Psychology's Feminist Voices Oral History Project

Interview with Erin Ross

Interviewed by Alexis Fabricius and Alexandra Rutherford
Toronto, ON
December 5, 2017

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

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ER: Erin Ross, interview participant
AF: Alexis Fabricius, interviewer
AR: Alexandra Rutherford, interviewer
MG: Meghan George, PFV team member
LB: Luci Belknap, PFV team member
SI: Shalyn Isaacs, PFV team member
LX: Lucy Xie, PFV team member

AR: Okay, so now we are recording and our first request of you, very simple, is for you to state your full name, and place and date of birth for the record.

ER: Erin C. Ross, May 25th, 1956; I was born in the city of Quebec, in the province of Quebec, in Canada.

AR: Cool, thank you. Okay so I'll turn it over to Alexis.

AF: So normally a lot of the PFV [Psychology's Feminist Voices] interviews start with the question: Tell me about how you relate to feminism.

ER: I relate to feminism as a kind of - it's like air, it's kind of what I breathe and it permeates pretty much everything I do. I would say it's mixed in a very complex way into other aspects of my identity.

AF: Can you elaborate on that?

ER: I identify as a queer woman and so for me queerness and feminism – they are not even hyphenated, they are all part of the same aspect, and not even aspect, the theme of my living. (1:12)

AF: Okay so kind of picking up on that, we are interested, of course, also in understanding more elements of your identity and elements like that. So I'm curious, you went to Western in the 80's for grad school, what were experiences like as a graduate student then? Were you out then?

ER: I actually came out in graduate school and came out in the context of feminism. So for me, it was like coming all out in both. And certainly at the time there were a number of students who identified as lesbian, but it was more on the DL (down low), kept more private. Although outside

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of the department, [they] were quite active in some feminist community activities outside of the University. And in some measures, some of them were active within.

But I think I actually felt more stigma related to identifying as feminist then identifying as a lesbian. I came out in the context of [being] an undergraduate student so I think there were some titillation values, I suppose I would say, to it. And I think that [being a lesbian] was less difficult for people to accept, than the fact of being feminist. I think, from my experience.

AF: I am curious, why do you think that is?

ER: The environment in the department was not very welcoming to feminism. It was viewed as something that those "women's studies people" did, as outside of the boundaries of the academic discipline of Psychology. And to position yourself as wanting to improve women's experience and women's position in society, was viewed as not part of the academic discipline - and I think in some sense [it] is subtly critical of the existing structure.

AF: Interesting. So, you've identified that people, and even the department, had a problem with this label feminism. How then have you merged your feminism with your work as a Psychologist?

ER: I think for a long time I flexed in-and-out in terms of research related to feminism. In the early stages I got interested in doing gender work and I wanted to do a project for my dissertation, but my supervisor wasn't particularly interested in that aspect of the work. So I opted to take an easier route. And knew that once I was done and I was on my own, I could choose to do what I wished in some measure. And I actually got hired at York at the time of the [formation of] Atkinson College, which was a separate college, particularly because I was interested in women's issues. They were hiring for a position in the psychology of women. And so for me it was an ideal opportunity to step forward.

AF: Perfect.

AR: Can I just unpack a little bit because there's so much interesting going on here, I don't want to go too far into your career before you leave this moment where in graduate school you came out as lesbian, your queerness and your feminism are really really meshed together. And I'm just wondering, for each of those things actually, kind of like, where did that come from? In terms of your feminism especially, how did you become aware of being a feminist? What were the kind of specifics of that?

ER: I think for me, I stand back and I go back and I think one of my first experiences of hitting a limit to what I could do was when I was probably 9 or 10 years old. I had a lot of (5:09) male cousins, I used to hang with them a lot, and play with them a lot, and I can remember not being allowed to run shirtless in the summer because I was starting to develop breasts and I regarded this as a travesty because I had to wear a shirt and my cousins didn't have to wear a shirt. And I had it explained to me and I still regarded it as unfair. And I think that was the first time I bumped into - I'm going to have a different path, because I am a woman - because I am a girl - I think that was the first phase.

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And I think the second phase was when I went to Catholic girls' school, which for me was totally liberating. It was a place in which we were encouraged to be exploratory, where those distinctions around gender simply weren't made. They were remarkably tolerant of my exploratory nature and gave me the opportunity to learn and to learn in an unfettered way what I wanted to learn. And so it was really strongly encouraged. And in another system I might have been that kid who - I might have not have been in school so much I think actually - because I was kind of an ill-behaved teenager and I think in another context I would have been suspended and kicked out and instead they spent a lot of time shaping me. And I think in that context, I had this four years of tremendous opportunity.

And then from my last year, at the time, which was grade 13 in Ontario, I actually went to public school because the Catholic high school I went to closed. And it was like, "Oh my gosh this is really different," and for the first time I really experienced, in a classroom, the differential attention that gets paid to women and men in classrooms and the streaming that seemed to be occurring. And I think for me that was the second phase.

And the third phase, I think as an undergrad in Psychology, the first psychology course I took was actually in my second year and there were no lectures, it was self-taught. Basically a textbook and lectures, and test chapters and then they had guest lectures where people talked about their research. So it's probably not the best way to teach Intro Psych, but I thoroughly and completely enjoyed it and then kept going. And then I hit Psychology of Women, which I took in 1977, taught by a woman by the name of Ellie Burwell [Elinor Burwell]. I've had a handful of instructors**,** I can still remember their names and I can still see her face and I had this entire experience in this course, of "Wow this is a thing. You can research woman's experience, you can talk about women's experiences, to talk about the breadth of women's lives." And I still have my textbook, I kept it, and it's the only undergrad textbook I kept for this long because for me it was a turning point where I realized that I can take this personal life and where I was up to at that point, and have it part of the academic world. So it was a kind of coming together of my - I think about the notion, the personal and political - for me that was the first point where I realized that my personal had a political place and it had an intellectual place. And those two things, again, became merged for me. And in retrospect it really has shaped how I approach pedagogy.

AR: I think we want you to get more specific about that, but I just want to have for the record, what was that textbook? You still have it.

ER: The Psychology of Women's Experiences, it's sitting on my shelf. I actually had correspondence with the author, who's still alive, and sent her an email kind of going, "Hey, I'm at the tail end of my career and I want to tell you, this book changed my life." So I viewed it as an - I'm sort of circling around.

AF: Having listened to this, I'm actually really curious, kind of, who nurtured these ideas for you, you know what I mean? Because you've described these three points in your life where (9:45) you're like, "Okay, well I've noticed that there's differences between men and women and there's possibilities for feminism and feminist thinking", so I'm curious, who nurtured that? Did you have mentors that developed your feminist thinking and feminist feelings?

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ER: I wouldn't say explicitly. For me, my feminist thinking and experiences have been shaped from being in an academic context a lot of the time. And certainly I was strongly, very strongly encouraged about secondary education by my parents. I mean, they stressed how incredibly important it was, and - my father would have added - especially for women to become well educated. Not out of any necessarily pro-feminist view, but because he didn't think that men could be trusted to take care of a woman, so you had to learn to take care of yourself. So I think out of that context.

I also think I saw it as, my mother didn't have the opportunity, coming from a very different time, didn't have that kind of opportunity and so I viewed it as, this is a possibility that exists for me that didn't exist for women who came before me. And so I think I had that. I wouldn't say, I mean, I think being brought up and going through high school and going to Catholic girls' school, being taught largely by women, there were very few male instructors, largely by women who encouraged us to be as good as we could be. In all of us. And it wasn't just about the academics; they also strongly stressed this full aspect of your life, to be everything that you could be. Whether that was in sport, whether that was in academics, whether that was in [our] interests, they were encouraging of that. And they were very surprisingly liberal.

AF: Did you have anyone who was really supporting these views in university, as well, and graduate school?

ER: No. Not at all. Not within the graduate context. For me the support for that came from within an academic context but not in the discipline of psychology. It was more in terms of a social justice and women's issues groups. And groups outside. For example I belonged to a, at the time it was called the London Status of Women's Action Group and it was a feminist organization, there were varying aspects to it that ranged from doing community-based research through to social action, to going in and engaging in social protest. So I got involved in it that way, but that existed very much outside of my academics.

AF: Okay. So I'm curious about this thread of activism that you're bringing up now, were there other forms of activism that you were involved in outside of this one group?

ER: I think at the time that was primarily where I invested my focus, in terms of activism. I think that morphed later into issues around queerness. I think for me part of that was around activism around HIV-AIDS because I was in that generation where, I mean I remember reading the newspaper articles about gay cancer and about GRID [Gay-Related Immune Deficiency], which was the name they had for AIDS prior to HIV-AIDS. And I remember hearing about it and I remember being involved. I remember the die-ins (13:24) and writing letters to elected officials to push for more funding for HIV-AIDS

AF: It sounds like there is quite a bit of social justice and activism in your feminism and the work that you do.

ER: In my background, yes. But I wouldn't say that necessarily describes me as much now as it did when I was younger. (13:47)

AF: Okay.

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AR: I'm really curious – sorry I'm trying to keep my eye on focus here too. But I'm really curious to go back to your dissertation work, because you made an interesting comment that you had by that time, through taking a psych of women course, you had become kind of alert to the fact that gender could be incorporated into Psychology but that you didn't receive a welcoming reception for that in your dissertation work so you kind of put that aside. Can you tell us a little bit more about your dissertation work and how you navigated that process of integrating the gender interest -

ER: I think for me it was, I didn't always have the most (…thinking…), the easiest relationship with my supervisor. I think as I got towards the end, having finished all my coursework, having done comprehensive exams and beginning this dissertation planning process, I was working in his area. And I saw an opportunity to engage in a study related to gender that dove into what he was doing and I thought it would make a great study and he was not particularly interested in pursuing that option, he never said "no don't," but I knew well enough that the way to finish is to ensure that you have full support of your supervisor. I just finished collecting data when I actually started working. I took two contract positions down East teaching and I knew I was going to have to finish largely on my own. This is pre-internet, this is pre-e-mail -

AR: - Pre-Skype -

ER: Where things had to go by mail from one place to another. And so I knew the capacity for support outside mail and a phone wasn't going to be good. So I made the decision to pursue and to follow through on a topic where I knew I would have strong support. It was a purely pragmatic decision.

AR: And what was your dissertation on, if we may ask? Dredging it up from the distant past.

ER: (cringing) Blowing the dust off. I was looking at risk-taking behaviour and looking at the impact of two personality characteristics; one being people's tendency to orient towards relative certainty versus uncertainty as well as people's level of achievement motivation. So I worked with somebody who came out of that achievement-motivation literature.

AF: I'm actually interested, picking up now from your work in graduate school and in your dissertation, I'm interested in the trajectory of your career a little bit. So, themes and topics of your research over the years, what were they?

ER: I started out much more traditionally in social-personality, I actually went through a part of the social-personality program, at Western, and then they split apart I went social. And certainly my background and my early research were a bit more social psychological in nature. I got interested in person-perception. So I did work for a while looking at, particularly looking at stereotypes and how stereotypes are related to how we perceive others. And I think that is the sort of centrality of where I've gone forward. I've strayed into varying areas, but I've always had this very keen interest in how we process, affectively and cognitively, the social beings in the world around us. And [I was] particularly interested in - not so much anymore - the basic processes of that, things like memory and attentional processes. I'm much more interested [now] in how I can use (17:34) that information, how do I take that information and use it to alter perception. Because I'm interested in the notion of, when I stand up in the front of a classroom, in front of 200 students, and say, "Oh by the way I am gay," what does that do? How does it shape their

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perceptions of what goes forward from there? Or does it? And to me that is an interesting question. If I want to change people's perceptions of what it means to be gay, then I need to understand their perceptions before I can understand how to change them.

AF: Is this where your work on childhood sexual abuse and the scales that you drew up, is this kind of an extension of that work?

ER: Absolutely it comes from that. It came from two places. I teach psychology of the family. And I was doing a lecture. One of the lectures I give is on childhood maltreatment and so I talk about varying forms of childhood maltreatment and it struck me in the process of doing that, that I know from teaching psychology of women in the literature, that we have this existing literature that looks at how women sexual assault survivors are perceived. And we know about factors that are related to that perception. And I see this parallel, and I originally started looking at child sexual abuse survivors, there seem to be some notable similarities but there is no literature. There is some work done on perceptions of children, but not in perceptions of adult survivors. So I think it came out of the classroom, but it also came out of sitting at a dinner one night with a group of women who all identified as lesbian or queer and sitting at the table and realizing that of the woman, there [were] probably 8 or so women, there was only one woman who really didn't have a history of sexual abuse in teens-to-younger. I don't know how unusual it is. There's some research that suggests that women who identify as lesbian are more likely to have a history, I don't know if it's that or if women that are lesbians are just more likely to talk about it. And I don't know whether they're likely to talk about it because of involvement in feminism or not. I don't really know the answer to that question. But to me, it profoundly shapes women's experience. It's also for me, a way to bridge to talking about marginalized people, because men who have sexual abuse histories are tremendously marginalized because of that history. So it sort of provides me a bridge that way as well.

AF: I'm curious how your work on inter-religious conflict emerged.

ER: It actually emerged working with my graduate student, Sadia Zafar, who is now faculty at Concordia University. This came from Sadia's interest as a Muslim woman, particularly post 9/11, in how Islamophobia was shaping how people respond to individuals that are presumed to be Muslim. Sadia was also integrally involved in the work on child sexual abuse survivors. So she came with this project going, and I would really like to explore it and I think looking across religious groups would be a way for us to begin to look at how minority religious groups, relative to majority ones, are perceived in the Canadian context. And it's not only the attitudinal aspect, but also looking at, literally, at the contact and also, at some level, the pure affect of response.

AF: So we've talked about these different research themes that have emerged in your career. I'm curious about what accomplishments you value the most in your career?

ER: (*Thinking*) I would probably answer that by saying, "Yeah I've done some research and it's actually a lot of fun and I've enjoyed it." I think if I had to say, if you made me pick one thing (22:01) in terms of accomplishments, it would be what I do in the classroom. It would be knowing that in a classroom I can encourage people to think and I can do it subversively and I can do it overtly and knowing that I've made a difference in terms of how people approach the world, and how people approach academics, how people approach their families, the experiences

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they have as women, with more focal women's experiences around childbirth, around menstruation, around menopause, around breast cancer, and also their experiences in the workplace, in their academics. So for me, if I had to say I did one thing right that would be the thing I would want to say I did right.

AF: Okay, so I kind of want to pick up on this teaching idea. I know in your CV you have quite a few graduate courses, and a lot of them are statistics, so I'm curious, how do you inject these things that you are talking about into statistics?

ER: You can work them into any class. I actually believe that part of teaching statistics is teaching research. So statistics is the tool but I have to embed that into a context of doing research. And taking the questions that we have and being more aware of the implications of the questions that we ask and even how we ask them. So one of the things that I do in my grad stats course is talk about things like, how is this gender? And I have students from every area, from Clinical, to Vision Science, to Social Psychology, to Developmental, and it's all for me, one of the things I can do is say "Well how are you measuring gender here?" If you use a binary measure of what is really sex, when what you're really measuring is actually gender, then ask about gender don't ask about sex, and ask about gender identity - With my current graduate student Alexia Strazds, [we are working to] develop this measure that ranges - and [we] did some research comparing binary measures, so man-woman, male-female, versus woman, man, fill in your own, I really don't want to answer this question option. So four options, versus a measure of gender identity that has 25 options in addition to, "fill in your own," or, "I don't want to answer this question."

And knowing that using simple binary measures alienates research participants regardless of their gender orientation, they are not as satisfied with that. When you give them, if you're not interested in gender per se, giving them at least three categories and also I really think that the value that I stress is giving people the option to say: "I don't want to say." I don't want to categorize myself is different than a missing score. We can still allow people not to answer but we can also give them the right to say "I do not wish to be categorized in this fashion." And so talking to Stats students about this simple thing that can take you so much further, to allow you to look more fully at gender if you are interested in gender, and do a better job capturing it and not alienating, by our research practices, a significant chunk of the population. And I will tell you, now when I get surveys, if you send me a request to fill out the survey I'll do it, I'm committed to being a participant, but if I get a survey and they present me with gender as a binary, I won't answer it and I won't continue because you've already excluded part of people and I don't want to participate in exclusionary science.

AF: I was going to say, there is quite a bit in there to unpack. One of the things that I'm curious about, I had asked you before if you had made any mentors in grad school, and you said no. Do you feel that teaching this way, by trying to challenge students in their perceptions of research methodology, that you are providing mentorship? Is this something that you are conscious of? Is this something that you are trying to do? (26:23)

ER: I think for me it's, and again this is my pedagogical stance, which is that I can be in a room without bringing myself to the room. So to be fully engaged in teaching, I have to fully position myself in the practice. So my history of not always having that kind of engaged approach or approach to research that regards the researcher as an active participant in what you're doing, to

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me, that's something that I simply can't ascribe to anymore and so when I teach, I teach with that perspective, and to encourage that perspective in other students, whether they continue on to grad schools or not, whether they're in grad school already, to think a little but about the implications of what you do beyond the immediacy of the small research questions. Every study is a small research question that sometimes has some very big implications.

MG: I just want to jump in. So you're talking about how people are perceived and stereotypes and being present in the teaching of your courses; can you describe some of your experiences as a professor, about maybe some of the challenges or some of the acceptance that you've experienced from your classes, how you've been perceived by your students?

ER: I would have to say that, by and large, my experience has been positive. Nowadays, mostly, it's like "Yeah, yeah" - When I come out it's like, "Yeah, yeah, who cares, I've seen it." I remember the first time I came out I was hired to teach a course in grad social psychology in grad school and I can remember very clearly the room and I remember my experience of I'm going to do this, I'm going to say this, in this room, in a very off-the-cuff way. I didn't position myself, but I simply made a reference to my partner and then I used a female pronoun. And I could see the ripple through the lecture hall and I didn't know what to make of it, I honestly had no idea what to make [of it]. Once I came here, I think York has always had a reputation of being very supportive and I certainly never experienced any institutional pressure not to and I have only rarely experienced negative reactions. One of which was actually last year, which was so odd. I thought, cause I think I have the sort of "Yeah, yeah - that's so yesterday" but it rarely happens, even in an Honours course evaluations, people rarely make comments about it or seem to care and I have students who actually actively seek out my courses and say I want to come and take your course because I like the fact that you're out, I like the fact - I like your politics, I like how you approach the material, I like your engagement of yourself as a person in the classroom.

LB: So I was wondering if students treat you differently depending on whether you're presenting in a more masculine or feminine way?

ER: I haven't presented in a real feminine way in a very long time (laughing). My first class actually that I ever taught as a grad student I wore a jacket and a tie. I once actually in a class, I went middle of the road for one lecture, I went neutrally dressed and then in the next lecture I went in very butch, I had like a tie, a leather jacket, I had motorcycle boots on and then the next class I went in wearing a dress, you've never seen me in a dress, heels, the whole thing, I went in very feminine in presentation, just to mess with their heads. And I think that actually was more challenging for them than anything I've done really because it was like, "Oh my gosh I don't know where to put you anymore, you're doing this thing."

LB: So you can tell that they were, that your students were shaken up by that?

ER: They were curious and puzzled I think. That was a long time ago, I mean I did that a long time ago. (31:05)

LB: On their facial expressions? From their body language?

ER: I remember somebody walked into the room and did that, "Oh I walked into the wrong room" and then was like "Oh well, no, wait a minute that is my professor and I'm confused." I

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have had students who have made comments on anonymous course evaluations that I dress like a dude, but I never have a sense that it's necessarily a negative thing. I've actually had a few guys come up and go “Oh man I really like your shirt.” I have not in a really long time worried about my presentation. I've always had the philosophy that if that's not what you're comfortable with then be uncomfortable. Either walk away with your discomfort or deal with your discomfort. I know when I first came to York I was in a timeframe where I tended to wear dresses, more skirts, I never wore dresses, but I would wear skirts. So for the first couple of years here at York I did and it was more a reflection of where I was personally rather than any attempt to present myself in a particular way.

AR: I have a couple of questions. One of them is related to how people have perceived you and as, in your teaching I’m thinking specifically, in terms of being feminist in your teaching. You said you have had students who really appreciate that you bring your person and politics into the classroom. Just anecdotally, I have had students, when I identify openly as feminist, they start to think they can’t trust what I'm going to say in the classroom because it's going to be ideological. Have you had any of those kinds of experiences?

ER: I actually don't identify myself as feminist in the classroom. I will identify as queer. I will occasionally refer to myself as feminist. I don't position it as a central part of my identity and my experience with that has been because of exactly this. Because I am then sometimes perceived as ideologically biased. But I do position myself as inherently biased. Like I stand up in front of the classroom and say, “okay I am biased, everyone in this room has a set of biases. My biases might not be the same as your biases, but my biases direct the questions I ask, the way in which I ask questions, some of my personal experience shapes who I am in the room.” And you can see me, I mean when you look at me I’m visibly white, I’m visibly on the more masculine end of gender, I’m not a tall person, I have these particular characteristics that you can read for me, that you can position me with and I understand the world in those ways. And then I proceed to subvert them through the whole classroom. Psychology of women, for me, is an exercise; I view it as an exercise in subversive education. And for me, part of that has been around, if I don't say the “F word” (feminist) then it leaves the door open for me to present perspectives that are very clearly feminist in nature and yet, I tend to come out as feminist later in the course, and for me that’s in part strategic and for me it's partly because I think my identity is more mixed.

AR: Absolutely, absolutely. Also, I want to ask about transgender but I think you (with reference to AF) are probably going to go there -

AF: No please, go ahead, go ahead.

AR: So we talked about your research on perceptions of child abuse survivors and so on, and more recently, I just even noticed in the hallway, that you gave a workshop on transgender awareness -

ER: I was one of five who were involved in doing the workshop (35:37)

AR: Yes, with Kim Cullen, who I know you’ve done work with. So can you talk a little bit about your research on transgender stereotypes?

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ER: In the 1990s, I began working on attitudes towards gays and lesbians, gay men and lesbians. At the time it was the early-to-mid '90's, there was some literature out there, there was an attitudinal survey, there was literature on attitudes, there wasn't as much out there about understanding the content of stereotypes and the purely affective aspect, and I got interested in doing that using a technique that Vicky Esses used, who is now at Western [University of Western Ontario], developed to elicit open-ended responses. And I did that work over a period of time with graduate student Leslea Moore and continued working in that area back and forth. And then I realized that there's more to gender diversity and sexual orientation than lesbians and gay men, [and I] started to collect some data on how bisexual men and women were perceived. And the next logical progression was to then look at how trans men and women, in part because the literature on perceptions of trans men and women and attitudes is much smaller than the research on gay men and lesbians, lesser but [there is] still more research on bisexual men and women, and not as much on trans men and women. And I teach a Psychology of Sexual Orientation course. I wanted a textbook, to try and find a textbook that had decent coverage on trans issues...impossible. Mostly, I have to supplement with additional material because it's still absent. I know that's changing. Even Division 44 has recently changed its name and has sort of incorporated gender identity in with sexual orientation as foci for the division. And I've been incredibly happy about that because it's been long overdue. I remember a business meeting in Division 44 that I walked out of because people were like, "No we can't put trans people in it, it kills our credibility to ally ourselves with trans folk." That was not the position of the division, and let me make that very very clear, but it was the sentiment in the audience and I was most unhappy.

AF: So I'm curious about that then, I'm curious; in your opinion what would the next steps have to be then, in the discipline, in order to incorporate these other different groups?

ER: I think there are two things I would say about it. One is that psychology as a discipline could do a lot better at diversity and at incorporating a range of diverse experiences and it hasn't always had a good history of that. I know my discipline has a history of doing violence to people who fall outside the margins. Whether those margins are defined by race, by sexuality, by gender, by ability, by disability, I know my discipline's history and I am cogently aware of our responsibility in alienating communities by virtue of going in and opportunistically researching them, that would be actually good or even do even worse to them. But even opportunistically researching them regarding "Oh trans-folks, they are a good place to test the boundaries of gender" and it's like they're not, trans-folks are not a testing ground. And I think the tendency, I mean, I saw how psychology did that with gay men and lesbians, I've seen how they've done it with bi-folk, and I see how they do it with trans-folk. And I think we need to get beyond the notion of viewing them opportunistically, as an interesting test subject. We need to incorporate their experience into the diversity of experience. I think we need to do more when we teach. I think all of us need to do more. And I will no longer go in and do the specialized lecture in people's courses on sexuality issues, on gender issues, it's like "Here, here's the readings" I have a pre-established reading list that I update regularly, it's like "Oh you want to talk about trans issues? Here, go read this stuff."

I won't do it anymore and I mean I understand what it's (40:22) like to talk about something from a position that you are not, I don't identify as trans, so I know what it's like to familiarize myself and to be respectful and yet at the same time acknowledge that I'm not a community member,

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this is not my direct experience. In the same way, I can't talk about what it's like to be a racialized woman, I'm not. And yet at the same time, I have an obligation to do so, by virtue of being a member of a majority, of having the privilege of social and economic, of being a university professor who teaches in a classroom. I need to do that. And I have to educate myself, and the only way to do it is to learn that very thing I want my students to do.

AF: You talked about altering methodologies and research practices and stuff; do you see ways beyond that to also include these groups as well? I'm thinking, structurally and things beyond the individual.

ER: For me, part of that is about supervision, student supervision. I actively encourage students who come from marginalized groups, who I see in a classroom, to say "Hey come, do work." This work can be done, this kind of research can be done, and also can be done in a context in which you have a good supervising experience. So I supervise, not surprisingly most of the students I supervise are women, or they're trans or they're gay, gay men or they're bi-folk, and I make a point of trying to supervise students who might fall on the margins otherwise, who might not feel comfortable. And I think positioning myself very openly, in a classroom, and in an academic context, provides them with a sense of "Oh hey this is possible."

I remember going to university, and the first female I saw in front of a room was my first year Biology lab instructor, and I was like "Whoa," and she was a master's student in retrospect, but it was like "Whoa you can do this, eh?" And then I had one woman instructor in my undergrad, in Psychology, now I did some Philosophy and Religious Studies and I had one other woman teach me, but that was my experience of not seeing women on the other side of the room. And then when I got to being on the other side of the room, then it was like "Okay well now it's my opportunity to be overtly queer," to position myself, at the time, as lesbian - I identified more as lesbian - and to be that person that other people in the room can go "Oh... this is a thing, it's possible". And for me it's [about] visibility, it's why being out is a political, pedagogical practice.

AF: I'm curious about picking up on that last statement too. What advice would you give to undergraduate or graduate students who are looking to merge their personal and political identities?

ER: I honestly, I believe that you will be a happier, whole human being, if you do that. I lived for a long time with those things running in parallel and I don't think that for me was the worst decision to make, but I can appreciate that I might have had a very different experience, for example in grad school, if I'd had a supervisor who was not only supportive of what I wanted to do personally, but who also didn't regard my personal life as outside the norm and therefore something that you should be a bit circumspect about. And I might have had conversations about things, like at the time, like how to manage identity. At that time, going out for job interviews, for academic job interviews, I managed my queer identity by being extremely telegraphic. I carefully managed it because I perceived that being very out would not be advantageous and might be deleterious in terms of job interviews. I don't think that scenario exists anymore - I'm not going to say that - I don't think that scenario is so strong as it once was. But I will tell you that still, I don't think gender issues, I don't think sexuality issues, (45:10) in the sense of sexual orientation, and trans issues, are covered enough. I can teach psychology of women, I teach a

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lecture on sexual differentiation, and I get to the section in the lecture that talks about when sexual differentiation processes deviate from the typical patterns; so - and I talk about disorders of sexual differentiation, I talk about intersex folk, I talked a little bit about the history about this and honestly I can give like three lectures on that and the students in the room are like, their hands are up they are asking like 500 questions and they need to know this and can I know this, and I'm like I need to finish my lecture. There is this tremendous curiosity. I mean Psychology of Sexual Orientation, I teach to180 students, I could teach it to 300 and not have a problem with filling the room, students really want to know and I don't think we're doing them enough of a service as a discipline in providing that; although I see that changing.

I remember, I think it was in the early 1990s, I taught a special topics course for this Psychology of Sexual Orientation and I remember at the time talking to colleagues, in Division 44 primarily, has anybody taught a course like this? And there were two people who answered and at the time there was no course like this in any Canadian university. And I was like how do I -what do I do? How do I do this and there was very little input and I remember thinking I don't have any idea, so I don't know how many students are going to be, this is before electronic registration, so I didn't know how many students were in the class. I knew the room held 60. I knew it was closer. I got to the class and the room was like full and the aisles were full and I was like "Okay I think this is going to go." And there was like no textbook, it was all readings, and that was in the early 90s. Students wanted to know.

AF: I was going to ask - I'm curious was there a psychologist whose work was really influential to you, especially because you are designing new courses in designing - you know - new, I guess, modes of thought for a lot of students?

ER: Historically, for me Evelyn Hooker. Evelyn Hooker is like my academic fantasy mom. I think she was outstanding, courageous, and an incredible ally to queer people and had that kind of [sense of] "I'm just doing this because it's the right thing to do," not necessarily heavily invested in the broad political significance but it came from this moral imperative to do the right thing. And change, like made this huge change, turned people's thinking in a very critically important way. If I could say there's one Psychologist that I would point to, for me that's her.

I think there's people doing some amazing work. I know one of the first places I got really really excited was, I read Celia Kitzinger's book on the social construction of lesbianism, and I was like "Oh wow, this is really mind-altering." I was incredibly excited by her perspective and by her integration of political ideology and understanding with experience. So I got very interested in that. I mean I was brought up on the more traditional, sort of Sandra Bem, the whole Janet Spence - and actually Janet Spence's work is probably in ways was much more influential for me. I think people, I think Philosophy actually has had some shaping influence in terms of understanding the notion of gender and how gender functions. I now read much more Sociology. So for example, Kessler and McKenna's book on doing gender and the ethnography on gender. This notion of doing gender as a social accomplishment to me was tremendously interesting and has shaped a lot of how I think about. I think writing by trans women and trans theorists, and queer theorists, has also shaped me, probably more than my own discipline. And that was just, I will tell you that's the luxury of Sabbatical. It's the gift that Sabbatical gives you that you have this interval where you can go "I don't know anything about this or I don't know enough about this, I am going to read". And my first Sabbatical was spent just delving. It was like going

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through this expansion. Like (50:14) grad school was like this: (gesturing) I went from here to here in thinking, and then my first Sabbatical was again that same kind of expansion of ways of thinking about.

AF: There's a lot of stuff I want to ask you about, even from that, but, I mean, I guess I'm curious, who, I guess when you were doing your Sabbatical reading, who really stuck out you as the most influential for you, aside from the people, obviously, that you've mentioned?

ER: Honestly, I think it was the body of work. And I think part of it was going back and reading work like Evelyn Hooker's, John D'Emilio's work (50:54), which was done early, so early gay psychology and understanding the historical contexts that came out of, and then reading the progression and understanding the progression at the same time as working in understanding social movements like Queer Nation, like Act Up. So kind of understanding in that area, how those two became companions in a lot of ways and how much the social movements and academic movements could flow back and forth and how much grass roots organizing and thinking could shape academic thinking. And for me that was exciting, to understand that it didn't have to only come from the academic context, that you could work in this social understanding. And I know a sociologist would be standing and laughing up their sleeve at me, and that's okay. As a discipline, we are very focused on the individual. We are very interested in internal processes, and how those internal processes shape our exterior. But as a social psychologist I was always aware that there is a social context, and how other people's external processes, which affect their behaviour, affect my behaviour back, and forth. So I started to venture outside of the discipline to get more of an understanding of that interactive.

AR: This is a complete aside, and (gesturing to others in the room) I will give you a chance to think of any questions that you want to ask before we wrap up. But you mentioned Kessler and McKenna's work and I'm just revisiting that, for the purpose of something I'm writing, and they did a retrospective of it in *Feminism & Psychology*, and they said "you know nobody in Psychology paid attention to that work for the longest time" -

ER: No -

AR: And I think this is just emblematic of what you're saying because they [Kessler and McKenna] were psychologists but they were paying attention to gender as a social process and the politics of it and it wasn't picked up by psychologists for the longest time.

ER: No, it's lived in the realm of sociology and it came out of that Goffman-esque identity work and I think because we seem to develop these artificial boundaries of, "this is Sociology and [this is] Psychology," and so I remember reading that, but I remember the first time I read the book and it's like "Jeez this is really interesting, this is really a different way of thinking about gender." And it fit my experience of gender - I talked about this actually at the Trans Awareness Workshop - of gender as being, in some ways a product, that you can commodify. You can make gender consumptive. So I can present gender in a way that is easily consumed by others or I can present it as a difficult meal. And I talked about it as the difference between fast food and a multi, gourmet meal with multiple courses. Like I can make it easy for you to consume me or I can make it much more varied and complex. I think trans-folk have a much better understanding of

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that derived from (54:07) their own experience than many of us who identify [with the] more normative gender - I don't even know what that is.

AF: I wanted to ask before we open up, we have gotten a sense of what your experiences were like in the past and even the work you're doing now. I'm curious about the future and what you see for Feminist Psychology in the future, in your opinion, what needs to be done still?

ER: I think we need to do a whole lot more on the complexity of gender. I think we've had a tendency to view it in a very monolithic way, even though we acknowledge that ... there's that lip service to the diversity of gender, but I think in practice we don't do that. I think in practice we have a tendency to binarize gender. I think in practice we don't even, within the binaries, have…I mean there's always that "Yes, there's lots of overlap between the distributions of men and women," and it's almost like that lip service that doesn't pay much attention to how variable [the distributions are]. When I walk around the world and I attend to social stimuli that approach me in a day, I see an incredible amount of diversity at the same time that I sometimes see the forces that operate to restrict diversity. The pink pandemic, as I like to refer to it, has this narrowing tendency.

I can't even imagine what it would be like to be a kid now. In what is a much more binary way. I see lots of kids who don't fit that very monolithic, A or B box. I think as a discipline we need to do way more. And I think as a discipline we need to pay much more attention to the political implications of what we do. To understand that we are producing research that's consumed by others and that positions people in particular ways. And I think we need to understand that even what you're doing in a simple laboratory experiment can have implications that ripple outside of the room, whether that's how you treat your research participants, what you do to them, what you ask them to do for you, [all of that] can have tremendous impact on how people walk away from the discipline.

I mean, one of the ways I got turned on to Psychology, honestly, was by being a subject. In first-year Psychology, if there was an experiment or a study around, I was like "Yeah sure, I'll do that." It's actually how I ended up doing my honours thesis, [it was] was by being a subject in an experiment. And I worked with, actually somebody else you interviewed Lorraine Radtke, worked with the same supervisor as she did, I was an honour student when she was there as a grad student. So I had that experience of being in an experiment and being very interested and asking 400 questions and they answered, they answered my questions and they're like "Oh come find out more." And for me that's the research that we need to be doing.

MG: How do you personally bridge this idea of making Psychology, in general, more inclusive, but also you talked a lot about managing impressions, and almost towing the line in order to be successful, when you talked about your dissertation, about just doing what needed to be done. So how do you bridge that in your own work, about doing what needs to be done in order to share this more diverse, inclusive research?

ER: I think as you gain more status that's much easier. I have the benefit and protection of tenure which allows me to be like "Yeah this is what I'm doing if you don't like it, fire me." And I have much more held that attitude [that] it is one of the protections of tenure and it's not a job for life it's the, it's the notion that tenure protects the exploration of ideas that may not be popular in my

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own discipline but it provides me with this space in which to do that. So I'm painfully aware of how once you have status you have that ability.

And I also think that I was more afraid then I needed to be as a student. I think I was, and this is something I've learned from my spouse, I think I (58:55) was too willing to toe the line for what I perceived was what I wanted. I don't think I had to toe it quite to that same degree. I think there's always a measure of some strategic-ness involved in making decisions, but I also know that at some level, making a decision for purely strategic reasons, to pursue research for purely strategic reasons, is self-defeating. I mean, I don't do the research I did for my dissertation anymore because when I finished I walked away and went "I'm no longer under that burden, I can now do what I want." And I was a much happier and whole human being.

I also - before I got tenure I had my fantasy alternate stream worked out, that I was going to be a welder. I even got brochures from welding schools and stuff. I knew if you weren't going to give me tenure because you didn't like what I did, then I wasn't really going to want to stay here. I wasn't really going to want to be doing this my whole life because it is not an easy job. I mean, honestly, there's parts of it that are amazing, and it's great, but it's not easy, it's not easy, it's not leisurely, unstressed work. And so to do any job I think having a passion for what you're doing makes it so much easier. And I always encourage my students at least to have a line of research, it may not be all your research, but at least have a line of your research that you can pursue with that kind of passion. It's that same thing as providing gender as consumptive, so here, here are my consumables...here's something you can easily consume, that fits well in terms of your expectations, and here is this other stuff that I do to that is also interesting. So I think that you can make choices as a student, understanding that you're subject to the whims of the institution more than I am as a tenured and senior faculty member. And I wish I'd had been braver. I really do, I wish I had been braver at the beginning.

SI: Dr. Ross, with your work regarding childhood sexual abuse survivors, I was wondering, we're currently experiencing a time where it seems that women are coming forward and talking about their sexual assault experiences more than ever. Like, you turn on the TV and that is what you hear, which is great. But, with your work and from your perspectives, I'm wondering, what do you think could be better done in society to ensure that childhood sexual abuse survivors, or sexual assault survivors in general, have the support that they need to live the most fulfilling lives that they can?

ER: I think the "MeToo" meme and the social movement in many ways, is, I think for me, very critical. I think for me, an understanding of this as a part of what shapes the lives of so many women, and I mean so many women, I think we have not understood, and I think that my experience of being at a table with eight woman, only one of whom hadn't experienced sexual abuse as a child, was a watershed moment for realizing this isn't something that just happens to a few people, this is part of what integrally shapes [a lot of women's lives]. And flowing through my experience as a teenager, I never really on some level questioned the daily harassment experiences of catcalling, of being referred to in sexualized ways by people with whom I worked, by being grabbed, by having people rub up against - people - having *men* rub up against you because they could. It became like, "this is the air you breathe" by being a woman, by being a young woman.

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And interesting, I don't experience that so much anymore. Partly, I think, because of presentation and also partly because I'm old, I'm no longer desirable in that way. And so experiencing that all through, having weird experiences in grad school with male faculty where it was just creepy and you knew there was creepiness around, and I think one of the things that I think this whole notion around problematizing it and women having the courage to come forward, I think emboldens other women to come forward. I think one of the challenges is [that] I don't want this to just be a moment. I'm thinking - I'm teaching Psychology of Women in January - and I'm thinking "How am I going to deal with this?" How am I going to bring this into the classroom, which is (1:04:13) mostly a room full of younger women who are in this flow and to help them think about it. I think we've had that tendency to brush it off, so it's the creep factor; it's this person is a creep, "oh don't go in a room with that person," or don't be alone with this person, don't go in a taxi with that guy because he's creepy. I think we've had that kind of underground - and as a grad student there was a kind of underground [knowledge] of who was "handsy" and who to avoid.

I think speaking, I think the loud voices of women collectively, and it's this collectiveness that I want to foster because, I mean I'm a product of my generation, I'm a product of collective action. It's through collective action that you get social change. I've seen the social change. I mean, I'm a married person. I saw the social change in how we approach same-sex marriage. I've seen that, I've lived it, and I've experienced it. And so I know it can be effective and I think talking about it, and not seeing women as victims or men as victims of sexual assault. They're survivors and often they're not just survivors, they have thrived. And for me, it's like being open; it's like being out as gay, being out as a survivor. "I'm a sexual abuse survivor," I stand up in my classroom and I say those words. And I'll tell you I was a lot more scared to say that to my classroom full of students than I was to say I was gay. And I do it because they have these images of women who are sexually abused as damaged, as drug-addicted, as they're not going to go anywhere with their lives. So I can stand up and say I'm that success that people say survivors of sexual abuse shouldn't be. And I talked about the fact that, yes it's part of what shaped my experience as a human being, but it's not who I am, but it brings with me a kind of strength to deal with adversity; that, if there's an upside to it, that's the upside.

And, that in part drove my desire to do the research, to take that experience and to understand it more fully, and to make it available to others to read. So I can go talk to students, so I can talk to groups outside of the university, and talk about how the response and the need is to shape collective action and to embolden women to know that they have the backing of institutions of their workplace, of their supervisor, of their family, when they stand up and say I've been assaulted, I've been harassed, I've been abused.

SI: Thank you very much.

ER: You're welcome.

LB: This isn't one that I had asked before, but I'm just very interested in this link that you've alluded to, of the link between childhood sexual abuse and feminism, and would you say that working to support survivors and to pull back the veil, as the "Me Too" thread has been doing, would you say that these are inherently feminist things to do.

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ER: I think that they are inherently feminist things to do, whether people experience them as a feminist action. I think they advance the cause of woman. And if I use that very umbrella definition of "what is feminism," it advances the cause of women, it emboldens them. I think it gives them the opportunity to seek the collective support of other woman. I think it also talks about how it shapes in dramatic ways the kind of changes that we need to make in a society that says that is not okay, it is not okay to treat me as an object. I mean, I read an article this past week on *Slate*, written by a young woman who identified herself as millennial, and she said, "I thought the thing that I was going - the thing in my working life (she was just starting her work, three years in) - I thought the thing I would have to deal with as a young woman in the workplace was closing the gender gap in pay because I knew that gender gap in pay existed and I thought that my generation's thing was going to be to close that." (1:09:00) And she's like, now, there is so much more. I think for a lot of people, I don't think they've been aware of how much women have had to deal with on a day-to-day basis. To me, it's inherently feminist to identify, it's inherently feminist if you have the capacity to speak, and I think it's inherently feminist to encourage others and to support others in the speaking and in the dealing.

And so for me one of these things is, don't leave other women in the lurch. I have that view. It's like I've done this before with students who've come to me who've had issues in a supervisory context, where it's like "No, I'll supervise you." I will take you [for supervision] because you deserve better than you're getting, because you have the right not to be harassed in this relationship that's going to shape your future, and for me that's really important. That's a thing I can do. I can do that, I can teach, I can make these changes, and for me that's, to me that's political and social action. And doing it not just with grad students but also supporting undergrads. And the notion of providing good, like really good experience, for students who are in the honour supervision, in part to create this, to foster the development of women who are going to go out and go on to grad school because that honours experience is so critical in shaping how people go forward and so I'll do it with women, I'll do it with trans folk, I'll do it with folks who identify across gender and sexuality spectrums because I think it's important for them to go and to take that forward.

AF: Yes, Lucy.

LX: So I understand that you had a lot of difficulty being able to tell people that you were a victim of sexual assault. So, I was wondering what advice you would give other women who might also be victims in face of all the stigma, prejudice, and negative stereotypes surrounding sexual assault.

ER: If I was going to say one thing, it's - I'll say two things: One, I'll talk a lot to the people who are going to be told, to the people who are going to have disclosed to them that I'm a childhood survivor of sexual assault. I think for me it's to start from the premise of support, of I don't necessarily know, even if I've had the experience, I don't know what your experience is and to allow women to have the place, to allow survivors the place to talk and to say as much as they need or want to say and to understand that saying is a process that occurs over time.

I think for me, in terms of disclosing, I think for people who are going to disclose to feel safe, and I know safety can be a big concern, particularly for survivors of childhood sexual abuse because our assessment of safety can be skewed, of what's safe, can be skewed in varying ways,

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in a varying context. But I think for me, it's been a matter of a gut level, of a sense of knowing a person, being careful about disclosing. I'm also careful, for example in medical contexts I've disclosed that I'm a survivor but I've also said, this doesn't go on my record anywhere, I don't want this in any electronic record because I want to have control over to whom I disclose. So I'll say, put your pen down, take your keyboard away, this doesn't go in here because I want to control where that information goes. But then I'll stand in a classroom or talk on tape about the fact that I am, because I'm now in a place where I feel comfortable with that and now I no longer care. It's a fact, I was born in Quebec like, I have four sisters, they're the facts of my life. And I think disclosing is seeking out those with whom you have a sense of comfort, a sense of safety, and being able to understand that some people are not going to be able to cope with it. Some people will walk away, because they can't deal with the notion that this happens to people.

I don't know what it's like for a woman who's heterosexually identified, who's going to want to interact sexually with men, as an adult, having a history of being (1:14:00) sexually abused by a man. I honestly, I don't know what that's like, I don't know what it would be like to disclose to a potential sexual partner who is a man, where maybe those boundaries around "you are the enemy but you're also not the enemy," I've never had to negotiate that process, it just hasn't been an issue for me because I'm lesbian/ gay/ queer. So for me, that intensity, it still affects how you interact but it's not, and I know women have talked about this, how do I sleep with the enemy? How do I now form this intimate sexual bond with someone who can at times remind me so strongly of my abuser? And so, I have no personal experience to draw from for that.

AF: I want to ask one last thing, if that's okay, so we've talked about your career and things that influenced you and teaching and stuff, I'm just curious, what have we not talked about that you feel we should know about?

ER: We've talked a lot about what I do in this context; I also have a life that exists outside of this context. And for me I've been a fan of having a "separation of Church and State." And I have this whole part of my life from which I draw incredible satisfaction, incredible joy: my relationship with my spouse. We're going on 30 years. If I were going to have a tombstone and I would have it engraved, it would say "I loved her well." And to me, all the other stuff, it's like that is for me part of the purpose that I was put on this world for and part of the purpose I was put on this world for is to have the experience of being loved so incredibly by this one wonderful, perfect person. And that has always been, for me, the way in which I have balanced off academics.

When I leave here some days and I'm in a snit because of something that happened or angry because of some institutional thing that's gone on that I think is crazy, that is just a system that's gone awry, I have always the reminder that that's that, and that's part of, that's work, it's what I do, it's not who I am. Although I have this identity that is wrapped up in it, as I approach retirement, I'm doing the "What am I going to be if I'm not this anymore," but there's always been an element of "that's what I do, not who I am." And yet how she has loved me has profoundly altered how I am here. It's given me courage, it's given me the kind of space and security and confidence, and I've modeled her courage, and I've modeled her strong moral compass in dealing with the world, her experience in business of being a woman who's like "No I'm not doing that, I don't have to do that." She's very strong-willed and very clear on what is right and what is wrong and has always stood up [for that], and she has always been pro-women and so I've learned so

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much from her and I've taken so much of that here. York has benefited tremendously from it. So yes, that is the other thing.

AF: That is such an awesome answer.

AR: I think that is a great way to end, so yeah I'm going to end here.

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