Psychology's Feminist Voices Oral History Project
Interview with Mary Brabeck

Interviewed by Leeat Granek
New York University, New York City
July 6th, 2006

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LG: Leeat Granek, Interviewer

MB: Mary Brabeck, Interview Participant

LG: I'll start by asking you about your feminist identity. How and when did you first develop a feminist identity?

MG: Well, I was part of the '60s, you know, the baby boomers and so I think I developed a consciousness about racial issues before I developed a consciousness about gender issues. I was quite active in the Vietnam anti-war campaigns. It was through those activities that I saw what happens when people start to organize, and humanize issues. Really that set the foundation for feminist activism, because equity and justice issues were also about women. And I was in graduate school and so we would meet to talk about these issues, my thoughts about feminism grew out of these kinds of experiences.

LG: What kind of involvement did you have with the feminist movement? What kinds of things were going on at the time? What kinds of feminist activities were you involved in?

MG: I was in a very active anti-nuclear movement. In fact, I was part of the group called "Women for a Non-Nuclear Future" and we called ourselves "WOFO-NON-NUFU". I had children at the time and was working and teaching. I had started working at Boston College (BC), it took me an hour and twenty minutes to get home and I had a new baby, a girl. She was nine months old when I started working at BC. I remember being on highway 128, which is the beltway around Boston, and it's just a mess in rush hour traffic, and I remember being there and thinking that the Russians can launch a missile from Cuba that can detonate in the time that it would take me to get home. I remember thinking, "I can't keep this job up," I can't get home if there's a nuclear attack. And so it was through conversations with other women, consciousness-raising groups that my awareness of peace, justice, and women's issues came together.

When I was in psychology I was doing some consulting with interpersonal relations and how to move an agenda in volunteer groups and I became interested in how other women make decisions and how to develop relationships. Then my dissertation was about the development of reflective judgment and critical thinking in young women, how it develops over time. So, I think my scholarly dissertation drew me into reading the

emerging literature on the psychology of women. I graduated with people who thought we could obtain equality for women and access for women, that we could get rid of the assumptions of gender differences, that if we could demonstrate that women were as capable and as eager to be capable as men are, that you could not keep them out of Harvard and Yale. So the psychological literature was accompanied by a political agenda; they informed one another.

LG: Were you with that school of thought?

MG: I think I was. I think I still am. I do recall reading Jill Morawski's critique of androgyny theory and she had lots of points too. There's a danger of women wanting to be more like men and the male norm when the male norm is potentially flawed - proving that women can be as nasty and boorish and aggressive and dangerous as men. I think that's fair. I think to celebrate the differences between us, saying there are norms for behavior, and there are ideals for human behavior that have been gendered in our society as "masculine" and "feminine". That is a separate thing from saying that men and women are different -- whether men and women are similar or different is an empirical question -- as a quantitative researcher, I have to ask empirical questions.

LG: Ok, I guess this is a related question, although it's veering off a little bit. What attracted you to psychology in the first place, and then how did you merge that with your feminism? You mentioned a little bit about the merging of the political and the academic?

MG: Right. Well, my interest in psychology actually developed in the time of the anti-war and civil rights movements. The federal government -- this is in the '60's -- they had a lot of money and they were giving out bags of money for people to go back to school and my radical thought was it was to get us off the street and into the system and of course get us to work! But I joined the National Teacher Corps and taught for three years in an inner city school to junior high school students. I came to see my own limitations in knowing about how children grow, develop, learn and how they can be better prepared, or what are the real challenges.

So, I went back to school to try and learn more about psychology of learning and development. I got interested in issues of intellectual development and ethical development. I have continued being interested in those issues, so my research has been around issues of intellectual and ethical development and how gender affects intellectual and ethical development. And I looked at gender differences in spatial relations, but I really brought together my interests in gender and ethnicity in the project in Guatemala. My husband took a position as volunteer physician there and I was influenced by a colleague named Brinton Lykes who had been working with Mayan women to try and help them develop culturally appropriate ways for working with the children who had been exposed to the violence of the civil war that was ongoing for over 30 years.

We lived for 6 months in Guatemala where there was a war that was over 30 years long. It was mostly directed at eradicating the Indigenous people who were suspected of being Communist. And I began teaching English and Psychology at an all boys school and

conducted a study on those boys' values and constructions of self. I wanted to identify what would factor into their communal self definition and what attributes helped them be resilient in the case of being exposed to horrific violence. All of these kids had relatives who had disappeared or had been murdered. Dead bodies were regularly found on the streets and the highways, which had been left out after people had been assassinated so that the community would "get the lesson." So I was doing that, my husband was doing medical work…Now, I don't want to say that it was unimportant….but we came to abandon some of our original ideas. We concluded that the condition that gives rise to the poverty and the lack of education and the lack of healthcare was the water. The water was an even greater evil because the water kept children ill all the time. We began to think about the issues that psychology, the issues of health, to be, you know, not just individually determined, but communal, so I began to research how you create conditions for better health.

LG: And you started doing research on education?

MG: And that brought me into the whole issue of how do we use the schools as a vehicle to promote learning and development that affects the kids and their families? My life experiences, a wonderful education, and being in the comfort and privileged position to be able to examine these issues and then begin to ask, "Well, how do I fit into this?" And you know, of course at that time, feminist theory was developing also and feminist theory was receiving a whole critique from the womanist psychologists - "privileged white females, who served for the advancement of privileged white females." That whole critique that I still, that all of us need to take note of, is that our own positions of power and privilege, our social contexts, are important, and the system supports and perpetuates them. Feminist studies have been really instrumental in the analysis of my own position as a scientist.

LG: How do you address that in your own work?

MG: Well, part of it in teaching, part in trying to teach the courses that bring up these issues. Part of it is in trying to work through a school system and with the community agencies that run that school system. You begin to say, how do we do better? How do we do this systematically? And differently? It's not enough to just worry about one kid at a time. You need to raise the level of the classes. Some of us are trying to conduct research that faces these issues and some are trying to find a different way to create models that develop these issues. And you know, I think this is, to take a social justice perspective, is an ethical feminist perspective. You cannot be a feminist without taking a social justice stand. It's an obligation, but it's not exclusive to feminism. There's a multicultural component.

In Guatemala, the Mayan kids that I worked with taught me an awful lot about gender and oppression and access to education. For example, I researched in my own work, gender and ethics, I tried to argue that while there are many feminist principles that we associate with women and masculine principles that we associate with men, they have also been stereotypically dichotomized . Justice, for example, is equated with thinking,

and care associated with feeling, and of course, women are equated with relationships and relationality as a natural component, and men in the distinctions, man is too culture what woman is too nature.

I found these principles of care and relationality in my kids that I worked with. With the boys, that this is part of their cultural identity. I will give you one example. One of the instruments in the testing protocol was the kinetic family drawings. And the family drawings test is to tell the person to "draw each person in the family doing something." And you are supposed to do this for each person in the family and I started out doing it very systematically, giving everyone the same direction. Do you have a father? Yes. Draw your father doing something. Do you have a mother? Yes, draw your mother doing something. The kids took forever to draw, they did as specifically as possible and they did it to try to make the person as well as they could, and they had a lot of kids in the family. And then some of those kids were alive and some of those kids were dead, but they drew the dead children in the family and then when I got to the question of how many siblings they had, they would point and say well that's my older bother and my older brother is studying because he is trying to help the family and help all of us be better. And the next would be that's my father, he's working in the field so that we can study and go off so that we can help the family, so that we can help the community get better. This is my sister, she's working with my mom to try to help the family and help Guatemala get better. And you know between that and the interviews I saw that the kids were saying the same thing for everyone in their families! And over the course of 50 interviews that I conducted, after about 20, I found myself saying, "tell me about your family." And I realized that that changed the interview, because I was not getting North American responses of individuality and separateness, I was getting collective responses. And then in a later part of the interview when I would say to the kids, "well what are your goals and aspirations?" They would say, "my goal is to help the family and to get better and to help Guatemala." There wasn't separation between themselves and others. And that connection, that relationality was there.

Then when I started teaching back in the States, when I came back, I would give the students transcripts from the interviews because I also conducted moral interviews, asking "how do you define yourself to yourself?" They would look at me, "how do I think about myself?" And I would give these transcripts of these interviews to the people in the class and say code these, so it was very interesting. It came to teach me about the intersections - you can't dichotomize male and female. I guess it makes me more of androgynous theorist in terms of the ideals that I would espouse, I mean as a feminist, I do not want to give up the claim to justice. Or abrogate my responsibilities or to rage for justice, to use Cheryl's Travis' phrase.

LG: You talked a little bit about ethics, you have started also to talk a little bit about what a feminist ethic is – you talked about incorporating social justice, how would you define what a feminist ethic is?

MG: Well, I think it begins with valuing women's experiences. And I think it also includes an intention to raise awareness that subjectivity can inform as well as

objectivity. I don't want to get rid of objective knowledge, or the pursuit of objective knowledge, but we are part of the Western tradition, we think the way we think because a long time ago that's the way the Greeks thought. And I think a feminist ethic attends to the possibility that there are other ways of thinking, and therefore, if you want to know what it is to be human, you need to be respectful of other subjectivities. I think a feminist ethic also doesn't stop at knowing, it requires *doing*. You just can't care about social justice - you have to do *something* about it! Knowing and thinking are good, but doing is required.

LG: Can you speak about the ways your own values, religion, spirituality may have influenced your work?

MG: The ethical stand is derived more from philosophy than religion. More from Beauchamp & Childress than theologians, although I have been influenced by the works of theologians. I was raised Catholic and I think I'm probably a cultural catholic. I'm very influenced by Vatican church writings, and in the era of the Vietnam war, I helped a couple of people write their conscientious objector status applications. Doing that, I was into liberation theology and pacifism and nonviolence and how it gets played out differently -- how Gandhi thought about it, how Martin Luther King thought about it, as well as theologians. So I think I was informed by that kind of social justice perspective.

LG: Tell me a little bit about your involvement in feminist organizations in psychology such as the work you did on the *Task Forces for International Women and Social Change*, and *Feminist Ethics and Psychological Practice*.

MG: Well, first there is Division 35, which was very early on in my life at APA. It was my home, and you know, it still is! When I go to APA, it's Division 35 that are my friends and colleagues. I did task forces with them, I've been chair of a couple of task forces for the division, things like that. Which academically and socially was very, very important. Wonderful people at Division 35!

LG: What was the *Feminist Ethics and Psychological Practice* chair position?

MG: It was the task force that led to the book. It began with the task force and it became the book on feminist ethics and psychological practice which was a great fun to write.

LG: How did this all get started? The Task Force? How did it lead to the book?

MG: Well, I wanted to push…I had been to meetings about feminist ethics among philosophers and I wanted to see if we could take these ideas from philosophy and push them in the psychological realm. What does it mean for ethical practice in psychology to wrestle with these ideas? Are they useful for us? Do they indicate something? Should we be thinking about them? Thinking about what feminist theory and practice has to say about it. I had wonderful people to work with, Karen Kitchener sat on the APA ethics board and she spent a lot of time studying virtue ethics and Kat Quina had been trying to think about feminist ethics in a multicultural perspective. Laura Brown in the area of

forensics -- she's such a fabulous theorist and such a fabulous thinker -- and she's always putting feminist ideas to the test, in action.

LG: And what was the Task Force?

MG: It was just to investigate this and see whether or not there was enough content there for a book and there was.

LG: Ok, I read in your CV that you have been a dean of different departments. You worked as an associate dean and then as a dean at Boston College and are now the dean at New York University in the School of Education. How were these experiences for you?

MG: Challenging. Exciting. Difficult. Academic leadership is very challenging.

LG: How so?

MG: Because there are scarce resources. Because anything that is worth doing probably takes a group of people to do it. It's not going to be an individual effort. Getting people in this very autonomous environment -- which is the academy -- to work together is very very challenging! When I stop and write my book on academic leadership, the research will be about the common good. Because really, individualism is so heavily rewarded in the academy and it needs to be. If you are going to have great ideas developed, you need to give intellectual freedom and the autonomy to do that, and individualism is needed. But if you are going to educate the next generation, that's a community project and it requires giving up something from your own individually rewarded effort. I think teaching is a moral obligation of higher education, you have to do it and that means giving up autonomy for the common good.

LG: How does one do that?

MG: Carefully!!! (laughs).

LG: What does that mean?

MG: Well, I think that trying to maintain those principles in ways of being, you have to keep focusing on how this is making things better. Trying to focus on academic leadership, some of the rewards, which can be individual by individual is how you make the change.

LG: Have you had difficulties as a woman?

MG: Sure, the glass ceiling is alive and well. You know, I hesitate to talk about this topic because I have been really so fortunate in my life. I had male and female mentors, and you know, I think if you get so caught up in the obstacles from doing something that needs to be done, then you don't really try. I don't want to contribute to that. At the same time it's still a racist and sexist society. You're a fool to not recognize that and to

understand that sometimes obstacles will block your way. At this institution, I work with a group, the majority of people here are women. Kate Stimpson is one of them. This is a great foremother, she's been a wonderful colleague and the women here at NYU are feminists. They are very accomplished, very smart, and have been very collaborative. I don't know how rare it is, but it seems very rare. Women are taking advantage of it and now everyone is worrying about men because women are doing so well. It's not that boys are doing so much worse -- everyone is doing well -- but the women are doing so much better than they have been. Now we are beginning to see colleges and universities trying to keep a gender balance, and in doing so have a much more talented pool of women, and men want to kept the numbers down. We are seeing it now in graduate school, in the numbers that women go to medical school, the women are outnumbering men. It's not going to be long before some of those obstacles will be pushed aside. We see women becoming presidents of major universities and in numbers that are quite exciting. Now, that said, you look at fortune 500 companies, you look at the number of male presidents that we have, the number of women in Congress… women aren't there yet.

LG: I'm going to ask you about your books. You have had a prolific career in publishing books and articles. What publication are you most proud of? Why?

MG: I think the *Practicing Feminist Ethics*, I think that was the most challenging because it was multidisciplinary and because I was trying to take abstract ideas and apply them critically and because we were trying to make it relevant, so it was the most rewarding.

LG: Rewarding why?

MG: Because it was new. I think it still is.

LG: You have sat on many committees and are a member of many organizations. You have also served as a consultant in various capacities. Can you tell me about what some of those experiences were like for you?

MG: They were so great! I think sitting on the Board of Education Affairs in APA was one of the most challenging and educational experiences for me. First of all, the staff at the Board of Education Affairs (BEA) are really committed to improving education, K-12, undergraduate education in psychology, graduate education in psychology, and professional psychology. Many of the people I've met through the Board of Education at APA have given their lives to improving education. Committed and wonderfully talented people and it continues to be that way.

LG: Would you say which committee has had the most impact on you and why?

MG: I think this committee.

LG: Do you have a teaching philosophy?

MG: Yah. Yah!

LG: Ok what is it?! (laughs).

MG: Let it happen. Love your students! If you love your students you are going to be sensitive to their individual differences. If you love what you teach, you are always going to know what is going on, you are always going to know the latest research findings, and you are going to be an interesting teacher because you care about the subject matter. If you stop loving it, stop teaching it! It becomes really boring.

LG: I think that's true. What is the best part of being a supervisor or a mentor?

MG: I think mentoring is important. I've always tried, when I've had leadership positions, I've tired to give a bit of mentoring practice for new faculty. That said, you know, I think back to Carl Rogers statement, he knew the best psychodynamic theory, the best of self theory, the best of behavioral theory, the best of gestalt theory, and he attributed his success to the fact that he was never mentored. So, there is something also about getting out from under a mentor. A good mentor takes pleasure in the individual's accomplishments. The best is when you see your student take off and go beyond what you could possibly do.

LG: What would you like to see happening in the field of psychology in terms of the research that you do?

MG: I would like to see psychology wrestle with society… what is the responsibility of psychology to society?

LG: How does that differ from social psychology?

MG: Social psychology and community psychology come close to this. And I think that there are attempts at this. But when I think of psychology as an organization, it's pretty centered on the individual.

LG: Would you propose an ontology for Psychology in that sense? An ethic?

MG: We came close to that in the APA ethical code. We talked about professional responsibility and responsibility to the communities. It's there, you know, but it could be drawn out more. I think it's a process to teach Psychology how to do that.

LG: Anything else?

MG: More feminist leaders of both male and female kinds. More embracing of a feminist ethic. Get mainstream psychology to get into it. I was delighted - it was one of the reasons that I put out that book *Practicing Feminist Ethics* - it was selected by APA as one of their continuing books, so you can get a continuing education credits by reading that book and taking a test on it. That gave feminist ethics an 'in' into mainstream

psychology. That gives me hope for the future. All of the Division 35 books, the whole series gives me hope.

LG: I sort of asked you this already, but more specifically, I asked you about your administrative role, but this is more of a general question -- what kinds of barriers/obstacles/discrimination have you experienced because of your feminism/being a woman in terms of your professional life overall?

MG: I think women still struggle to be heard. On the basic level, in conversations and in group conversations. They still need to be working at establishing their credibility and are still not getting their work acknowledged, it still happens. Marianne LaFrance's research on non-verbal communication, who gets attributed with the good ideas -- it's still an issue for both women and men. There's that. I think I believe that people have difficulty, people have difficulty seeing outside of their own view and I don't think it's just a terrible misogynist perspective, but men think about other men first. And getting women into positions of power and gradually accessing -- it's not going to be all women -- but getting women into academic leadership positions, getting into leadership positions in medicine, law, etc.

LG: How have you balanced the demands of your personal life with your professional life? You mentioned you have a daughter?

MG: I have two kids, two in-laws, and one grandbaby. I think for someone like myself, a heterosexual woman, if you have a good partner, you can do this. And I had a good partner who is my best friend. So you share the parenting and you share the majority of the parenting and housework. I think you have to have the right partner that respects your autonomy, individualism, and career pursuits. You have to have someone else who cares a lot about the balance of your relationship with your children, providing the nurturing, and it is pretty hard. It's getting better. I have to believe this. Naturally, some of the work that's been done on dual career families is demonstrating, you know, my husband does a better job than my father did. In terms of childcare, I remember once Gloria Steinem was talking about why women were not making progress, and she said, probably women have become the men their mothers wanted them to marry but men haven't become the fathers that their mothers wanted them to marry. And I think that's, you know, she was saying a complicated thing that was widely criticized at the time and needs to be thought through, but I think that women are becoming better at it.

End of Side A

Beginning of Side B

LG: What advice could you give to feminist women working in psychology now? What remains to be accomplished/changed in the field?

MG: Choose your friends wisely.

LG: Could you be more specific?

MG: Choose to be around people who have a feminist consciousnesses and who value all of your attributes, and being relational, and needing relationships, being autonomous and meeting these kinds of people. Being feminist! And don't compromise. Find someone else if it doesn't suit you.

LG: What inroads have feminists made in Psychology, what roadblocks remain?

MG: What inroads? Well, I think we know more about human potential because of feminist psychology and what remains… there is a lot that remains, a lot. A lot of thinking about what we want as a society and how to set up conditions to either achieving that or not. I don't think we have finished that job yet.

LG: Is there anything else that I haven't mentioned that you feel is important for me to know about yourself? Your career? About Psychology?

MG: I really loved it! I loved it! I think studying feminist psychology is endlessly varied and interesting.

LG: How do you think the discipline has changed?

MG: I think it's changed in so many ways and it's going to change so much in the future. I think the insistence of working at the multiplicity of the attributes of a person is something that feminist and multicultural psychologists have contributed. The intersection of gender, race, and class is now firmly in mainstream psychology. You cannot publish a study without talking about the attributes of race, and that's a significant contribution. I think pushing to look at these things and not simple gender differences, because it's complicated. It isn't just gender that determines behavior, it's the *interaction* that determines attributes. The other tendency is to see it as only biological determinism, and that's a mistake. Psychology waxes and wanes on that and we are always paying more attention to the biological than psychological reality, or the temporal lobes. Experience shapes who we are. I think we are multiply determined, and I think you have to look at all of it, and I think we are just beginning to look at this.

LG: Is there anything else?

MG: No, I hope this is useful for you.

LG: Thank you.

MG: Thank you.