Psychology's Feminist Voices Oral History Project

Interview with Laina Ya-Hui Bay-Cheng

Interviewed by Alexandra Rutherford
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Toronto, Ontario
November 13th, 2019

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Alexandra Rutherford, PhD

Project Director, Psychology's Feminist Voices

alexr@yorku.ca

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York University
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November 13th, 2019

AR: Alexandra Rutherford, Interviewer

LBC: Laina Ya-Hui Bay-Cheng, Interview Participant

BM: Brianna Murphy, Interviewer

SS: Sonia Sandhu, Interviewer

DC: Danielle Christie, Interviewer

MG: Meghan George, Interviewer

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AR: So, this is the little formal bit. We do start all of the interviews with asking you to state your name, and place, and date of birth for the record.

LBC: Oh, wow, okay.

AR: Just so we can identify the tapes, like, 50 years from now. [Laughs]

LBC: Yeah that's fine. Laina Bay-Cheng. Date of birth was October 27, 1973, and place of birth: Manhasset, New York.

AR: Great. Great. And I have already gone through these with you, but this is the consent form that we ask people - and it just explains all of the things that I was talking about with Dr. Bay-Cheng earlier in my office, so she knows about the project and the process that we follow and that kind of thing. So that's great, thank you.

Okay, so, our first question is, can you tell us – talk to us a little bit about your relationship to feminism?

LBC: Yeah. So, I was thinking, that's actually one of the hardest questions, because it's so huge. You know, I don't really think of myself as having a relationship to feminism I think, because in a weird – at least at this point in my life, because that makes it sound like it's a totally external thing, whereas I just feel like there is no part of me, there is no relationship that I have, there is no way that I see the world, there's no part of my life that has not been affected by and won't

continue to be affected by feminism, and so I think that's part of the struggle, is that I don't really think of it or experience it as separate from me. Or rather, I don't think that I exist separate from it. I guess maybe that's the better way of thinking of it.

{01:47}

LBC: But I was trying to think like when was the first time, right? So, I took – and it's sort of classic story, right? I took my first women's studies class, and I think it wasn't necessarily that the heavens opened and I saw things in a way I hadn't seen before, but I felt like I all of a sudden had, well, community, first of all, like in the people that I was reading, in the people who were in class with me, in a way of understanding the things that I had been taught by my mother, and the ways that I had received a bunch of different messages, and so that was a very galvanizing experience, I would say. But again, I think the intro women's studies class in college is pretty par for the course, probably.

AR: Yeah, it is. Yeah. Well, you spoke about being able then to apply kind of a different way of thinking to things that you had maybe learned in your family of origin. Can you speak a little bit about your family of origin and sort of how, in terms of your own development, what influence they had?

LBC: Yeah, I'm the youngest of six, and actually… In reading through the questions ahead of time, I think always about – a lot about my mother, and again I think this is very common for many people who identify very strongly as feminist. They often are able to point to women who have modeled for them what that means, and my mother is absolutely one of them.
So, I'm the youngest of six, my mother was functionally a single mother for the entire time, officially for pretty much all of my life, and that was an amazing and a good thing. And everything from my mother going back to school, going to college when I was in high school. She worked nights so that she would sleep during the day and then she would wake up when I got home from school. She helped raise my nephews and nieces.

She was just like - she took a lot of pride in her work, but she also did very explicit things, like she always used to tell me to not – if I would get concerned around adolescence, right – if I got concerned about what I looked like, or concerned that I wasn't as pretty as my sister, and things like that, or if I wanted to wear makeup. My mother, she always used to – I don't know if she ever said it, but in my head, what it distills into, is my mother basically saying, "don't be a silly woman, and you have better things to do with your brain." And she didn't say – I will say, the "silly woman" thing, she was not dismissive of other women – um, but she was very protective of women being able to be more. And so, it was more like "don't be that silly thing that people tell women they need to be."

AR: Yeah

{4:48}

LBC: So, yeah. And I think… I will also say that I identify very strongly as being sort of part of a lineage of women who have struggled against all odds, and me being the beneficiary of that.

So, my mother, but my paternal grandmother in China, was an orphan – was orphaned when she was seven, had no name, and raised her – she had five children who made it to adulthood. But she educated her daughters. But they had no money, so she did all kinds of things to be able to educate her daughters just like her sons, relatively speaking. Her mother had committed suicide, that's how she was orphaned. Committed suicide because of her relationship with her husband. And, so, I feel very strongly about being, again, the beneficiary of many people who had to struggle a lot, and that means a lot to me.

AR: Yeah, absolutely, absolutely. This is maybe jumping ahead a bit, but, it feels like from what you've described, that a lot of those experiences have influenced you not only in terms of being a feminist, but also some of the more specific kinds of areas that you focused on in your work in terms of class, and struggles, and violence, and I don't know, I don't want to put words in your mouth.

LBC: Yeah, well, I guess – and this is going to sound simplistic. I'm going to be simplistic now, but I am not totally this simplistic in my head, fully, but for the purposes of conversation starters - I mean, all these things that I feel like these women - my mother, my grandmother, my great grandmother, just to name a couple - that they were struggling against were not random, they were not unfortunate events. They were systematic, they were largely not – they weren't – they didn't originate in individual men, but they were absolutely carried out by men, and so the idea that women are subject to conditions that are not of their making, and yet we… They actually are faced with, and what's demanded of them is to rise above or something –it's not that women don't, but I think it's unjust. It's an unjust expectation, and it's an unjust demand. And that idea is certainly one that I feel strongly.

AR: Yeah. Yeah. And that is obviously so well reflected in the kinds of questions you ask, and the material that we've read, even for today.

Alright. I'd like to go back a little to your educational trajectory, but does anyone have any questions at this juncture that they want to jump in with? [looks at the students in the room]

Yeah? You're gonna hold on? Okay. Because, I get going, I get going in these interviews, and sometimes I might forget to kind of [check in], if so, just yell and scream if you want to jump in, because it's a little hard to both really listen and record and make sure I'm paying attention. So, feel free to scream. [turns back to LBC]

Okay, so tell us a little about your educational trajectory, and sort of then how you kind of got into social work as a field and then obviously psychology as well, and the combination of those things.

LBC: Yeah. So, I went to Wellesley College. I went to Wellesley because my eldest sister went to Wellesley. When I was six, she left and went to Wellesley. And, it was, for her, the happiest place she'd ever been. 'Cause yeah, my family came to the US when my eldest sister was twelve, and she had a really tough time, and so she went to Wellesley, and just had this sort of revelatory

experience. So, I grew up wanting to go there, and so I did.

And it was also for me an amazing place, and, for very different reasons than for my sister. But when I was there, I started – I took psychology classes – I wasn't intending to go into psychology, I wanted to be a German and English lit major. But I went into psychology, and there, I had – I didn't know anything, just to be clear. I didn't know what it meant to get a PhD, none of that was clear to me.

{10:02}

LBC: I now, looking back, I realize that I had these professors who were these amazing sorts of figures in feminist psychology. But again, and also at Wellesley, it's a little bit of a joke, and it's a little bit true, a little bit not true, but that everything is feminist, like the entire place is a women's studies class.

AR: Yeah.

LBC: And, so I took classes with Laurel Furumoto, I took classes with Nancy Genero. Julie Norem was there, it was this amazing experience. So, I was working while I was at Wellesley. I started working over the summers with kids with maltreatment histories. And, there, I was around a lot of people who were clinical social workers, and, when it was time to graduate, I didn't know exactly what I was going to do, but my professors were like, "you want to be a professor." I was like, I don't know what that means exactly. And then everybody in my sort of practice life, they were all saying "you don't want to go into psychology, you want to go into social work." And what they told me was that social workers really change things, and that psychologists are… They're maybe not so useful, was really the message I got.

AR: We'll get you to unpack that later!

LBC: Okay! Anyway, and so I started my MSW program thinking that what I wanted to do was be a practitioner and be a clinician and do work around child maltreatment and, because, the sort of violation of children – of anybody's bodies, but of children in particular, I find – and not just in explicit forms of abuse, but the sort of violation, and the actual, total invisibility of children's rights. And for me, adolescence is a part of that. And the lack of… The imposition, and what adults seem to think is a totally fine and justified amount of surveillance and control over adolescent bodies I find deeply concerning. And so, I was really interested in these kinds of things. I wanted to go and do clinical work, but then when I was doing that work, if any of you have, you know that it is… It's not even that the work – the work is always hard. I think some people are strong in ways that enable you to work in that field and to stay, and it was really very quickly apparent to me that I did not have that kind of strength, and that I was going to be useless pretty shortly. And so, then I transitioned into research, because also I wanted to do more work that I felt would change the way we thought about these things. How we think about, how we create worlds, in which girls are subject to these horrible things. Like, how is that possible, and it need not be, and so I thought "oh I can be more useful for a longer amount of time if I went into research." And so that's when I decided to transition from the MSW into the PhD.

AR: And how did you find your way to Michigan?

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LBC: This would be one of those work-life questions. So, my partner was… This is maybe not necessarily interesting to anybody here, but we were in Indiana because she was in a directing program in Indiana, and I was working as a social worker, and it was outrageously, unbelievably homophobic. I've never experienced anything like that before. The county, the councilwoman was in the newspaper talking about how anybody who hired sodomites to work with children should be fired. And in fact, right before we arrived there, this guy had been fired – he worked at a group home where I eventually was working, or you know, I was working with kids there – and he was fired because they found out that he was gay. And not only was he fired and run out of town, but his father was [too]. And then, the councilwoman's comments were that she thought that the people who hired him should have been fired. And I mean, I was just shocked. I mean, I was really shocked. It was an incredibly hostile environment, I was very nervous, because I was working with kids, and I brought in Planned Parenthood to do a lecture and to do a presentation, and after, the Planned Parenthood woman was like – I didn't think anything of it, I was 22. I really did not think anything of it – afterwards, the woman from Planned Parenthood was like "Thank you so much, nobody ever invites us." I was like, "Why not?" Then I realized that it's because you're not supposed to talk to teens about sex.

There are other examples. One of the other kids I was working with - at the time we didn't have the words for this - but was absolutely gender-expansive, and the best thing that I could do was bring them to the library, to the public library, and just kind of leave them in the right area of the library, and I was sort of like, "We're going to go to the library, and your foster parents don't need to know which section of the library you're hanging out in." So, I mean, I couldn't put that in a case plan. Anyway, so things like that, and I just thought "This is crazy" so I said "I'm leaving Indiana" and my partner was like "Yeah no, me too" and so we both just applied to Michigan, because it had a good program for her and a good program for me, and I was like "Oh, and it's a really good program, great, let's go there" and so that's what we did. And it was really, it's the only school I applied to, I didn't look at other schools, it was not an informed decision beyond "Program for you, program for me, both of them are good, let's go."

AR: Right. Well these are the conditions of our lives, right? That inform the trajectories that we end up on, so yeah.

LBC: I mean, yeah. It was just… luck, really.

AR: But I know that once you got to Michigan… Can you tell us a little bit about your experiences there? And, in terms of both your education but also the mentoring and the kind of community that you connected with there?

LBC: Yes. Yeah, so. Once I was at Michigan, again, it took me two months to realize that I was not gonna be long for the world if I stuck with forensic interviewing. So I applied to the PhD program, and, I was excited because Abby Stewart was on faculty in the psychology department,

and I had read Abby Stewart's work when I was in undergrad in Laurel Furumoto's class, and I couldn't believe that I would have the opportunity to meet her.

{17:53}

AR: You may have to tell these young 'uns who Abby Stewart is – even though we've interviewed Abby for the project.

LBC: Have you?

AR: Her interview isn't available online yet.

LBC: Abby, she was – she became my chair, she was an unbelievable model in a bunch of ways. So, feminist psychologist, did work on women at midlife, among other things, but, sort of at the time, that's what she was most known for. And, her work around… I mean she was in personality psychology, but really expanding the idea and how people thought of personality psychology. So really looking basically at social context and its intersection with personality. Without totally ceding the idea that personality and some version thereof exists. And just the sort of the social forces that make and shape people. And so, I took psychology of women with her, and that aligned with a bunch of other things, I mean it was really –*that* was an experience of the heavens opening up, was working with Abby and the other people in the classes that I met with her. One of the things that Abby did that I think is one of the most important things that a mentor does, is actually connect you with other people. And so, the network that Abby forged with her lab, but also just even in this class, I'm still in touch with them. I'm not the kind of person who stays in touch with people, I don't go to my reunions, and things like that, ever – except that I have unbelievably a sort of strong sense of affinity for these people that I went through these classes with, and it was because of the community that Abby – she didn't forge it, like in this very direct hands-on way, but she allowed *u*s to. And so, she really cultivated and created this community, or, the conditions, under which we could forge our own community.

AR: Alright. [turning to group] Does anyone want to jump in? Meghan? Sonia? Okay, we'll do Meghan and then Sonia?

MG: In terms of, when you speak of community, and, I know now, people are sort of branching out trying to make connections between psychology and other programs, was that the case for you, or did you sort of feel like it was a dual identity having a psychology and a master's of social work at the same time?

LBC: So, yeah, you know, I didn't identify - in psychology there was a strong cohort, and we went through (personality psychology was the area I was technically affiliated with because of Abby), and we went through course work together. And we went through comps or prelims or whatever they call them at whatever university you're at. We went through those things together. But my home always felt like the Institute for Research on Women and Gender, which Abby was the director of at the time. And that was what felt like home to me. And so, I technically belonged in social work or psychology, and I think that some of my friends who were in political science and social work, they did feel like they were in a divorced parents thing – like which house are you staying at tonight – and I didn't feel that because I did feel like there was this sort

of interdisciplinary home. It does mean that I was, and still am, pretty naïve about the disciplinary boundaries. Like I just don't get it. I mean I really am like, "What are you talking about? I don't understand, what do you mean, 'Psychology doesn't do that.'?" But I am a psychologist, right, and I do those things.

AR: Yeah, absolutely. Sonia, did you want to jump in?

SS: Yeah, so, upon reading your paper called *The Agency Line: A Neoliberal Metric for Appraising Young Women's Sexuality* I just thought I might ask you these questions. So, neoliberalism as a political rationality that sets aside rights, information access, and accountability among many other things, I'm curious as to what political rationality or system do you believe would allow women and young girls to have true agency over their sexuality?

AR: That's a big one. Switching gears, a little bit!

LBC: So, I don't know if I have an easy answer to that. I will say – a slight segue – part of why I do feel strongly about staying a little bit grounded in social work is - this is not social work as it's necessarily practised, but social work as it is in its ideal form - is that it is always asking about the social conditions of peoples' lives…. You know, I really hated listening to these debates about "when a girl does this, is that empowerment, or is that just, you know internalized… Is it just sexualization?" and I was like "ugh, why is it [always] one or the other?" And Rosalind Gill actually writes and thinks about this and writes about it incredibly persuasively. Like how are we getting stuck in this debate and saying that it's one or the other and part of me just thinks "and why are we only looking at girls' bodies?" like we're still just all the time judging, and whether we're saying "yes you may because we believe you're empowered," or "no you may not because you haven't convinced us that you really, really want to." You know, I find it…

So, on the one hand, I don't know the answer to that question, and I don't know if it's knowable, and on the other, I feel like digging down into the "does she really want to do that? Is that really coming from her or is it from the outside?" Maybe one day we'll get to the point that we can answer that question, but right now I am much more interested in "what can she do," right? So, if you are familiar at all with the Capability Approach, right, the central core question is "What can a person do?" And "What are they able to do and to be?" And I find it a useful tool for saying "Let's not care too much about what people do, let's care about what they can do." And that's really the only thing that we have a say over, is making sure that all people have equal access to all the possible things, and that until that's true – and again, this is a little bit I'm a begging off, I'm hedging, but I am sort of like, I'm not going to answer the question about what a girl should or shouldn't do with her body until we talk and we are assured that she can do anything she wants. Then maybe it's time to have other kinds of conversations about what should she do, and what's right, and what's healthy – but not until everybody can do everything. So, what I am interested in is focusing not on what girls do, but what they can do, and changing the social environment. Yeah.

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SS: I think that also kind of relates to the debate over sex work, like, is it because you want to do it or is it because you have to do it, and then that leads to questions of then is it right and when is it wrong, and I completely agree, yeah. It's what you can do, not about why you're doing it or if it's right to do it.

LBC: Right. And you know… One of the things that strikes me about those kinds of conversations is that they presume that you can't really want to make money, and you can't really want, you know, to have a secure home. So, an idea and a thing that I'm writing about and thinking a lot about now is the discourse around consent, like obviously you know I'm in favour of consent, but I really do not think that that's enough. So, in a bunch of articles and research, but then also this goes back to practice experience and also if you have ever been in a tough situation in your life, right, you know that we often are consenting to things happily, fully. But that doesn't mean that the conditions of our consent are not a problem. And so, I think that this focus on consent is really problematic, and I think the same thing is that you can apply this to the way that sex work is talked about, and it's like "well, does she really want to or does she not?" And again, I'm like, let's not care too much about what women are doing with their bodies, let's care about what they can do. To me that's the only thing that we have a right – and it's not even a right to comment on, it's a responsibility to provide. I have talked to and interacted with lots of young women who have consented to sex and consented to relationships that everyone around them – including myself, and they also, would be like, "yeah no, this is not a good situation. But it's the best one I have right now, and so, like, yeah, I really, really want to. Not because of sex, it has nothing to do with sex, what I really, really want is to not have to worry about where I'm staying." And that desire for security and that desire for comfort and also for emotional comfort, I think it's as valid as anything else. And so, I think part of also when we talk about sex is, we only talk about sex and I think that's ridiculous. Because it's just so one-dimensional, it's so shallow, it's so stripping sex of – and treating sex as a special thing, when it's really not.

SS: I think when you mention consent, it reminds me of the talk that you had, the talk at the Society for Social Work and Research, and you mentioned choice like a super power. So it's like, we decide that just because you're given a choice, you have this opportunity to do the right thing, but it's not about the choice that you're making, it's about the choices that are given to you and what those choices look like, and it's not just a simple as consent.

LBC: Yeah, the whole choice rhetoric stuff is ridiculous too, because I mean, especially around adolescence, that's not like, "we support your choice" – all of that is about telling people what they should choose. All of it. And not caring about why somebody is choosing anything, and sort of what that tells us. I think it's pretty pernicious, the discourse around choices and just how hollow it is, and how all responsibility just gets boomeranged and sort of put right back on individuals.

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LBC: And I will say, I am very – not just persuaded, I don't have to be persuaded, there is a lot of evidence about how important it is for people to feel like they have a choice and how we will fabricate in many ways a sense of choice and a sense of volition in order to be able to get through our day. And again, I think that that is true. I think all the things can be true, I think it can be true

that people feel good about having false choices, I think that it is true that people should be allowed to make whatever choices they want, and I think it is true that we can be concerned that they don't have better choices to choose from.

AR: So this leads us I think pretty directly, to both the foreground and the background of much of your work, which is a critique of neoliberalism right? I wonder if you could elaborate a little bit on that and how that has framed, right, your discussion – more specific discussions around what is sexual agency, with is choice, empowerment, and that kind of thing. How did you come to that? It sounds like you had been already oriented to this way of this thinking; were you always thinking about it in terms of – through a neoliberal lens?

LBC: No!

AR: Okay, tell us a little bit about that.

LBC: Not at all… So, it was 2006 and 2007, and I was working with Alyssa Zucker who is now at the University of Florida, and she – I will just say it – she and I met because Abby Stewart introduced us. Alyssa was postdoc at the time and Abby – I was a master's student, and Abby was like, "Alyssa help this student." And so, Alyssa helped me, and she became one of my best friends and one of my closest and most wonderful collaborators. So we were working together because we really wanted to work together, and so we came up projects that were at the intersection of our interests, and listening to women struggle with not just things that had happened to them, but how to tell the stories of what happened. I started thinking about this because I would hear women really distancing themselves from the idea that they had been victimized. And so, there was reading that I was doing about the construction of victim and agent as oppositional and absolute, you were either one or the other, and you really don't want to be one, right? You really, really just want to be a survivor. And so I was reading about that and I was listening to women and I was also listening to women – this is my work with Alyssa – distancing themselves from feminism and being like, "I don't need that." And we were like, what is going on? Like what are people so worried about and why are people so worried about it, and then I just started reading. I will say, I think that the work around neoliberalism and neoliberal ideology at the time, it was not a thing that in the US people were talking about in psychology and in social work, not at all. And so, certainly people in other parts of the world were. Anyway, and so now it's really interesting to me because now it shows up not an all newspapers, but people are starting to think about it, and not just as a set of policies, although mostly that, but they're also starting to think about it in terms of neoliberal subjectivity and the neoliberal self and things like that, and that has really just been a remarkable change, at least in the U.S., over the past 10 years. Nobody was talking about it and now people are sort of seeing, like, following – you just follow the trails and they all kind of go back to this way that we think. But I just read other people, I just tried to learn things as I was going,

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AR: [turning to group] Does anyone want to jump in with questions about some of the things you've read or the themes in Laina's career? Brianna, did you want to jump in? You look like you do.

BM: I feel pensive; I'm always so bad at wording questions. I guess in the article I was looking at, the one you recommended for us, *Yes, But: Young Women's Views of Unwanted Sex at the Intersection of Gender and Class*, you were discussing how during the interview process it was actually the women who discussed what unwanted sex was, you didn't define it for them. I was wondering a little bit about the variance you saw in those responses? Did it seem like a lot of women had the same kinds of ideas about what this is?

LBC: I remember actually thinking a lot about that when we were working on it. So, I'm trying to remember … I know I actually wrote something about that in the paper! So no, I think there is tremendous variation, and we purposely didn't sort of define it, in part because I was kind of curious and because I am mainly interested in how women perceive and make sense of their lives and I'm not like just counting "did this thing happen?" I really, I'm like, "I don't really care, you tell me." And so, there was tremendous variation. I know that unwanted sex, for instance, a lot of times people think of that as just, as regretted, but not necessarily regretted as a way of discursively framing a violation. It truly was like "ugh, I don't think I should've done that" which I think is a pretty human thing, right? You're like, "oh, I – that might have been a mistake." Right? It can be about anything. So I think that there are women who were like, "yeah no, I've un-wanted that," or they're like "I wanted it last night, now I wish I could un-want it." I think that that's true.

But there also is – and I also – you know, in that paper, right, I talk about the normalizing and problematizing discourse, and I try to make really clear, I am not trying to take a stand. I think there is a whole bunch of literature and people who take a position on that, and I'm not one of them. And again, maybe it's a little bit hedging, but it's also because I think it's complicated and because I think doesn't matter what anyone else thinks. Not that it doesn't matter, but, I think most important to me is, how does a woman understand it and what sense does she make at this moment? And I think that also always changes. So I think that there were women who were like… and this is in an earlier study that I did, women were like "it's kind of like sometimes we see go to see a movie that I don't want to see, too." You know, and "sometimes he goes to see the movie I don't want to see" and they were like, "That's just a relationship, and it's not necessarily a big deal." And I think that that is possible; I also think that it is also possible that that's a story that women tell. I think it is also possible that those instances are very disturbing. And in fact, actually, one of those participants in that, she said at the beginning of her interview, she was like "yeah no, it wasn't a big deal, oh no." She took a lot of responsibility she was like, "oh I should have known better, I made a mistake, I got drunk" right? And she – and I can't remember, she got into a car with these guys. Anyway, and she took a lot of responsibility at the beginning of the interview. And at the very end she was like "yeah no, I don't really believe that. They totally took advantage of me," that was, you know, she was like "but I don't want to be seen – like I'm painting myself to be a victim or something like that." She was more worried about what people think of her as being an "attention whore." She's the one who talked about being an attention whore. And I thought that was really interesting, right? So it wasn't that she was… The layers of complexity I thought were really interesting, and all of the different things that she felt like she was trying to defend against. Mainly just to be able to keep people away from telling her what her experience was. She actually knew what she was trying to do was not have people feeling like they knew for her. I thought it was interesting. Long-winded answer.

{41:05}

BM: I appreciate it a lot, thank you.

AR: Yeah. That does lead though to the work that you've done on *The Agency Line*, right? And I think most of us have read at least one of the articles – which may have been the article that you wrote in response to some of the folks who critiqued your work. So I wonder if you could set that up for us and kind of, um, kind of what that was all about, and what your take away from that, kind of – so this was in 2015 in *Sex Roles*, although I think there has been some before that too. But anyway that whole kind of debate, the ways in which other feminist psychologists kind of responded to your idea that there is a matrix that divides young women above and below an agency line in terms of too much or too little sex, and so on. Maybe you could sort of sketch that out for us and what the controversy was, and how you feel about that now.

LBC: Yeah, so… I mean I sort of said this – I say this is the article and it is really true, I found myself with colleagues and other papers working ourselves into knots trying to be able to be like, "well there is a double bind, right?" The kind of standard usual, like, "oh, the double bind be between being sexually desiring, or desirable but not desiring." You know, but then also like, turning on TV, listening to the way people are trying to be and I don't think it's that simple anymore. Like actually I think now women acting as though they are desiring, that's pretty profitable. People are making a lot of money off of women performing that. And girls are feeling like they need to, and of course it's also possible that girls really are feeling – anyway, I felt like people, and not just us, but in all these papers, people were getting tangled up in how to talk about this and being like "oh it's a double bind" but it's actually a little more complicated than that now. And I felt like oh you know to me, and I literally sketched it out in a conversation with Alyssa Zucker, when we were there visiting and she generously let me talk all of these ideas out and I was like, I feel like there's this other way, and that girls are having to negotiate a very different space and that it's multidimensional, right, it's not additive and that was important. And so I sort of wrote *The Agency Line* paper, and trying to make it very clear, because actually one of the times I gave the earlier, earliest talks of it was to a psych department, and people – this one guy was really excited and I was like "oh this is great." But he was excited because he thought that I was developing a measure of girls' sexual agency, and I thought oh my god, I have to walk this back. [Laughs]

AR: Psychologists do love their measures.

{44:13}

LBC: And this idea that, and again, the idea that we can or we should be going in measuring girls' sexual agency, and I thought, oh, okay, so I was like I need to work on the messaging, because clearly something is not getting across. So to be really clear, I am not trying to capture in any way, and I do not think that we should be, again, in any way, capturing, "is she agentic or not" because I feel like that leads to this, "are we going to sanction and condone this behaviour or not?" And I'm not comfortable with that, and I don't want to be a part of that. So I tried to be very explicit that what I was talking about was sort of this performance, this demand for a kind of performance of agency in the same way, and that that was as disconnected from a young woman's… All the different versions of her internal personal experience, as the sort of virgin-

slut continuum is in relation to actual sexual activity. In both cases, I thought this is not about actual behaviour and this is not about actual feelings of agency, right? This is always about basically trying to get girls to behave a certain way, and when they act the right way and which girls do, we even accept as actors in that way, then we like, pat them on the head. Anyway, so I was really excited about being able to sort of express all of these things, and, you know, Sharon Lamb wrote a response, Jenny Katz – and she does this work on reproductive justice, and I thought it was really cool. Deb Tolman responded, and Sharon Lamb and Deb Tolman are both people who I talk with a lot, and I totally was excited for there to be conversation.

{49:16}

SS: I wanted to ask you another question about *The Agency Line* paper. You mentioned: "According to neoliberalism's dualist construction of agents and victims, one cannot have their individual agency *and* systemic vulnerability." Meaning, if you were vulnerable, it would be your fault. It's completely your onus. But do you because of that discourse, kind of "knowing for her" discourse, do you think that's why some women may not want to align themselves with feminism?

LBC: Yes. And with Alyssa Zucker a lot of what we looked at was sort of feminist identity and why do people say things like "I'm not a feminist, but I believe all these things" and I think that some people reject feminism for political reasons and that has to do with the sort of legacy of at least some strands of feminism as being pretty exclusive, very centred among certain forms of privilege, and really not just centered but actually really dismissive and marginalizing. But we also felt like there were some instances of women who just didn't want the label, right? And that a lot of the denigration of "feminist" as a label had to do with the idea that feminists are people who complain that they're not being treated well enough.

Video 2

[There is an off-recording question about research that has had the most impact, that is most important to her]

LBC: There's this one young woman from this one project that I did, and it's this tiny little project, tiny qualitative project, so nobody wanted to publish it. But it is by far the most important study to me that I've ever done and it's what changed, for me, the idea that we shouldn't be looking at girls and telling girls what they should be doing – that's the thing that I was already thinking, but I did this one study and I was like "Oh no, I can't participate in it even a little bit anymore." And it was because we had gone in and we were doing the study with girls who were in foster care, and we were doing sexual life history calendar interviews with them. And we went in and were sort of thinking about, you know, "Oh, the problem is that girls are not assertive, and the problem with gender norms is that they teach girls to not be assertive, and then they have these bad sexual experiences because they're not assertive. And yes, material resources and other forms of discrimination, that's a part of the problem, but if only girls could be a little more assertive." That was the [thinking].

Anyway, so it was this tiny little qualitative study for a bunch of reasons. But that study... It was impossible for me to walk away from those conversations and be like "Yeah, the problem is that girls are not assertive." These girls were assertive, that was not their issue. And in fact, what they said – and this was not my interpretation - they literally said things like "Yeah, I said no. But he was 21 and there were three of them, they didn't care what I said." And it was like, right…. Assertiveness wasn't going to help any of these girls and that's what they said, and I was like, "Ok." So, I think letting yourself be changed by research and letting yourself really think of, you know, you serve other people. It's not just what you think, it's not just what you think is interesting, it's not just what will get published –you can't forget that these are real people and they don't owe you their data. I'm always like, it's not data. Even a survey, it's not just data; those are humans. I think that's important.

{4:10}

AR: I'm trying to be mindful of our time, and I realize that I haven't, Danielle, I have not been paying attention to the Zoom, so instead of putting anyone on the spot I will just ask in general is there anyone who would like to ask a final question?

DC: I have a question.

AR: The zoom speaks! Danielle, yes, go ahead.

DC: I'm kind of just spit balling here, but I wanted to go back to something that you had said in the Yes-But article, which is the one that I read. And something you said about, kind of the variance and women's labelling of unwanted sexual experiences, and it was really reminiscent of, I don't know if you're familiar with it - I think it was from 2011 - Peterson, and someone else... on the {5:06} match-and-motivation model.

LBC: Yes.

DC: I drew a lot of parallels between that and this. So, just to give everyone a quick synthesis of that article, essentially it was looking at non-labellers and labellers, to do with unwanted sexual experiences. And kind of a point that I thought was really interesting was that even between the labellers and non-labellers, not one person labelled their experience as a normal experience. It kind of speaks a lot to how we need to be really careful about not putting the idea of rape into kind of a cookie cutter standardized way, because we're really, really missing the different nuances and different perspectives that you maybe wouldn't see if you were only looking at the labellers, let's say, as opposed to the non-labellers.

LBC: Actually, and this gets back to the idea of strategic consent, right, so I think also when you're only paying attention to including unwanted sex, even that, and not identifying and not defining it, we still lost probably lots of young women who were like, "yeah I wanted it, but again, because I wanted a place to stay or because I wanted to not have a bad thing happen," right? So, people who consented for avoidance – out of avoidance reasons, or approach motivation, but not approaching a sexual goal, and I think that is important absolutely. The labelling, I mean, it's a problem for many people, but there are many people who don't want to and who won't comply with that kind of distillation of a very complicated thing, either because

they don't want to have it distilled down, they themselves don't want to do that, or because they don't want other people to do it to them. And I think that that's really important, as somebody who often does not comply. Or answers things knowing and thinking always about how it's going to be treated on the other end. I think survey research is a tricky thing. It's pretty fallible.

AR: Is there anything that we haven't covered or haven't asked about – and I'm sure there are a million things – but that you would particularly like to kind of have as part of the interview?

LBC: I don't think so… No, I will say: just if anybody read the *Agents, Virgins* – one thing that I think is interesting, one of the things I wasn't expecting was, we're analyzing the images now. The losers – so these women who are not seen as sexual and who are abstinent, so, involuntarily celibate, like the women equivalent of an incel, I guess. So, in the text it didn't come out so much, the images are… ridiculing in a way that we had not anticipated. Anyway, so we need to read about and think a lot about involuntary celibacy among women, and basically the stigmatization of women who are not seen sexual. They're basically, I mean I called them "losers" in some places or "undesirables," but it really is the worst thing it seems to be, if you're a woman, is to be not seen as desirable and what that means.

AR: That sounds great. Okay, all right, so we really appreciate your time and insights and sharing with us really, really, just – learned so much from your body of work. So we really appreciate having a chance to have you speak about aspects of it to us, and a little bit more about your personal trajectory too, in terms of some of your background and how that's influenced how you see the world.