

Psychology's Feminist Voices Oral History Project

Interview with Maryanne L. Fisher

Interviewed by Sarah Radtke

Toronto, ON August 31 2011

When citing this interview, please use the following citation:

Fisher, M. (2011, August 31). Interview by S. Radtke [Audio Recording]. Psychology's Voices Oral History and Online Archive Project.

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MF: Maryanne Fisher, Interview participant

SR: Sarah Radtke, Interviewer

SR-Are you familiar with the questions?

MF- I looked them over.

SR-Okay so you are going to wing it?

MF-Yeah, it's gonna be real.

SR-So, first please state your name and where you were born.

MF- I am Maryanne Fisher. I am an associate professor in the department of psychology at Saint Mary's University in Halifax, Canada, and I am also a member of the women and gender studies program there, which is an interdisciplinary program and also an inter-university program in the Maritimes. I was born in Ontario, Canada and my birthday [laughs] I can give you the month and year, how about that?

SR- Okay.

MF- It was at the end of 1975.

SR- So what attracted you to psychology in general, particularly evolutionary psychology, and how did you get into evolutionary psychology?

MF- Okay, well, funnily enough I was actually an English major as an undergraduate and I really wanted to be an English High School teacher because I thought I'd have the summers off. I used to write poetry and prose and thought this would be a lot of fun. I got into the bachelor of education at York [University] and quickly realized I hated teaching, hated it. And I also quickly realized that no matter how hard I tried at my English courses at University I was getting B's, solid B's, and that was taking everything I had. I did not have a natural gift. In the interim, I had taken psychology as an elective, intro psychology, and I loved it. I did really well, and I kept taking [psychology] for fun and was really really doing well, and then I ended up in Irwin Silverman's third year evolutionary psychology course. Now Irwin has a unique lecture style, he doesn't use notes, he doesn't use overheads, not PowerPoint

SR- Yes...

{2:45}

MF - He stands up there and paces back and forth and talks, and I have never been so bored and so stimulated at the same time in my life.

SR - I also had him.

MF - There was one moment where Irwin [*Silverman*] had made a mistake, which was rare actually. He was talking about twins and he said dizygotic instead of monozygotic, and being the nerd I was in the very first row I put up my hand and said Professor, I think you meant...and I corrected him. He looked at me, and in typical Irwin style said "what you want to get up and teach the class?" And I said to him, yes, one day. After class I talked to him, and became his thesis student so that was the beginning of my evolutionary career.

SR - How interesting is that? That is a very cool story into your entrance into evolutionary psychology.

MF - Yeah, and I was also interested in genes, even in my first year I took courses on genetics

SR - Okay

MF - I remember my first class in [*Psychology*] I asked the intro [*Psychology*] Prof. if there is such a thing as genetic psychology. He said "no, no, no" and that stayed with me, so that was the other thing that happened.

SR - So that kind of propelled you forward a bit when some said "no no no"

MF - Exactly, well, you know well enough.

SR - Yes.

MF - Don't tell me no [laughs].

SR - No, don't tell you "no" especially with something like that.

MF - Exactly.

SR - So now let's talk about your feminist identity. Do you have one? I mean you do have a feminist identity, I'm thinking...

MF - I do

SR- You do, so what does it mean to you to be a feminist? How do you define that? If you can actually define that.

MF - Wow, you know it's funny because I think that should be easy [*to define feminist identity*] but I find it extremely difficult. I, I guess I was a very naïve person when I was in University and I thought of course, there will be lots of attention to issues that involve women or are really important to women. The more deeply I got into psychology, the more I realized that was not the case, especially within evolutionary psychology. And I guess you could say I became a feminist in response to the fact that the rest of the world wasn't. No, I just kept reading things that made them [*women*] sound passive or, they just made women out to be these weak characters who accepted whatever guy came along.

{5:14}

SR - Right.

MF - And, I found it offensive, I truly did. So, I think my response was well, you know, let's look at some of these issues that matter to women and through that I became a feminist, I think the cart came before the horse in that way, yeah.

SR – All right, and now have you merged your feminism with evolutionary psychology?

MF - You bet. I totally have. I did it at first very reluctantly because I did not want to ...I wanted to keep myself as a pure quote-unquote “scientist” without bias.

SR – Yeah.

MF- And at some point I realized that science is biased. You know, I was teaching gender courses, and here I was telling my students one thing and I was practicing another. I was telling my students that the very kind of questions you ask are biased versus “I was doing my science purely and thinking I was good.” And at some point I just realized I had to merge right?

SR - Right.

MF - So, I can tell you an interesting little side story.

SR - Sure.

MF - I was sitting at the NEEPS table, The North-Eastern Evolutionary Psychology Society breakfast table...

SR - Is this the FEPS story?

MF - This is going to be the beginning of FEPS.

SR - That's my next question!

MF - [laughs]

SR- Yes.

MF - I had not really come out as a feminist at this point although the editors of various journals in evolutionary psychology seemed to be pushing me to identify myself as someone that studies women's issues. They [*Editors of various evolutionary psychology journals*] kept sending me articles that were primarily about lesbianism or feminist issues or feminist theory.

SR - Right.

MF - Anyways, so I am in the background doing all this stuff and thinking that no one is really noticing. And here I am, at this conference at the breakfast table, it's day two of the conference, and, and I am angry. And I don't get angry, and I am angry. The day before I had heard pretty much nothing but how women were passive in mating or, some of the talks...one of the talks was actually very misogynistic, and I just, I got frustrated. I was very fed up, and I'll never forget this. I was eating fruit loops, and I don't eat fruit loops, it was the first time in my life. I was sitting there with Rose Sokol-Chang and Sarah Strout. {7:30}

MF - And Rose's family actually. I threw down my spoon.

SR - You threw it down?

MF - I threw it down. I said "that's it." I remember the fruit loops kind of bobbing in the milk, and, and I said, I am fed up and so I told them [*The people at the breakfast table*] what the issue was, and this is without a lot of coffee so you could tell I was angry [Laughs].

SR - Oh, okay.

MF - And within minutes I had named the society the Feminist Evolutionary Psychology Society (FEPS) and they [*The people at the breakfast table*] had agreed. I went up and down the breakfast table and asked if we formed this society would you join? And everyone at the table agreed. We went from table to table.

SR - Right.

MF - And people agreed [*To join FEPS*] by lunch we had 29 signed-on members, so I think that was really cool. But to be fair Sarah, I have to say I think there was a zeitgeist going because since then *Sex Roles*, there was a special to deal with feminism and ev psyc [*Evolutionary Psychology*]. This is happening internationally, the timing is there.

SR - I think even David Buss did something?

MF - Yeah, he years ago put out a book, and it really didn't get at the heart of the matter in my opinion, but he is on board, we talked to him [*David Buss*] about FEPS.

SR - Yeah.

MF - Yeah, but I think, I think the time is right.

SR - So right now?

MF - Yeah and, sorry I keep talking so much without letting you ask questions but...

SR - No this is what is expected, so it's good, yeah. We want you to talk not me.

MF - [Laughs].

MF - At the FEPS meeting two years ago, afterwards, Rose and I got together and we talked about putting out a book, an edited book, and we were in contact with Justin Garcia who at the time was a PhD student at Binghamton in bio/anthro [*Biological Anthropology*] and he said have you thought about these strategies on how to get more people to submit chapters. We were thinking of an edited volume. And we ended up bringing him on board and we were able to get some fantastic contributors and that book right now is picked up by Oxford University Press. It should be coming out next year. It's basically FEPS, but beyond FEPS, basically the women's active role in evolutionary history. The reviews, it went through a lot of review before we got the book accepted but in the end it will be fantastic, the reviewers are very enthusiastic.

SR - Wonderful.

{10:10}

MF - Yeah, so that's the background.

SR - So my next question is, any negative response from people in Evolutionary Psychology regarding this direction into feminist discourse. Have you had any negative reactions to FEPS?

MF - I have...

SR - And in what fields? In feminist psychology, anthropology...

MF - You know I am blessed because most of my colleagues in feminist studies are tolerant. They are willing to see what happens so they are kind of riding it out. We don't agree. There is absolutely no agreement between the evolutionary basis and the social constructivists but I think by basically saying, can we start having a conversation towards a middle ground. Or maybe we are explaining the same thing but at two different levels.

SR - Yeah.

MF - I think we are making some progress there but the nastiness to be honest has been very gentle and the negativity has been very gentle and some has been from the evolutionary community who want bias-free science, who believe women have not been painted in a passive manner, those sorts of things. It's not so much, like I am not getting hate mail, I do get hate mail about other things but not about this [Laughs]. It's more the time will tell attitude, the "Let's see how this pans out." What I think is happening is some of us in the FEPS community are really trying to say that this will be different whereas past mergers have not been successful. This time let's go in with open ears and let's see what we can get from each other here.

SR - Yeah.

MF - I think the last FEPS meeting was really a testament to that because we had people from all different disciplines, an arrangement of disciplines anyway. I think we had more men in the room than women in the end.

SR - I remember, I think there were more men, which was pretty interesting in itself.

MF - Yeah, everyone was contributing, I felt the students were contributing as well as the faculty members, the women and the men, I did not sense any sort of unease.

SR - No.

MF - We have a lot of projects going on where we have mixed sex and mixed status teams of students and professors working together, different universities, it's fantastic. So the negativity as I said has been more wanting to wait and see the result.

SR - Okay.

MF - But so far so good. I have been slammed online, people have said some nasty things about me online talking about my ideologies and things like that but I think for every one really nasty slam online I have probably had one positive so I'll take it [Laughs].

SR - Exactly, I guess that's what you should do.

MF -Yeah.

SR- Thank you. So were you involved in any kinds of feminist movements, any feminist activities, however you define that. Well FEPS would fall under that.

MF- FEPS would be huge for that. I guess you could say I had a very small movement too when I was doing my PhD. I really, I wanted to look at how women were competing for men. That was my thing, the literature hadn't looked at it.

SR- Yeah.

MF - And I remember going to my supervisor and saying this is the topic I wanted to do. I had done some reading and I remember he said "Absolutely not." His rationale was that it would be too hard to do, it was not a reasonable dissertation topic. I ended up switching supervisors, partly because of that, and I guess, you know I would say it was not so much as a feminist movement but it spoke a lot when the first study I did hit the media. It hit CNN, it hit the BBC, yeah it went global.

SR - Really?

MF - Yeah and I remember there was a reporter from the *Toronto Star* in particular who called me up and she wanted to report the results much differently. So I felt she was misleading in what she was saying and the questions she was asking and I remember at one point in the conversation I said to her, "Listen, that is not what I found at all and that's inaccurate." And what she wanted to do, I felt, is that she wanted to paint women in a very negative way for performing a very natural behaviour which was basically women just as they can be loving and compassionate and have great friends, and be supportive, that when they find a man, or if they are lesbian, a woman they like they are gonna have to interact in way that makes them get that person right, or at least get their attention.

SR – Yes.

MF - And she was basically putting out women as always being in catfights, this was her word for it, and I was just blown away. I think in a small way by doing that kind of work and getting that kind of media exposure and trying to put out good media reports I was doing a small bit in a feminist I guess you could say movement of a very small nature

SR - Sure, I totally think that's a feminist move right there, especially when you see the reaction to it as well.

MF - Yes, absolutely.

SR - And now we have shows like the bachelor and the bachelorette [Laughs].

MF - Oh I know, but I don't consult for them thankfully [Laughs].

SR - I'd love to but [Laughs].

MF - That would be interesting, definitely interesting.

SR - I don't know, throw a whole bunch of good looking people in the room. {15:56}

SR - And they start competing.

MF - And see what happens [Laughs].

SR - Okay, let me move on to the next question. I think we covered a lot so far, so this is good. So, where do you see feminist psychology going in the future and its intersection with evolutionary psychology, do you think it's really going to take off now as you said earlier?

MF - I do, mostly because I think the time is right and I think there has been a lot of interest in it. I'm getting some well known older scholars, they are emailing me saying we heard about FEPS or what's going on or this is a fantastic idea. The amount of very positive emails I have gotten from people that I respect as evolutionary psychologists, anthropologists, is incredible. I feel very lucky.

SR - From a range of fields then?

MF - Yeah and the other thing is that, we are looking... psychology is at a point where we are getting, we are very divided. We have a little section for almost everything and as much as I hate that fragmentation, if that fragmentation allows us to now have something like FEPS, fantastic, lets use it to our advantage. I'm hoping that one day there will be no FEPS, I really am because I am hoping what will happen is that evolutionary psychology of psychology in general won't need it anymore. It will automatically be assumed that women are active or that human nature has an evolutionary component. Its just like biology, we don't have evolutionary biology properly because all biology is evolutionary.

SR - Exactly.

MF - So I am hoping the same thing will happen, but in the meantime I see this going very much ahead and very successfully.

SR - So you are very positive about what's going to happen.

MF - Oh yeah. I mean I'm investing a lot of time I don't have [Laughs] I'll make sure it goes ahead. I have got a very big network behind me so hopefully that works out.

SR - It sounds like its going to.

MF - If nothing else we will have books. I am hoping one day to move ahead and put out more scholarly work so we will see.

SR - I'm going to shift gears a little here. So who were your mentors? Were any of them feminists? I mean when you were a grad student or even now, any mentors you can think of?

MF - Absolutely.

SR- Female or male in Evolutionary Psychology or Feminist Psychology?

MF - Yeah, I have actually been very lucky. There are 3 people in my undergraduate [Years] that really influenced me and that was Irwin Silverman who definitely brought me into the evolutionary fold. Vinod Goel

{18:58}

Who is a neuropsychologist/cognitive psychologist also at York *[University]* and the reason he was a mentor was because he pushed me, he pushed me constantly and he actually was my informal go-to advisor so when something bothered me or I needed advice I would go to him. And he is one very good reason I finished my PhD later on, yeah but during my undergraduate career he was there. Ray Fancher who was a history/theory guy and him just because I had to do a term paper for one of his courses and he pushed me to look at Darwin and Darwinian versus Lamarckian thought in history of psychology and that was very useful to me so those 3 stand out.

Then later on I got to know Margo Wilson at McMaster *[University]* and she was on my Master's committee along with Daphne Maurer who is a developmental psychologist at McMaster *[University]* and I worked with Denys DeCatanzaro but Margo, as much as the other members of my committee were fantastic, Margo really stood out. She was always above and beyond in terms of encouraging and providing feedback and she actually was my external for my PhD later on. I really enjoyed working with her and I looked up to her. She was a very powerful influence in the history of evolutionary psychology. She also believed in looking at feminist angles. She wrote the forward of preface of Griet Van Dermussens 2004 book *Feminism and Darwinian Thinking*. She was just inspiring, she was very inspiring and the way she treated people inspired me, very humane.

SR - Yeah, I have only heard wonderful things. I was at her tribute at...

MF - HBES *[Human Behavior and Evolutionary Society]*

SR - Yeah, HBES, and I have never seen such an outpouring of emotion when everyone was talking about her.

MF - Yeah, she was something else. Then my PhD supervisor at the time Suzanne McDonald who also inspired me because she just, again incredibly encouraging, and really taught me to think for myself and that really was a positive influence. I know I'm not supposed to have a huge list, but there are others.

SR - No that's okay, name as many as you like.

MF - Back in my undergraduate days I started going to conferences and Chuck Crawford and Linda Mealey made a point of making me feel welcome, especially Linda having many conversations with her, you know about silly things, even just about shoes, but she made me feel at ease. In that way she was a good mentor because when students come up to me now and start talking to me I'm able to remember that first interaction I had with her, and how much that meant to me so it's nice to pass that forward a bit.

SR - So, that's kind of going into my next question, how are you as a mentor? I guess these people have influenced you as a mentor.

MF - They have. I mean when I think about who I would like to be, I would love to be someone like Sarah Hrdy okay. I think Sarah is brilliant. She is so incredible in terms of the way she presents her ideas in a very fair manner, even when they contradict someone else who is right there. I think she is well informed, I think she is supportive of people around her, I think she is amazing. If I could be like her as a mentor, that would be great. But you know I have to tell you

{22:11}

something funny, when I first realized I was supervising students, it was almost a year into supervising some undergraduate students, I was standing outside my building and I went “Oh my god, I’m their equivalent of Irwin” [Silverman]

SR - [Laughs].

MF - It didn’t really hit me that I was going to have a major influence on these people. For the rest of their academic careers.

SR - I know and I know, I don’t want to say burden but responsibility.

MF - It was terrifying! Honestly, I remember the exact moment, I was outside my office and it hit me like a wall, I had to go for a drink.

SR - Well I would have to.

MF - I was terrified, but when it comes to mentoring I like to think I am successful at it. I have been able to choose good student and work with them and students who have lots of potential. Not all of them will want to go to graduate school, not all will get into graduate school, but my role I really view as getting them where they want to be. If that is to go onto graduate school I do my very best to help them get there.

SR – Okay.

MF - If it’s to go teach English in Korea then it’s again, try and make them as prepared for that. The only reason I get up in the morning during the school year is because of my students. They inspire me, and I try and feedback inspiration to them. I try to view it as a partnership.

SR - Right and I think that’s very important to view it as a partnership. I have heard some stories and it (*mentoring between supervisor and student*) is not a partnership.

MF - Yes, yeah. I push them, I am not always their friend, I am not trying to be their friend, I am trying to work with them to get them where they want to go.

SR - Only a few more questions.

MF - That’s fine.

SR - Here is an interesting question. Again, kind of deviating from what we were talking about. How do you navigate personal and professional demands in your own life? Any tips on how to do this?

MF - [Laughs] I didn’t say I did navigate that.

SR - Maybe you don’t [Laughs].

MF - That’s an interesting question alright.

SR - A difficult question I imagine to answer.

MF - It is.

{24:45}

MF - I mean part of it comes down to...well let me answer in a different way maybe than you intend.

SR - That's okay.

MF - I believe that our brain...hmm, I don't know how to word this that doesn't make me sound like a hippy-dippy flake.

SR - It's okay [Laughs].

MF - I think our brains need time to incubate ideas right, and I think our brains need time to just let things run around for awhile and then they focus back in on the topic. So if I am writing and article, or I am trying to figure out a potential way of testing and idea, the best thing I can do is go for a long walk, or I go and do something artistic. I really think you need to let your brain have its own time to do stuff. But the other thing is I think that if something happens and one day I am not an academic, I want to have a life. I spend a lot of my conscious effort trying to balance the work and play. When I leave the office for the day, or when I turn my laptop off, or whatever it is, I try to remember to do something fun. I try to remember to do something for me, to cook a good meal or even watch T.V. with a friend. It's important to try and do that every single day. I'm not saying I am good at it. Realistically, I probably work more than I should most days if not every day. But you gotta have some fun in there to right?

SR - Of course you do, yeah.

MF - I guess that's my only answer. Other people are probably far better at putting that into words but anyway...

SR - I think it sounded good. I wouldn't worry.

MF - [Laughs].

SR - So, which of your accomplishments are you most proud of? If you can even answer that, and why? Is there something that really stands out for you in your academic career?

MF - Hmm.

SR - Anything pop into your mind? The first thing?

MF - Wow. You know one thing that does come to my mind is FEPS because I think that's important and even if it flops 10 years down the road I think it was still a really important endeavor, and I am learning a lot from it. I guess, its not a solid thing, but one of my biggest accomplishments I guess is been when I go to some of the evolutionary conferences now, people will come up to me and say "hey, I really like your paper on blah blah blah...and I have told my PhD students if they ever want to look at women and competition they should come talk to you" I remember someone actually paid me that compliment at Montpellier [*where the last Human Behavior and Evolutionary Society Conference was held*]and I was ecstatic, I mean what more could you ever want right?

SR - Yeah exactly. You definitely had an impact on the field. {27:48}

MF - It made me feel like I did. It may have just been a hollow compliment but I think there was something to it.

SR - I am sure it was not a hollow compliment. [Laughs] If you look at you CV it's quite impressive.

MF - Thank you.

SR - Only two more questions...Do you think Miss Piggy is a feminist? I'm serious, and why? So talk about Miss Piggy for a little bit. This is an interesting kind of question.

MF - [Laughs] Should I give some context for this question? [Laughs].

SR - [Laughs] Sure, you can if you like. I said I was gonna ask you about Miss Piggy.

MF - [Laughs] As you know, I love the Muppets and I would consider myself as a weak expert in Muppetology, and I think that should be a field of study, just as there are cowboy studies. I think the Muppets are fascinating for so many reasons but a couple of years ago, I was involved in a book chapter for a book called "Kermit Culture" and its an interdisciplinary book looking at various aspects of Jim Henson's Muppets. Along with my collaborator Tony Cox, we wrote a chapter on Miss Piggy and give I have some expertise in Gender Studies, we were looking at feminine and masculine representations of Miss Piggy. In what ways is she feminine, in what ways is she masculine, so that's the background. Now, do I think she is a feminist?

SR - Yeah?

MF - I would have to say that she probably is because she, I would sense that when other characters get...well lets put it this way, on the Muppet Show there is that whole pigs in space scene, they have that theme that keeps on running throughout the whole series and whenever Link Hogthrob or Dr. Strangepork basically say she shouldn't do that because she is a girl or girls are stupid, or has that inference that girls are stupid, she would sort of mess down her snout a little bit and look all upset and then she would do something that would show otherwise. She ended up being the brains of the unit, and making sure that they didn't all die. I think her response was a very feminist response. You know, I love her and I hate her, she is so in your face and she is not nice you know.

SR - [Laughs].

MF - And I think for that reason I actually love her to because she puts up with nothing.

SR- No.

MF - She is her own pig, she does what she needs to do.

SR - She doesn't take anything from anybody.

MF - No, absolutely not. I don't understand the whole Kermit love thing, I am not gonna say I do. She buys him flipper slippers and she's sweet on him but anyway.

SR - She does fight for him to against other females. {30:46}

SR - That's another interesting aspect of Miss Piggy.

MF - She engages in intersexual competition in Muppets in Space, yeah, I know.

SR - You almost sounded like a Muppet there when you spoke.

MF - Laughs

SR - One more question, I had to ask you that Miss Piggy one because that was very cool.

MF - That's fine.

SR - So one just little wrapping up question. Is there anything I haven't asked you that you would like to add to the interview? Anything coming to mind? Or have I covered a lot and you're tired?

MF - I think you covered a fairly big span including Miss Piggy there.

SR - You are good?

MF - I think I am good...I know because I work in women/gender studies at least part of my life is in that community, I know other people will have much more eloquent answers to a lot of this and they were politically motivated or personally motivated to guide their research in a certain direction, that was not me, I am going to be absolutely honest about that. I sort of fell into being a feminist and mainly it was a response to seeing other people weren't. I think I really, I came from a family that was very traditional but at the same time I had an aunt who was buying me books from the feminist movement, and even picture books when I was a kid of women who were firefighters. They idea was "yes you can" you can be anything you want to be so I think all of that really spoke to me.

SR -Okay, we are done. Thanks so much for doing this. {32:38}