems or challenges that came up, to sustain that collective?

EK: How we organized it? We just did it. There would be a lot of problems that came up in that collectives and in other ones, because there were differences of opinion on money, and on how personal to get with clients, how personal to get with each other. In reality, the collective wouldn't have lasted that much longer, it wouldn't still be a collective now. Several people left the field; they couldn't take it. Several people really had breakdowns. When they saw the world differently. It was the traditional description of how somebody becomes psychotic. Like the ego walls start crumbling. It's like everything that held them up for those years crumbled. Then they would have horrible psychotic episodes, and I know of two therapists in San Francisco that this happened to, I won't name names. And then when they finished they wanted to do something concrete. They didn't want to [inaudible] anymore. One became a realtor, one went back to medical school, became an anesthesiologist. They just couldn't take dealing with how unfair the world is I guess.

It crumbled for that, and for other reasons. People had disagreements, people got in and out of of relationships, all the regular things that happen to break up collectives.

AR: When did you disband as the Women's Counseling Service?

EK: I'm not sure of the date, I would say about 1975. I went to work in San José in '74 and within about a year or two years I moved my practice to San José. So there I started my own private practice. People were getting their degrees also. Sarah went to Mission Mental Health and I went to San José and things like that. So we all kept practicing, but not as a collective anymore.

AR: Could you recall, at that point, around 1974-75, how would you characterize the main principles of the feminist therapy that you were practicing at that point?

EK: Well, one of the basic ones was to listen to a woman's story and believe what she says. The other ones were, you could do a power analysis and a gender analysis. Those were the core things. We were differing on how we would do fees, that sort of thing.

AR: But it's amazing how seemingly not radical, but radical, the idea of just listening to a woman and believing her is.

EK: Seems now, not radical, and that's one of the things that has happened is that feminist therapies changed the field. More than existing strongly as a separate practice. I heard a psychoanalyst say "You can't let a woman choose her own therapist," because men were choosers of therapists. Never mind believing her story after that. The client shouldn't even be allowed to choose their own therapist.

[33:23]

What they meant by not choosing the therapist is that she's going to do it defensively. She doesn't know what's best for her. So things that we got vilified for, are just common practice now. We just got used to, we're right, we're gonna keep doing it, and now you know, where did we get that from?

[Start of Video 2]

AR: At this point in your career trajectory you're starting up what has turned out to be a long career at San José State University. Tell me about some of the early days there. You were in both community psychology and family. So, how did that come about? What was the community psychology program like at that point?

EK: At San José? They were just starting up. What happened is I applied there since I wanted to stay in the Bay area for obvious reasons. The other jobs available that year were in Terre Haute and Memphis and places, Bakersfield. And so I applied for a part-time temporary job teaching group dynamics. And they told me that I wasn't qualified to teach group dynamics, which they were right, I wasn't. Then, somebody got a grant proposal funded. The grant proposal was to bring in ethnic minorities from the community and train them in community psychology, send them back to their communities. It was a good program. So, that was funded by NIMH [National Institute of Mental Health]. And I don't know why they took the family therapy part. They had clinical treatment and they wanted people to learn family therapy. We had a whole set up in the clinic with one-way mirrors and the whole family therapy thing. So the department was looking for somebody who was half family therapy and half community psychology. I was probably the only person in the world, at least in the country that was qualified for that position. Plus, I speak Spanish, the community in San José is mostly Latino. It was like there was a job made for me, and I was made for the job. There I was in San José.

AR: That's great. There are two questions that come into my mind. One is I want to ask you about your Costa Rica connection, and it sounds like you started going to Costa Rica very early in your life and have continued. But what originally took you to Costa Rica?

EK: Sarah Sharick who was one of the people in the women's counseling service, was one of the people in graduate school with me at George Washington. And she is Costa Rican. It was like coming home from vacation. So I went there once and we kept going back, and actually I went to visit her family and nobody spoke English. She had a brother who was fourteen years old at that

time, who would come home after middle school and hang out with me and teach me Spanish and take me to local cafe. He's still one of my best friends. He became a political scientist and got a degree at Columbia University, he speaks perfect English now. Different people, I began establishing my own family in Costa Rica, so that's why I stayed there. It's my second home. I have a whole community of feminists there, and I've taught at the universities.

AR: I want to explore that a bit, but take me back to training other people in family therapy at San José. Did your feminism influence how you were doing family therapy yet?

EK: Yes, very much so. It started influencing everything I was doing. They gave me a course to teach, the community psychology course that I was teaching was about ethnicity. And I immediately made it about gender and ethnicity, which was never really popular with the faculty at San José, but academic freedom and all that, so that's what I was teaching.

[3:50]

So, I was immediately teaching about gender and race and class - now we call it intersectionality - to the community students, and I was teaching more traditional therapy to the master's degree students. It was a good program in that we had the one-way mirrors and we did it the way the early family therapists did, we walked in and interrupted them, and they could have real feedback as we saw what they were doing. [tape cuts out 4:10]

AR: What were your research interests at this point? What did you feel drawn to?

EK: Well, my research interests were really in that area also. Gender and ethnicity. And since I was needing tenure I was doing empirical analysis, various kinds of studies. "I will do this to the day I get tenure and I will never do it again" and I have kept that vow. We were doing a lot of gender role research, Sarah and I and her brother, standardized and normed a Latin American sexual inventory, which was similar to the Bem [Bem Sex Role Inventory]. We did it in Spanish and we got different norms and everything so that was some of my research. I also did several of the early studies that you probably have seen on gender bias and ratings of professors, you know we changed the first names and so on. So I was doing that kind of gender focused research and things that I was interested in. But not epistemology. Things that were simple 2x4 [ANOVA] and you did it.

AR: Were you also waiting for tenure to dive into epistemology?

EK: I had written an article on socio-therapy. I was criticizing clinical practice already. But I didn't really understand that it was epistemology that I was doing for a long time. I didn't exactly know what I was doing, but I was questioning everything. Questioning basic assumptions, you know, "What makes you think this and this." So I wasn't waiting for tenure to dive into epistemology, but I was waiting for tenure to do work that wasn't the kind of reduced empirical… I still wanted to ask the bigger questions.

AR: So in terms of your teaching at this point, you were teaching a lot of different subjects, was the psychology of women or psychology of gender course that we can think of now, was that part of your armamentarium as well?

EK: No. I actually never taught psychology of women, because it was an undergraduate course and I was teaching in the graduate program. I taught gender and ethnicity, and I also introduced one of the first courses in the country on professional ethics, which now also is pro forma. Around that time, 1973, they had voted down homosexuality [out of the DSM]; 1978 there were important things going on, and I got very interested in professional ethics. And so, I had the idea that all the students should have a course in professional ethics. It was just a little pamphlet. The Ethical Code was a little two- or three-page pamphlet in those days, saying "try not to have sex with your clients if you can help it, or wait until ten minutes after the session is over" kind of thing. I was really doing clinical training and community intervention training. Even though that had never been my intention, I never actually wanted to be a clinician.

AR: Oh okay, that begets a whole host of other questions.

[7:50]

EK: It's because if feminism hadn't happened I never would have become a clinician. I couldn't find what I wanted, I thought maybe it was personality, maybe it was social. I wanted to study the ordinary lives of people, not pathologies and the extraordinary lives, and I couldn't find it. I was interested especially in personality. They had construct theory and I thought I was going to get it there. But I still didn't get it. So what happened really was that I had to participate in inventing the therapy that I wanted there. The psychology, not even the therapy. So I'm really interested in the theory and the epistemology of practice, but, really I don't have the right temperament to sit and practice in the psychotherapy office.

AR: But that said, at this point, you were still doing private practice alongside your academic work?

EK: Yes

AR: And has that been something you've always done?

EK: No, I stopped practicing in 1993 after *Engendered Lives* was published. I went into writing. I didn't want to practice anymore. Truth be told, I thought I was making too much money. It's a funny thing to say, but I thought "I'm getting too motivated by the income, not by the work." So I felt like I needed to stop and get back to what my real work was.

AR: Well I'd like to ask a little bit about *Engendered Lives*. Because it's a really important work and I always like to get the backstory of these things. What motivated you to write it? What did you want to accomplish?

EK: I wanted to, ah, do you know the book *The Denial of Death*?

AR: No

EK: It's a sort of book that, like feminism, you see the world differently after you read it. Then I thought about the books that I had read in my life that changed everything for me. That was one of them, *The Denial of Death*. It goes into an analysis of Freudian theory and instead of analyzing bisexuality, it views the knowledge of our own death as the basis of the defense mechanisms. It sounds also very obvious now, but it was one of those books that, you know there were books along the way that just changed my world. I always had the ambition to write one of those. Try to write a book that after people read it, they can't see the world the same way. So I was really wanting to write. My first love is really writing. So I was wanting to write it and I was just waiting for a sabbatical to do it. I'll write about what we've done all of these years. It didn't come out until 1992 but it was everything that I'm telling you up to 1992.

AR: And what would you say is the main message or what you want people to see the book as?

EK: I don't know if it's the main message, but I think I want people to question reality. And epistemology is really very simply how do you know what you know. **[11:10]**
And that's what I want people to question. You think you know what a bird is, or this or that, whatever it is, but how do you know? I wanted to come back to the most fundamental questions. And not just do the enterprise and take it for granted.

AR: It's interesting too that you mentioned earlier that one of the reasons you were interested in psychology, but it was something that you couldn't find readily was the kind of experience of every day. The quotidian, what is the experience about? Not "abnormal experience" or "extraordinary experience" but the every day. Seems to me that that also comes through a bit in the book.

EK: It's called a *New Psychology of Women's Experience* as a subtitle. I actually wanted to call it a *Psychology of the Ordinary*. The publisher said no because you don't put the word ordinary in a title, who's going to read the book? What's hidden and what's buried in the taken for granted. What's so ordinary that we don't see it anymore?

AR: Ellyn, you have been the editor of the journal *Women and Therapy*, as you mentioned, for 20 years now. Tell me how that journal got started.

EK: It was started by somebody who nobody seems to know, who wasn't active in the women's movement. Then it was taken over after a year or two, and it was started by Hayworth Press, and Bill Cohen, who was at Hayworth, was very instrumental in starting a lot of our journals in the field. I think it was a woman in New York who was a friend of his and somehow they cooked up that she was going to start it. Ellen Cole and Marcia Hill then took it over for a while. They were doing it for a while and then they needed somebody to take it so I took it from there, in 1996. Again, surprised by my own longevity, I didn't think I would be doing that 20 years later or be at San José State 35 years later. It shows how reliable I can be.

AR: Absolutely. What have been some of the highlights of your editorship?

EK: Well, I think my mark shows in a way because I didn't want it to be [focused on] just narrow clinical questions. So I brought a lot of diversity into it. I tried to make it transnational, not just multicultural. Looking at the differences between United States' [meanings of] multicultural, Canadian multicultural, I think, is similar to the United States, and then, in other cultures there are totally different categories. I have recently written a paper about whiteness, about how much we categorize people by race, by skin color. They don't do that in a lot of countries. [inaudible]. So I tried to bring in the values and epistemology from a large context, the diversity, and to look at institution of psychotherapy and not just "here's how a psychotherapist that would handle this." [inaudible]. I think this has been my contribution to it.

AR: It's amazing. I also want to ask you to tell me more about the *Feminist Therapy Institute*. You were a national chair of the FTI and I think it was in the early '90s. I really don't know very much about the *Feminist Therapy Institute,* at all. So what can you tell me?

[15:15]

EK: What happened was there was a sort of critical mass of us doing feminist therapy by the early '80s. We're talking now about 1980s. And we'd get together mostly at AWP and talk about what we're doing. So 10 or 12 people who were doing things nationally called a meeting, I think Lenore Walker was involved. And we just decided to form a group. When I tell the story it just sounds ordinary. We decide to form a group, and we did it.

AR: What did the group do? What were the main activities or objectives of it?

EK: A lot of what the group did was to encourage people to write for their first time. You see that a lot of the people that were in the *Feminist Therapy Institute* all wrote the first books and did a lot of edited collections. Most people were like, "I can't possibly write." So we were massively supportive of each other and produced these collective edited editions on topics. So now we didn't have to write the whole book. Just write articles on what your ideas are. We were supportive of each other doing a lot of publishing and a lot of the publications were on women and therapy. We were also talking about practicing feminist therapy, we were mostly from all over the United States, some in Canada, some in Europe from time to time. One of our meetings was in Banff, for example. We would just get together and brainstorm what needed to be get done and then write articles about that. That became the cohesive organization of feminist therapists.

AR: Is it still in existence?

EK: No.

AR: When did it end?

EK: Sometime in the '90s. The exact year doesn't come up on top of my head. But it started to have fewer people coming to it, that's sort of related to the question of feminist therapy, whether there is a separate profession called feminist therapy, instead of integrating it with other therapies.

Nobody would say now that you don't ask about gender in therapy, but everybody would have said it then. Today of course you don't sleep with your clients and of course you deal with gender issues.

AR: Well where do you stand on that issue? The last chapter in *Engendered Lives* is called a New Model of Feminist therapy. Where do you stand on the issue of does there need to be a separate thing called feminist therapy, and if so, what makes it distinct?

EK: Yes and no is my answer. It is still somewhat distinct and there's only a certain target group that will come to something called feminist therapy, so I do think you need both. I think you need feminist therapy for people who want that, and you need it fully mainstreamed as we call it now, because otherwise other people are doing unethical practice. It's unethical not to believe what somebody says, not to feel it's gender, all the laws about abuse that are set now that therapists have to report, it's difficult. I don't know if I would start being a therapist now with all the paperwork, and the reporting and everything that one has to do, the third party payment and all, it's a totally different profession. Before I just put up a sign on my door and that was it. You could never do that now. I think we still need both. I don't think many people identify as a feminist therapists anymore. They do intersubjectivity or self-psychology. And it's possible to do it because it integrates feminist principles in so many places. There is a whole field called trauma that grew out of feminist therapy. I want it acknowledged where it came from. I appreciate that as a historian, they didn't make it up, they got it from feminists.

AR: Right. It's really important for us to recognize that that was the trajectory.

EK: Yes, because we were the only ones that would believe the stories of these people, the stories of what became the field of trauma.

AR: Absolutely.

EK: In 1978, the feminists had to go and insist that we're included in PTSD, because it was just going to be for the Vietnam vets, the diagnosis. So a lot of the original work was done by feminist therapists.

AR: Absolutely. You know, on this topic of naming something feminist therapy versus using the principles, but not calling it that, I recall reading in one of your autobiographical pieces that for a long time you were teaching, you were teaching feminist ideas but you were not calling them that. I wondered why. Why did you feel that you shouldn't use the F-word at the time?

EK: I'm nefarious, that’s my strategy. I don't know if anybody else would do that but I knew all the shit I was gonna take if I called myself a feminist. And I was going to have struggle and you can't teach it and stuff like that. So I just went around it all and there was a lot of "we are not feminists" actually. It's starting to change in the culture. On Facebook I see there are young women calling themselves feminists, and public people. You didn't say the F word in those days or you just get a barrage back at you. So, my strategy was just to teach it without labeling it. A lot of students came back to me years later and they just thought I was teaching them good

therapy, which I was, but that's how I did it. Even then we see these women in counseling services who decided not to use the word feminist in the title, for a similar reason. Because we thought we were just going to get trashed and attacked, and do we need to waste our energy on that.

AR: Right, yeah. That's interesting. I have very mixed feelings about that myself. Language is powerful, and obviously does work in the world and you don't want that to get in the way of what you're trying to do, but on the other hand, language is powerful. Language is important too, so I think it's a really fraught issue.

EK: I haven't resolved the conflict even in myself but I decided I had to act.

AR: That's right. One of the things that has been on my mind a lot lately, partly because of what's been happening in the FDA and so on, and the recent approval of "female Viagra" is the medicalization of female sexuality and Leonore Tiefer's work, and I know that you worked with Leonore on an edited collection, the New View. Can you tell me how that collaboration came about?

[23:00]

EK: Um, Leonore was trying to organize people to do the original work of the group [the New View]. She came here to California to organize a group with the help of Marny Hall and I went to that meeting. It's another one of those "I happened to be there" [situations]. They were talking about how they were going to affect the larger public and how they were going to get this material out. And I said, "Excuse me, I am the editor of a journal, we can do a special issue." And Leonore and I got together and did the special issue. And most of the people that wrote in it were people who were at that meeting, and sexuality was their issue. That's one of the things that I've been able to do with the journal that was good. An important issue needs to get out and I can do that piece.

AR: That's really reflected in, when I was reading through the special issues and I thought, wow, you've been able to capture some really, such a wide range, first of all. But things that you need a little bit of nimbleness, you need to be able to say "let's do that now."

EK: I would accomplish that by going to conferences, going to meetings, and seeing who is really just on the cutting edge, beginning to think about it. Let's help get that out there. We have one [issue] coming out on whiteness now, whiteness and white privilege, and an issue on [sex] trafficking.

AR: Oh, great

EK: You know, those are the things that need to be pushed right now, I think

AR: Absolutely. Well you've had a longstanding interest in race. And obviously race, ethnicity and now you're working with Andrea Dottolo on whiteness, in terms of what you see as your

contribution to that literature, that discourse, that issue, can you encapsulate what you see as your contribution to understanding race, ethnicity and psychology?

EK: I think my contribution to race has been to be one of the people who is really deconstructing American racist ideas. My article in there [with Dottolo] is talking about how racialization came out of racism, not the other way around. It's very clear in the literature that a bunch of white men introduced slavery. They basically decided that they wouldn't enslave the Irish because the Irish were white. It created a hierarchy. The hierarchy allowed white people to feel superior to another group.

I got interested in it in two ways: one was the job I had in Washington DC, in inner city ghetto schools. I didn't have a political analysis when I went to work there, and I saw how racist it was, what we were doing. The clients were all inner city black kids, they could hardly speak the English that I spoke, and they were getting trapped into something. Now my analysis would say they were being trapped in prisons. I thought it was just horrible. What can I do about it? I couldn't think of what to do about it. So what I did, I think the statute of limitations is up so I've started telling the story. I burned all my files when I left the job. I took all my files some place and burned them. I thought, I'm not telling anybody about this but I'm not contributing to it [the racism] either.

AR: Yeah. So that data could not be used against your clients.

[27:00]

EK: Exactly. The files were 2 years of about 3 test batteries per day. I didn't tell anybody about it for a long time. I did it because it was the only thing that I could think of to do. I was one of the only white people working there. At the time my analysis was these people who are black think it's an okay thing to do and I don't, so what am I going to do? So that's what I did.

The second thing was, since I happened to be bicultural and bilingual in the wrong direction, I don't qualify for the multicultural stuff. For a number of years I was active in Latina feminist organizations, and I was always marginalized. They were like, you're a white person. I started to think about what it meant. What is a white person? What is a Latina? And the other thing is, just experientially, a lot of my friends from Costa Rica think that they're white. The minute they come to the United States and get off the plane they are not white anymore.

So just from that perspective I began to see the arbitrariness of the system and the epistemology under it, the way that racial categories, I think, perpetuate racism. I don't think you can eradicate – you can't say I'm color blind – I don't think you can eradicate what's happened to poeple in the name of racism, but you can understand where it comes from and try to work against it. Just like you can ask men to work against masculinity, you can ask everybody to work against the racist system. So that's sort of where my work has been.

AR: Well I'd love to ask you now about your most recent book that just came out, *Sight Unseen*, because it is about the ways in which race is seen and not seen. Tell me a little bit about how this book came about?

EK: Chapter three in *Engendered Lives* is about Oedipus. That was the last chapter I wrote. I was writing away, and all of a sudden for some reason I started re-reading the trilogy, which is mostly about Antigone and not about Oedipus at all, and I thought "This fits perfectly." I'm going to re-write the Oedipus complex. I was actually doing it as a way to show how gender, I was doing it as an exercise, but I didn't expect psychoanalysts to adopt it which lot of them have: the Antigone complex. I didn't mean it that way at all. I meant, what happens when you look at the women in the story? The story changes. So, part of the Oedipus story is that he blinds himself in service of punishing himself and he says, "It's all right, I have a daughter and Antigone's eyes are my eyes." And I took that as emblematic of the fathers saying about his daughter's body, I have access to my daughter's body it belongs to me. That's how we worked with gender through *Engendered Lives* and then, you just think the next step, thought, what if people were really blind? And they couldn't see all this stuff, and if you pay attention to it, most of it is visual. Like so much. And we have blind people writing that book about how visual everything is. So it was another way to get into epistemology. I actually wrote it many years ago. I was sick for a long time and wasn't able to work, so I have that and another manuscript on epistemology that I'm going back and publishing. I actually started doing the research shortly after I published *Engendered Lives*.

AR: Well, for folks who haven't yet read your book, can you describe, give them a taste of what the actual research was? It's an ethnographic study, but what did you actually do?

EK: What I actually did was go and hang out with a bunch of blind people of different races and genders and so forth. Rather than interview them, I'm not a fan of self report and interviews, because people tell you what they want to tell you. So I spent enough time with them so that I got to see what I thought was going on, not [limited to] what they tell me. **[31:34]**

So, I spent hundreds of hours of hanging out with blind people, hanging out in all different venues. We weren't sitting and doing interviews. We went to museums, we went shopping, we did everything together. My students did some of it in the beginning, but I had to eventually take it over because I needed to see [what they were experiencing]. What I had done from the beginning was to make sure that you do something for the blind person that's quid pro quo. Don't sit and interview them, take them to Costco, let them to do some of their stuff. For example, you have no idea what it's like to go food shopping if you're blind. So, I'd been all over the place with blind people, and I got into their lives as much as I could. I tried to do it as naively as I could. Not with pre-conceived theoretical ideas. I just listened to what they told me and then little by little it deepened. At first, I saw things the way they told me, and then I started to see things differently.

I admit it came to me the idea that vision is language prior to the verbal. And part of the reason why it is so difficult for people to figure out their racism and their sexism is because it's embedded in the way they see, it's not verbal. It's unconscious. You don't have easy access to the idea that a woman is this and a man is that, or a white person is this and a black person is that. So I started to see what it meant to them not to have that language. With the cross-cultural background that I have, I started to see what I thought I could call translating. They were learning sighted language. They could say back to me things like, "The sunset must be beautiful"

even though they had no idea what a sunset even was. And then they'd start to tell me, I want to be able to pass in the sighted world, so I'll learn the language. I was being so careful not to say, "See you later" and then they would start saying it, and I would say "Why are you saying see you later? You're not going to see me later. You have to be a little bit brazen with those kinds of questions.

And the answer I started to get was, "I want to sound like I speak the same language as you." So I started to realize that they were passing. You know, like a light-skinned black person or like a Jewish person learns to pass and you learn the cues and you correct yourself.

So I thought it really revealed the blindness of sighted people. [inaudible] I was trying to show how blind we all are, that we get told something, and because of the way our brains work, it has to become unconscious. [inaudible] It organizes things into patterns and the ones you don't need all the time the brain makes unconscious. And the unconscious I thought was the repository of a lot of sexism, racism, homophobia, all those things we are trying to work on.

AR: What was the most surprising experience you had as you moved into this new world of relationships with blind people?

EK: The thing that I was focused on for a long time was my own experience. I decided that I'd make that central, but things like how much I prepare when I dress for a meeting. Even though I've written against it so much, I wanted to look professional. Do I want to look like this, do I want to look like that? And you know, you perform accordingly. And it took me a while to realize they don't have the slightest idea what I'm wearing. My students realized before I did and they started going in sweats. I can't bring myself to do a professional interview in sweats. Also, how important eyes count in relationships, for me. They talked a lot about falling in love and things that they did without vision and I couldn't imagine it for myself. I can't even imagine flirting with somebody if you can't look into their eyes, for example; the ordinary things again.

AR: Well, one of the concepts that you have used a lot in your work is something called "a mattering map." Can you tell me what that is exactly? **[36:35]**

EK: It's an idea that I devised in *Engendered Lives*. It [was developed] a number of years before intersectionality but it's similar, in a way, to intersectionality. And what I did is generate with my students a list of all the cultural and contextual variables that we think affected somebody in psychotherapy, and so their race, gender, ethnicity, class, finances, and I asked them when they're working with somebody to draw a map of multiple levels. So draw your map and then draw the client's map. [inaudible].

They do community work in Costa Rica. And they do projects, and I ask them first to do a mattering map of the people in the group. Is gender central or is it peripheral? Are finances central? And then do your own. And you can then place them over each other and you see that you have totally different values and a different focus than the people you are working with. You can do it for your goals. And the reason I started doing it was to have psychotherapy students fully contextualize who they're working with, in the way that intersectionality does now. But my conception of the mattering map is that it's fluid and it morphs. You can't really write it down

because I can say something to you, we can be talking about gender, and I can say something that immediately moves us to race, let's say. So, they have to learn how to conceptualize it, it can go like that in a second.

AR: And it may also be mutable according to just the situation you're in, the kind of environmental cues are, to make different things more salient than other things.

EK: I used the phrase because I like the word 'mattering' better than 'meaning.' Because it's more mind-heart than meaning is. Meaning is an existential, masculine idea that is very dry. But, mattering is in every cell of your body, it's not just up here (pointing at head).

AR: Right, even the fact that things matter to you.

EK: It works very well with matter, with materials. The idea that mattering subsumes matter, that matter is morphed by mattering.

AR: Right, that's great. I'm going to go back to my interview protocol now and ask some of the things we really would like all of our participants to at least think about, whether they're as relevant to you or not, and these are kind of more general questions and reflection questions.

You've been involved in the field of psychology and psychotherapy, for several decades. What would you say have been the biggest successes of feminism in psychology and/or psychotherapy? Where has been the greatest inroads, would you say?

EK: I think in some of the places that I've already been described, in making gender visible, in treating women with respect, in the field of trauma. I think narrative therapy comes a lot from feminism. Anything that is relational and intersubjective I think we've made a tremendous impact on the field, but, it's sort of swallowed up in other areas.

AR: Where do you think maybe there's more resistance? Or there could still be room for a feminist analysis?

EK: I don't think there has been enormous resistance. Obviously, the traditional psychoanalytic areas, but even they have become a little bit more relational, but not in the way we would call it relational. **[40:50]**

I think one of the things that we did that was really important was educate consumers about how to choose therapists. [inaudible]

AR: Absolutely. Psychologists who are now coming into the field, people you train and so on, what advice would you give them to kind of navigate psychology as a stated or unstated feminist?

EK: Well, I think to ask questions themselves, don't just accept that it's the field and that you're learning it. That someone handed the tablets from on high. But to question everything, to see if there are micro-aggressions, if there's discrimination, if it doesn't fit to kind of navigate to fit

your culture and experience. There's a lot of colonizing work still going on among psychologists in all of the countries.

AR: Well, would you mind elaborating on that because it's something I'm really quite concerned about, in fact. About the idea that American psychology specifically is so intent on exporting these training models with absolutely no concern for local cultures, traditional practices, and with the idea that it's kind of one size fits all and we're going to make money basically. It's really quite shameful given the other psychology which is about in fact, being sensitive to issues of culture, race and ethnicity. That's such an important part of American psychology, then to just ignore it in other parts of the world.

EK: It has been part of American psychology because people in those groups have insisted [inaudible]. And the problem is that you're going some places where people don't necessarily have the power to insist. And a lot of times you see people just doing a factory thing, [inaudible]. And so, that's why I have things like mattering maps, I think you sit with people first and learn what their lives are. Then, you don't import a model and attempt to put it on. And that's harder to do, you make a lot less money if you have to hang out to get to know the people.

AR: Which is just the crux of the matter, isng out

EK: It is just the crux of the matter, hanging out to get to know the people. [inaudible] I did a group in Costa Rica for women with cancer. Since the tourism industry has become stronger, there's a huge increase in breast cancer. So in cleaning hotel rooms women would be exposed to chemicals. So I don't think an outsider in the culture, not that I'm totally inside, but inside enough that I understand the different way they organize, [different] than the way we organize groups here. [Inaudible]

[45:00]

AR: When you assess your career so far, what would you say are the things that you're most proud of? Your most important contributions, the ones you feel most proud of?

EK: Probably the writing and the editing. That's just because for me, it feels like it lasts.

AR: That it will go on for generations.

EK: It's my bias from the beginning, if it's in the book it must be forever.

AR: [Inaudible] Would you say that at any point in your career you did have mentors?

EK: Um, I would say that in particular roles, like when I was on the Committee for Women in Psychology. People helped me learn what I had to do. And in those particular circumstances, like Nancy Russo, Carolyn Payton, Florence Denmark, people like that. But I didn't connect with them once I was in the field. Really, I would say that way I learned to publish was by writing articles and sending them in and if they're rejected they'd tell me what was wrong and I'd fix it and send it to another, and like that.

AR: So learning by doing more than anything.

EK: Yeah.

AR: Well, is there anything that I haven't asked about any aspect of your life and your career that we haven't really touched on? That you think would be an important part of the story?

EK: You know my whole life!

[Inaudible]

AR: So, well you know, no other part of your life that you'd like to share for the record?

EK: Well, the only other thing that I'd say is that I skipped a lot of years. I skipped a lot years, [inaudible] because I was too sick, and I was given a terminal diagnosis. Stubbornly, I kept writing all those short articles. So like now I'm going back and I am picking up the pieces. I feel like in a way I'm making up for lost time. So you can expect to see ten new books in the next two years.

AR: Amazing, amazing. **[48:15]**

EK: That was the only interruption, right in the middle of my career.

AR: Here you are, you made it through. Looking back, this is kind of an existential question, but what impact did that have on you?

EK: Oh, that would take another whole hour. Tremendous impact. It changed almost everything that I do. I don't know how to say it briefly, but I have a very strong Buddhist practice. So that was part of what got me through. I learned to live each day, not knowing what's going to be there tomorrow. It made it hard for me to do long-term projects for a long time. So it made for a whole different way of living, understanding other people with softening, understanding that everybody has struggle and you have to get there, you know. If I think of my life before and after that, it really changed.

AR: That's a huge impact.

EK: It was huge. Imagine you're going to die the next day. But days have gone by, and I'm still here.

AR: Wow. So these are, it sounds like learning how to cope with this and deal with this has impacted how you live now, in kind of seeing the world.

EK: Impacts every minute and every day. Mostly positively.

AR: Well good. Well gosh, I'm aware that we've been about an hour and a half now, so yeah I want to thank you so much for your willing to participate and share your story, your work and your life, with us, and I'll stop the recording now.

[50:30]