

**Psychology's Feminist Voices Oral History Project**

**Interview with Laura Brown**

*Interviewed by Wade Pickren and Alexandra Rutherford  
San Antonio, TX  
February 4, 2006*

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Alexandra Rutherford, PhD  
Project Director, Psychology's Feminist Voices  
[alexr@yorku.ca](mailto:alexr@yorku.ca)

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LB: Laura Brown, Interview participant

AR: Alexandra Rutherford, Interviewer

WP: Wade Pickren, Interviewer

*[Recording starts mid-sentence]*

WP – [I'll have you start by describing your]...you know, your role as an ally in Division 45 [Division of Ethnic Minority Issues] and how that came to happen, and kind of, what you've seen as the important issues that you could bring something to bear on.

LB – Okay. Well I signed the petition to create Division 45, so I've been a member since it came into existence, and it seemed like the natural and right thing to do for someone who was a feminist, who at that time was beginning to pay closer attention to the intersection between multicultural and feminist issues. I think that the early- to mid-eighties was a time when feminists were beginning to get called to account by women of colour within the feminist movement. My response to that was to say, okay, what do I need to do? What actions do I need to take, because I don't do shame or guilt very well, I just take action. So I joined [Division] 45 and for a long time was simply another member, although, a number of my very close friends were in the early leadership. So, John Moritsugu was someone I have known since the mid seventies, and Maria Root is someone who was actually a student of mine at the University of Washington and I supervised her practicum back in the early 1980s.

So there are people who have been very central in the Division with whom I have personal relationships and who have been supportive of, or who I've been supportive of. I think my role as an active ally has been something that has been more recent. Being an ally is something that I have always had a commitment to. That I come from a politic that says that we work in coalition with one another and that each of us has multiple mixed identities that contain some privilege and some target group membership. My largest areas of privilege are my ethnicity, which is that I am Euroamerican, and my social class, which is I'm upper middle class. And so because of those, my areas of target group membership, my being female, I'm a lesbian, having an invisible disability, have been sort of balanced against, and I've had access to power in ways that someone of colour might not have. And one of the accesses to power I've had is being very involved in APA governance and knowing how to work the system and how to get people into the pipeline, because that is something that white feminists figured out how to do and taught one another how to do back in the '70s and '80s, under the leadership of people like

Nancy Felipe Russo, who's actually Hispanic, who was the head of the Women's Programs Office from the start. So I've taken that, how to basically invade and take over is what I think of it as...you know that thing from Star Trek, we are Borg, resistance is futile, we will assimilate you?

WP – Right, right.

LB - Well I kind of like to think of us as the anti-Borg except that resistance to multiculturalism is futile; that we will infuse psychology and this association with multicultural perspectives and with the presence of psychologists of colour. And so I've seen my job as an ally, first of all, to mentor other psychologists, particularly psychologists of colour who are newer to association activity, and to do that in a multiculturally sensitive manner that respects that they may be new in the association but they are elders themselves within their own disciplines. So I mentor in a way that is respectful of their elder status rather than the way I might mentor someone else who is typically more junior in APA. A lot of the people who come into ethnic minority psychology in APA have been elders in separate associations outside of APA. So they're very respected, they have huge CVs, but they don't know how APA works. And APA is this kind of byzantine creature; there are these unspoken rules of how things work and if you don't understand them you don't fully participate.

So exposing those rules, saying here's how things work, here's what you need to do, here's why you put your name in the hopper even though you're not going to get selected this year, here's why you don't take it personally when you don't get selected this year, because this is how this process works. So teaching people about that process and mentoring the division, more recently in my role as the member at large for diversity. So, how do we jump on the bandwagon of getting people into the governance of APA, into the board and committee structures, because when I first came on the executive committee, that was being done in a kind of haphazard manner. And so I have been working at sort of leaving a legacy of, this is how it's done, so that we can be as a division, more effective.

To me, as a lesbian, as a Jew, as a feminist, my minority identities, there is no such thing as their struggle and my struggle. This is, if there is something that undermines one, it undermines me, whether it's happening directly to me or not. And I think that what APA and psychology does, with whoever is the leading edge of the wedge, is what they will eventually do to or for me. And so issues around ethnicity are places where APA still needs to do a lot of work. It's a lot easier to include white feminists eventually, even though at first we were like "Ahhhh", you know scary people. But because we were Euroamerican we felt familiar. In some ways it was even easier to include, particularly queer people like me; I'm this very feminine woman, I pass, (28:35), I'm easy to digest, because we were white people. People of colour are in many ways very much the other, in a big way, in American culture. And so ethnic minority psychologists have been otherized in some ways that are painful and should be shameful to psychology and the association. And so being an ally is both an altruistic thing but it's also a very self-

motivated thing because what is done to one of us is done to all of us. That's a politic that really informs my being an ally. So that's a long answer to a short question.

WP – Well let me ask a question that I'm not sure I can put together in the most articulate manner, but some of the things you have said prompted in me, and that is, what would be some strategies, perhaps already used perhaps still to be used, to keep these issues that you have spoken so well about, to keep them from just becoming the... a matter of always preaching to the converted. So that yes, we have a division for the study of ethnic minority issues in psychology, yes we have a Public Interest Directorate, but then all the other psychologists, the European American psychologists, may think along the lines of "That's their issue, it's not mine, I'm a European American psychologist". How do we get around that? How do we get through it?

LB – Well, I think there are several different strategies and one of them that I implement as a faculty member in a graduate program, a PsyD program, is that we infuse issues of diversity into everything we teach. And I think all of us who teach psychology, whether it's at the high school level, community college, undergraduate, graduate, or postdoctoral level, that we have to infuse issues of diversity at the core, into everything we teach. I teach ethics, I teach psychological assessment, I teach the basics therapy skills class, as well as the diverse populations class, and diversity is central to the first three classes. It's not a peripheral, it's not an extra lecture at the end of the class; it is central. It's in every assignment my students do. It's not an add-on or an afterthought. And I think that all of us who teach psychology, whatever the topic is, need to ask ourselves how issues of ethnicity, culture, social class, gender, sexual orientation, immigration status, language, age, how do we infuse that broad tapestry of diversity into everything that we teach, so that students do not know a psychology that is not infused with diversity.

It's been interesting for my students because I teach the intro classes, so students who come into our program get a class that I have designed and I mostly teach. And then they go on and they sometimes take classes where they end up saying, 'Excuse me, where's the diversity component?!?' And I love that! I love that my students think that this is what clinical psychology is. That it is the MMPI, which includes thinking about how multiculturally not-competent that test is. That it is person-centered therapy and the critiques from multicultural perspectives of this way of thinking about therapy. That it is looking at the evidence-based practice argument, including the questions of how and whether evidence-based practices have ever looked at any component of diversity, short answer no...

WP – Except white diversity, right?

LB – Or even that, actually not even that. Evidence-based practice is really not good on this topic, but the point is, that's a place where we start. We start from the bottom up; the high school psychology curriculum for the [AP] (24:38) classes and community college. That at every level we make this what psychology is, because then we create psychologists for whom this is what psychology is. And we've got strong science thinkers in the multicultural realm. And I think that that kind of teaching about science,

that “How do you ask a research question,” is a topic that involves thinking about diversity and multicultural competence.

WP – Yeah.

LB - For example, how do you comment on the ethnic make-up of your participant sample; how do you not group everyone into Euroamericans and the other; how do you comment on the limited generalizability of your data? Those are things that are science questions, for example. Unless –and even -(23:42) you are an ethologist, looking only at animal behaviour. And even in animal behaviour there are questions of how gender and implicit assumptions about gender get imposed on to the creatures that we are observing, witness the recent feminist critiques of evolutionary psychology.

So you start at the very bottom with everything that you teach and then we need top-down leadership. And top-down we actually have. I think we see in the leadership of the APA and psychology, people for whom diversity is not an add-on or afterthought. I mean, Jerry Koocher is a really excellent example of this. This is at the core of what he does and this is part of why we’re friends of course, because this has always been at the core of what he does. But I think that kind of top-down leadership in every aspect of psychology, where, for example, we’re beginning to see in the practice world, which I have been a part of my whole career - I’m a practicing clinical psychologist - that people are getting that we’re practicing in a diverse environment. And if we do not train ourselves post-doctorally and train our students pre-doctorally to do this, that all the marketing campaigns in the world won’t do diddly-squat for psychology. So I think that dollars and cents speak and sometimes people do the right thing for the wrong reason, and I’m okay with people doing the right thing for the wrong reason, you know. After all, it was Richard Nixon who wrote the executive order for affirmative action and founded the Environmental Protection Agency. I don’t care if he did that for the wrong reason, they were good things. So if there are Euroamerican psychologists out there who are taking diversity training because their licensing board mandates it or because they’ve figured out that their market has become diverse, fine, do it for the wrong reason; eventually it’s going to affect you.

AR – Yeah, yeah.

LB - You know, in AA they say ‘Get the body there, the mind will follow’ and that’s how I think about psychologists; get the body there and eventually the heart and mind will follow. And so I think that those two strategies to me are the ones that as an ally I try to model in leadership and in my role as a faculty member. I came onto a faculty five years ago where diversity issues were not in every syllabus. I’m now on a faculty where diversity issues are on every syllabus, and one of the strongest things about our program is that our students walk the walk and talk the talk; it is central to their understanding of clinical psychology, in a program where that is not the specialty. So, I think that’s what we do.

WP – Yeah, thanks.

AR – You have been involved in [Division] 35 since the beginning.

LB – Since almost the beginning.

AR – Since almost the beginning. Mid-seventies?

LB – Well I joined the Association for Women in Psychology in my second month of graduate school, in the fall of '73.

AR – Okay.

LB – And was very involved in AWP initially and then got involved in 35 after I graduated in '77, in fact immediately upon graduation, when Carolyn Wood Sherif recruited me to run this thing that she had created called [The Open Symposium]. So practically the minute I got my PhD, I got recruited into involvement in 35. So if you count AWP, I've been active in the organizations of feminist psychology since the first AWP conference, which I attended in October of '73.

AR – How did you get there? How did you find out about it?

LB – Well this is very funny. So I was dating a woman, I was in love with a woman, who was a graduate student in clinical psychology back at my undergraduate institution. I had courted her by helping score her dissertation results; she was using the BEM Sex-Role Inventory. And I'm not going to use her name because she's not a lesbian and she's not out, she's never been out, and she is a psychologist who people now know. But she had joined AWP. She had heard about it because she was a feminist psychologist, and I had joined AWP before I went to graduate school because she had told me about it. And so I find out there is this conference happening in Fort Wayne, Indiana. So there I am in Carbondale, Illinois. I had just bought and learned to drive my first car at the age of 20, so I took my very first interstate road trip. I got in my beat up Plymouth Duster and I drove to Fort Wayne, Indiana. I slept on the floor of the home of some member of the Fort Wayne feminists who were putting us all up and went to the first AWP conference, raised my hand and volunteered to do something, and have been an activist in feminist psychology ever since.

AR – Wow. Do you want to speak a little bit to the history of the relationship between AWP and the Society for the Psychology of Women?

LB – Well it's interesting you know, because AWP was first. It was founded in response to a demonstration, which I didn't attend because I was still an undergraduate, but I heard about it because George Albee, who was the incoming president of APA the year of the demo, was my undergraduate abnormal psychology professor that fall. So I walk into his class and he's muttering about these feminists and I got very interested! It was great. So AWP was founded in response to this demo that was held at the '69 convention. And some people in AWP figured out that we also needed a sort of front organization in APA.

And so the more respectable women, respectable-looking women, the academic women, of whom there were very few, came together, formed, did the petition for Division 35 and formed it and appointed the first president, Libby Douvan, who was this very respected older woman psychologist, who didn't scare anybody in APA at the time.

AR – Right.

LB - I can tell you that the relationship between the two groups has fluctuated depending upon the politics of the groups, who was running them, and who was central to them. And there's been times when they've seemed in opposition and times when they've really worked together well, but they've always been two sides of the feminist, actually two of the three sides because Committee on Women in Psychology is the third, and I was a member of that as well, but they've been two sides of feminist activism in psychology. Because AWP is an independent organization, it can take more overtly political stands and it can critique APA in some ways that 35 hasn't always felt free to.

AR – Right.

LB - Although, I think as 35 has become more mature, it has felt safer to raise issues that were critical within APA. Division 35 is also a psychology organization; it's part of APA, whereas AWP is more interdisciplinary. AWP has been a place where I think more radical politics, more heuristic visions, more graduate students, more non-psychologists have been able to be involved. Division 35 has typically been more psychological, more interested in the science of psychology, the practice of psychology, per se. AWP has been much more welcoming to lesbians. I was the first, and for a long time, only openly lesbian president of 35. We've now had two lesbian and one out bisexual president of 35, myself and Nancy Baker and the current president, Cynthia de las Fuentes. But when I got elected, people were shocked that we hadn't had an openly lesbian president before me, and it was because 35 was not seen as particularly welcoming to lesbians; not hostile, just not particularly welcoming. And one of my goals coming in as president was to change that and I think I have. But AWP has always been seen as a place where lesbians were very welcome, and in leadership roles, have always been very visible.

AR – Well let me go to the social context a little bit. What was your involvement...a lot of the changes in APA, vis-à-vis women and feminism, were supported of course by larger social changes, the second wave of the women's movement. And you're a political animal, so what was your involvement in the women's movement?

LB – I kind of fell into it (15:47). First I got involved in the anti-war movement and then I noticed what we would now call sexism, in the anti-war movement. And what's interesting is that I grew up in a very egalitarian family. I grew up in a family where we didn't "help" my mother out; my father, my brothers, and I all participated fully in the running of the household. There were no things that girls could do and things that boys could do; there were things that smart people in our family did and we all did them. So I hadn't encountered lots of sexism and I went to a school system where there were powerful women teachers, so no one said to me, you can't go far. One of my girl scout

leaders was a psychiatrist. Half of the mothers in our class were physicians. So I didn't know from 'girls can't do this.' I had a very privileged, sheltered, pro-feminist environment, and so I didn't know why I was so uncomfortable with what I was seeing in the anti-war movement. And where it really finally came to a head for me was...I got involved in radical Zionism (14:36). It was a left response to anti-Zionism in the left movements. We had this big national conference in Madison, Wisconsin, to which all of the on-campus organizers came. Only six of the campus organizers, including myself, were women. And so we're in this room full of men and they're all voting support of resolutions for this liberation struggle and that liberation struggle, and one of the women said what about women's liberation, and the men, the boys, all laughed. And the six of us women got together and said, we have to form a women's caucus here, and that was my consciousness-raising moment.

AR – Wow.

LB – I thought, wait a minute, women's liberation is valid.

AR – Right.

LB – So I came back, got involved in a consciousness-raising group, which is where I met the woman who I was dating when I went off to graduate school. And when I encountered feminism, it was such clear truth to me. It was like, yes, this is true. If I look around me I can see, first of all that I had this very sheltered, privileged situation, but that there it was. And then I didn't get into graduate school anywhere the first year that I applied, which was a good thing. I was nineteen and you should not let a nineteen year old into a clinical psychology program; I finished college very fast. So I went to work as a psych tech in an inpatient unit and I had up-close and personal encounters with sexism in the delivery of psychotherapy. And that was the year that *Women and Madness* was published, and I read it, and that was when I said, okay, I'm going to be a feminist therapist. So there it was. I went to graduate school just one jnd [just noticeable difference] (12:57) away from being a lesbian separatist, you know I had to relate to men in graduate school, but with my hair longer and wilder than it is now, this is the longest my hair's been since I got my PhD, and walked onto the campus at Southern Illinois University saying, "Hi, I'm a feminist therapist. Didn't you read the Broverman article in the *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*?" I would say this to faculty members having no idea that most clinical psychologists didn't read *JCCP*, that they certainly would not have read that article, nor would they have had the "ah-ha" from reading it that I had. I organized a women's caucus in my department immediately, and in fact, we ran the second AWP conference. A bunch of graduate students, having no idea what we had gotten into, raised our hands and said, 'Okay, we'll put it on.' We had the second AWP conference in Carbondale, completely graduate student run, and have never looked back. I mean, feminism was so clearly right to me when I encountered it. It made sense, and not because I had been directly a target of very much gender discrimination or stereotyping, because of the truly uniquely egalitarian family in which I grew up. You know, as I've talked more and more to women, as I've grown up, my friends in graduate school didn't have families like mine. My partner grew up in a highly



sex-role stereotyped family. I had this extraordinary situation, by virtue of my maternal grandmother who raised two feminist daughters, although they didn't have those words.

AR – Right, right.

LB – And therefore who married men who were not horribly sexist and who were interested in being egalitarian. So feminism made sense because I could see around me what was happening, and it made sense of why I had always felt a little odd, and then it made sense of how to think about human beings.

AR – Well, you know, you've been one of, in my mind anyway, one of the pioneers, I think it's just true, one of the pioneers of feminist therapy. I mean, there were others, you were drawing on something that was...

LB – I very much stand on the shoulders of, you know, Adrienne Smith, Lenore Walker, Rachel Hare-Mustin, Lucia Gilbert, the women who did the groundwork and who got bloodied in these battles. It was easier for me because they were a generation before me.

AR – There was something there called feminist therapy that you could grab onto.

LB – Right. Hannah Lerman is a name I should have also mentioned. There were women who had their doctorates already who were calling themselves feminist therapists, who were the ones taking the blows (9:57) from their peers, who created a space in which I could develop.

AR – Can you talk a little bit...you've devoted your entire professional life to doing feminist therapy.

LB – Yes.

AR – Can you talk about your perspective on what kind of influence feminist therapy has had on clinical training, on clinical psychology...

LB – It's an interesting question because we have succeeded beyond our wildest dreams and yet failed. Succeeded in that things feminist therapists first introduced and that were radical are now normal good practice: Informed consent, don't have sex with your clients, pay attention to power, pay attention to gender; they have become mainstreamed. But many clinicians don't learn about feminist therapy theory in their training; it's not included in many textbooks. Although, to their credit, Prochaska and Norcross have a chapter on feminist therapy in their very well-regarded textbook and, you know, they're leaders. So the fact that they've done that, I think, is going to help. It's been sort of mainstreamed in that way, but not everybody has done that and so people don't always encounter it. And because feminism has been given a bad name in the popular culture, graduate students come into school thinking, well this has nothing to do with me, or thinking this only has to do with women, rather than, feminist therapy is a theory; It's an integrative model of therapy that's about therapy with human beings in which gender and

power and people's other social locations are interrogated as we make sense of people's distress. So we've succeeded in getting all of our core concepts into the good stuff. You know, students learn, do informed consent, think about gender, think about power, but they don't learn that this was started by feminist therapists. They don't get referred to the article that Hare-Mustin, Levinson, and Kravitz? I can't remember the three. I know Rachel Hare-Mustin is the first author, and I know Nechama Liss-Levinson is on it, the rights of clients/ responsibilities of therapists article, which is the starting point for talking about doing good informed consent in psychology. People don't go back to that document. So unless they are feminist psychologists, they don't say, this started here. The trail has been lost between these then-radical feminist ideas and their complete and utter mainstreaming in the training of professional clinical and counseling psychologists.

So I think that we've had this massive success and some failure, which is something I've addressed in...I've got an article coming out in PWQ that is my Carolyn Wood Sherif Award address that I gave at a convention last year, last year being, for those of you seeing the video at some other time, in 2005. Let me be specific: I gave it at the APA convention in 2005, how's that? Where I said, do we still need this term feminist therapy, and the answer that I gave, after consulting my students actually, is yes we need it and here's why: because we need to say that this is a particular theory of therapy. That this is an integrative, both theoretically and technically integrated model that does have a particular epistemology. And that particular epistemology differentiates it from general 'good therapy'.

AR – One of the things that I think of as a principle of feminist therapy and that people certainly include in their lists of the characteristics of feminist therapy is the idea that feminist therapy and feminist theory, upon which the therapy is based, should create social change.

LB – Right.

AR – How do you feel about that aspect of feminist therapy and how successful it's been?

LB – I think that everything a feminist therapist does is a small act of social change. From where we situate our practice, to how we set our fee, to how we relate to giving clients diagnoses, to how we inform our clients about what it is that therapy will be, because by taking the stance that you the client are also the expert, by disrupting the discourse of authoritative knower and non-authoritative help-seeker, we do an act of social change. I think social change happens at very micro levels that eventually grow to a macro level. So I think that every act that a feminist therapist does is potentially an act of social change; changing the world one human life and one hour at a time. I think we also have a commitment to doing social change work at the larger level, which means taking our data and our science and our scholarship into the public policy arena and realizing that public policies create the social context that affects the lives of our clients, which could lead to distress or to healing. Washington State passed its gay civil rights bill a week ago, and the state psychological association lobbied for that bill using

psychological research, using data that comes from our research. That's an act of social change that then has a positive impact on the lives and well-being of my clients. And so it's this forth and back process where you do it at the larger level and you do it at the micro level. And I think that...I see us as sort of the mental health arm of the feminist movement; that we are about disrupting oppressive discourses in peoples lives so that they are empowered to go out and disrupt oppressive discourses at a larger level. And then we also disrupt those discourses at larger level where and when we can.

AR – Okay. What are the challenges in the twenty-first century to accomplishing those goals?

LB – Fatigue. You know, I'm only 53 but I've been doing this a long time. I've been doing this more than thirty years and there are moments where I think "Couldn't I just take whatever the easy way out allegedly is?" Except I can't. I think the larger political climate, which is extremely regressive and repressive, frightens some people; managed care, but I still see managed care as a temporary phenomenon. I think that in America we cannot keep on allowing health care to be a privatized phenomenon. So I think that eventually that won't be the thing that scares people so much. But the challenges aren't different just because the year changed. You know, we have this artificial time thing; for me as a Jew, you know, it's like the 60<sup>th</sup> century now, it's not the 21<sup>st</sup> century or the 58<sup>th</sup> century. So it's all artificial, these social constructs of time. I think the challenges are to keep renewing our understanding of what feminism is, to keep expanding it so that as we understand oppression and empowerment in new ways, that we don't keep on having the same definition of feminism as we did thirty years ago. I'm not the same feminist I was in 1972, and that's a good thing. I don't think feminist psychologists are only women. I don't think feminist therapy is done for or with women only. And I did. I don't think multiculturalism is other than central to feminist practice. That was not something I knew or understood in the 1970s. I don't think that gender is binary and I certainly don't think it's essential.

So my understandings of all of these things are informed by my encounters with my colleagues...from my opportunities to be in alliance with other people; from the things that my clients teach me and my students teach me. And I think that the challenge is to keep open because we are so embattled as feminists and progressive people in general. It's easy to get rigid and say, 'Here's the ground where we stand and why do we have to embrace something new?', because that fatigue factor is there.

AR – Yeah.

LB – And yet if we stultify, then we stop being part of progressive social change. And so I think the challenge is to stay alive with it. To stay engaged with it. To not let fatigue and burnout overwhelm us, to make it look like fun, because it is fun! It really is fun to be a feminist psychologist, to be progressive. I think one of the things I let my students know is that this is hilarious fun. That there is something about going around and disrupting patriarchy that's a lot of fun! And we should do it more often. You know,

Emma Goldman said, 'If I can't dance I don't want to be in your revolution'; exactly. This is a revolution where we have a dance every year.

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