Psychology's Feminist Voices Oral History Project

Interview with Nora Ruck

Interviewed by Alexandra Rutherford
Toronto, ON
October 23, 2013

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NR: Nora Ruck, interview participant
AR: Alexandra Rutherford, interviewer
TD: Tal Davidson, interviewer
JB: Jeahlisa Bridgeman, interviewer
ER: Elissa Rodkey, interviewer
JY: Jacy Young, interviewer
PG: Prapti Giri, interviewer
AJ: Amanda Jenkins, interviewer

*Text in dark red was added by the interview participant subsequent to the recorded interview.

AR: This is an interview with Nora Ruck in Toronto, Ontario on October 23rd, 2013. [We will start off with] something really straightforward [which] is how we start all of our interviews. It helps us identify the tape in the case that it ever gets mislabelled or lost. Could you just state your full name and place and date of birth for the record.

NR: Okay, my name is Nora Ruck, actually Nora Maria Ruck and I was born in Ried im Innkreis in Upper Austria on April 13th in 1981.

AR: Great, great. Okay so we often ask our participants to tell us a little bit about how their identity as a feminist developed or evolved.

NR: Yeah, talking about my feminist identity, I think looking back it emerged pretty late. I think it was all really at the beginning of my PhD studies so it was about [when I was in my] 20s, 24 or 25. I mean to me it was a little surprising because I think I could have become a feminist much earlier because my mom was a feminist or is a feminist. Maybe she wouldn't call herself that, because I was born in a little village in Austria and you wouldn't call yourself a feminist, but she was very straightforward with me about feminist ethics and she was practising them very clearly even though….She was very proud about knowing how to do man stuff like using a drilling machine, changing tires. She taught my sister how to do all those things and actually when I moved into my first apartment she gave me a drilling machine because she thought every woman should have a drilling machine so [laughs] this is the kind of person she is. She was always very conscious about…and also giving me feminist literature to read and…

AR: Do you remember anything in particular in terms of the feminist literature?

NR: Yeah, I mean she loves stream-of-consciousness kind of literature so she loves Virginia Woolf. She didn't give me Virginia Woolf to read because I was not old enough, but she gave

me Christa Wolf. I don't know if you know Christa Wolf? She's a German author, also a very feminist author. Then also some Austrian authors, Ingeborg Bachmann, she's among the first generation of writers after World War II, so she's engaging with issues of violence and war but also patriarchy, and Elfriede Jelinik, who is very well known for her feminism and social critique and for her very violent, disruptive language, so that was the kind of literature she liked, and I kind of adopted her preferences so…

AR: But at that point it sounds like not in a really explicit way?

NR: No, not in a really explicit way. I also think that I [had] a kind of reaction formation against her because I think I blamed her feminism for ruining the relationship between her and my father. I mean at the time and kind of rewriting this history over and over, I have come to a different conclusion, of course, but this is what it looked like for me at the time. I mean, now looking back and being a feminist myself now. I had a pretty anti-feminist phase for a while, so I got into this myth that equality had already been reached and [wondered] why [she was] bothering so much and why [she was] so angry. I adored my father as a child. In retrospect I would say that he has many qualities that could be described as not stereotypically male, he's very artsy and soft, in a way, not afraid to admit weakness or to say that he's sorry, at least to me. I don't think he cares at all about societal expectations regarding women or men. He also did not care about economic success or status, he always had a rather humorous or ironic relation also to my being an "A" student, I think he wanted me to not take these things too seriously. My mom was the opposite in many ways. Very self-reliant, sometimes rather hard and strict, she was responsible for reality in our family and she also cared very much for preparing me for some of those harsh realities. Also, some of her friends, some of those friends are divorced now and they would always tell me that I needed to be independent as a woman, I needed to earn money, I should not depend on a man. You know, I felt like everything was discouraging having an honest relationship with a man, particularly with men. There's also a lot of weight on your shoulders if you're supposed to do everything by yourself.

AR: So the messages you were getting from that generation of feminists were all fairly negative or kind of rubbed you the wrong way?

NR: I mean, they were positive about certain things of course because I saw that my mom had lots of very intimate and caring relationships with her girlfriends so that was positive. I think I took that as well because I have lots of very intimate and very caring and also, in a way, very intellectual relationships with lots of girlfriends so and also what was positive. [My mother] never gave me that feeling and my father never gave me the feeling [that] there was anything I couldn't do just because I was a girl. You know, so it was also very encouraging, you could do anything you want to and also the kind of man stuff; "Don't let people tell you that you can't do this." That was encouraging

AR: So when did that shift then in terms of [your identity happen], you said around 24, 25 [was] when you later explicitly embraced feminism?

NR: Well it was at the beginning of my PhD studies and at the time in psychology I was very much into social psychology. I had read a little bit of critical psychology [and] social

constructionism so I was very familiar with the kind of epistemology that is similar to feminist epistemology. And I did my first paid [position] as a researcher at the International Research Center for Cultural Studies in Vienna. There was this colleague of mine, Iris Mendel, we were the only two social scientists. Most of the others were from the Arts or Humanities and she was a radical feminist. I mean she was…[laughs]. I had never seen anything like it, but the way we conceived ourselves in science, it was so familiar. You know? We hit it off from the first moment and I think the funny thing is that she recognized me as a fellow feminist which I don't think I was at the time but when I started calling myself a feminist it felt very familiar because I knew very much of it already. So that's pretty much when it happened; for me it was very connected to this one person. And also I think the intellectual freedom that I enjoyed during my PhD [triggered this acceptance of a feminist identity]. I mean, people wouldn't ask us what we were doing constantly or they wouldn't keep track of our achievements and so I mean we were supposed to be very free in what we were doing so I engaged a lot in feminist theory. At the time I was also very interested in body modification, plastic surgery and why it got so popular and I started reading Kathy Davis and Susan Bordo and those were the smartest pieces on those issues, so it's just radical how you explore and engage.

And then also my feminist identity was very connected to the transdisciplinary team I was part of a little later, together with Iris. I remember this moment still back at the International Research Center for Cultural Studies in Vienna, when our first year as resident junior fellows was almost over and all of us were preparing for our second year, which we were supposed to spend abroad. I was about to go to Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore and Iris actually went to York University in Toronto. None of us knew what awaited us after our year abroad but I remember this moment when I realized that I might not finish my PhD being in contact with Iris and discussing my research with her, so I called her and I said "I just realized, I don't want to finish my PhD without you" so eventually Iris had the idea of handing in a proposal at the Austrian Academy of Sciences for a funding scheme that explicitly targets transdisciplinary teams of doctoral students, we got sociologist Julia Hertlein and Julia Riegler on board and we went for it. It was the most amazing time, we were so close and we also worked together a lot. For me, that's just really the ideal way to do feminist research, the collective thing and being so close, and also, we were pretty do-it-yourself and mentored each other and learned so much from each other.

AR: Can I take you back a little bit to your undergraduate experience? Did you encounter any feminist or gender-oriented material during that time?

NR: Hmm…no. I mean at the time there was no such thing as undergraduate because you pursued to master's immediately so there were five to six years of study and then in this time you complete your masters but in the first years of my studies, no I don't think so, No. I mean a little later, I took courses in philosophy with a friend of mine, Iris Laner, and I ended up in a class led by feminist philosopher Ingvild Birkhan and I thought she was a good role model because she was a good teacher but not in psychology. There was nothing going on in psychology, no, not that I knew of at the time. I think there were a couple of feminists teaching in psychology, too, Sabine Scheffler, for example, but I did not seek out feminist courses at that time.

AR: Well that leads me to ask you about how you got interested in psychology in the first place?

NR: [Laughs] I mean that was during my adolescence. I think like most adolescents, it was a pretty troubled phase. You know, my parents were quarrelling a lot, eventually they got divorced when I was 18. I had trouble at school too because I couldn't…I don't know, I couldn't accept the institution in a way so I mean I was a good student but I had disciplinary issues. They were very troubling, so at that time I started to paint and I painted a lot. I realized that it had a very soothing effect on me and I would say therapeutic. At the time I wouldn't have called it therapeutic. So I got very interested in this and I actually wrote my first pre-scientific paper that I could do at school on art and Lebensbewältigung, [which is what] we call it in German - coping with life. I [became] very missionary - because it's just so great, I get to tell other people about it. So I wanted to be an art therapist and that was the reason. The plan was pretty clear, I wanted to study psychology and then also art but then I didn't get into art school so I ended up doing psychology [laughs].

AR: Fair enough, fair enough.

NR: Yeah fair enough.

AR: Can you speak a little bit about some of your early interests in terms of body modification and body cosmetic surgery? How has that interest evolved and what form it took then?

NR: Hmm… how it evolved I don't really remember. It was just something that was close to my everyday experiences and it changed into something completely different. Because first [I] was planning to do a PhD thesis on women undergoing cosmetic surgery but then I realized psychology had so much to say about matters of beauty and aesthetics. At that time I wasn't in psychology but I was in cultural studies so it was pretty plausible to look at those scientific texts as cultural documents about beauty. And I got very angry too because I started to read many texts within psychological research referring back to Galton because he's sort of a methodological forerunner. And I started to read Galton and I realized how racist he was and no one had ever told me, you know? In my first lectures at university I was told that he was the father of twin studies and he was a founding father of psychology. No one ever told me [that he was racist] so I grew really angry [laughs] and yeah then my dissertation changed to a feminist critique of the science of psychological attractiveness research and that's what I did then.

AR: And you started more or less with Galton then?

NR: Yeah, I mean I started being angry about it [laughs] but also time wise, I started the history with Darwin and Galton.

AR: Yeah, I consulted one of your papers from that wonderful online resource, the…what's it called, the Living Books online, or something like that?

NR: Oh yeah, the one by Bernadette Wegenstein, yep.

AR: Was that article actually part of your dissertation then or that chapter?

NR: It didn't enter my dissertation. I mean some thoughts entered my dissertation, especially about Galton and then also the ones about the programs that are used in psychological attractiveness research. I spent a year working with Bernadette Wegenstein, she's a media

theorist. So it was part of an article that we wrote together about the media [being] used in a lot of psychological attractiveness research and by psychologists like Galton. So it was a kind of a side project connected to my dissertation.

AR: Okay so when you speak of your dissertation, what was your criticism?

NR: It changed a lot because at the beginning I wasn't really sure what I meant by critique so the last three years of my PhD studies I was part of this interdisciplinary doc team, it's for doctoral students. We're all working together on the feminist critiques of science and [laughs] after a while we didn't really know what we meant by critique and I realized I had gotten a very limited notion of critique in psychology because at the beginning I think I wanted to falsify the empirical evidence. [But] then as I engaged more with how to do criticism, I got more interested in the kind of critique that Foucault proposes, like to criticise something by making the conditions of its possibility visible and also the interconnectedness of knowledge and power. So that's what I ended up doing. I really wanted to reconstruct this kind of research becoming possible or speakable in the 1990's at a certain place, at a certain time in psychology and in society. I think my main criticism now is that evolutionary psychology, especially when it theorizes about women, is a kind of ideology of a gender division of labour in a neoliberal capitalist society. That's my basic criticism. It provides a kind of justification for gender inequalities that have no other justifications so yeah that's my basic critique [laughs].

AR: Yeah, that's really well put. Maybe I can ask you a little bit about some of your mentors? If that's even the right word, I don't know. You mentioned Iris Mendel?

NR: Iris Mendel, yeah.

AR: And I guess also a collaborator Bernice…

NR: Bernadette.

AR: Bernadette, sorry, but can you speak about mentors and the role of mentors?

NR: Yeah, I would call them mentors because I've always called them mentors. My first mentor was my art teacher in high school. She was wonderful and she was such a good role model, being just such a fine and good human being. She also had this wonderful and loving marriage and I think I also liked that part about her and her life. She was very supportive of me and my art back then and she had this way of accepting some of my erratic ideas with this smile that said "I don't have to understand everything you do but I accept it." I think her loving and accepting ways very much formed my ideas of what an ideal mentor looks like and when I left for university and there was no such person it really hurt.

I think in psychology, then, my first mentor was a teacher I got to know in the Netherlands. After three years into my studies, I was fed up with my studies in Vienna and I went abroad and I went off to the Netherlands and I ended up at the University of Nijmegen. They had a focus on cultural psychology and I had never heard about anything like that so I completely overthrew my plan of studying art. And I was supposed to do courses in clinical interviews and social and personality psychology but I ended up doing none of it and I only focused on cultural

psychology. And there was this one teacher and his course sort of got me into [cultural psychology] because from the first lesson he would read from Dante's Divine Comedy and he would read from children's books. The course was on self and culture and he would draw from so many different sources so it swept me off my feet. In Vienna, you know, the University of Vienna is a real mass university so there are so many students they are trying to get rid of students. No one knew my name, no one would talk to me. I was completely anonymous in Vienna and then in Nijmegen, this teacher, his name was Cor van Halen, he talked to me after class. I was completely [laughs] ... I was taken by surprise because I was not used to talking to teachers at universities and I think he became my first mentor at university because I think he was the first person who suggested I could stay at university because I had never thought about it. It was not part of my family tradition to think about something like that because I'm the first person to study in my family and I went on to my PhD, which was unheard of. The institution was sort of… I don't know… I never thought of staying and he was so clear about it and was like "Oh yeah, you're going to stay." and I was like, "Yeah, if you think so." Yeah and so then I came back to Vienna. Actually I wanted to go back to Nijmegen and complete my studies there but I couldn't. There was one person at the University of Vienna doing cultural psychology and that's Thomas Slunecko and I pursued him for a year [laughs] because at the beginning he didn't really want to advise my project so I really had to convince him and it took me a year but…

AR: That's persistence.

NR: Yeah [laughs] and I was furious when he rejected my first proposal. I was like, "No, that's not going to happen!" and he turned out to be my most important mentor. He was really extremely supportive. So he supervised my master's thesis and then after my PhD thesis too. Looking back without those two I don't know if I would have ended up in academia because it just would not have occurred to me, but also Thomas just understood and [always gave me words of encouragement]; "You can do this, you're good so you can stay."

(18:11)

AR: That's maybe a place to pause for a moment and elaborate on the impact. Did you ever feel out of place because of the lack of expectation that would go on in university? How did that kind of unfurl for you?

NR: Yeah, I did. I think at the beginning it was a good thing. When I applied for my first scholarship at the International Research Center for Cultural Studies I didn't have a clue and Thomas had boosted my self-confidence so much that it just carried me over, and I was so naïve. I didn't know how competitive it was although I had been told because I had talked to a vice-president, vice-director of the institution, who had told me that it's competitive and really hard to get in. And he told me the numbers and I heard the numbers but at the same time I didn't really hear them and thought, "Yeah, oh well." I mean also looking back, I was so naïve. I didn't have a clue. I just thought it was all a game in a way. I think at the beginning it might have been because this institution was out of place for me in a way. So…that was a good thing but once I was in it was [a different story]. And it's not that I'm not used to education because education is very important in my family and my mom and my dad they read a lot. They were [positive role

models]. My mom's a primary school teacher so education is very important but still always…she feels that she doesn't know enough. My dad, he's a federal financial accountant but he's doing a lot of reading in his free time, so he also [believes in not] being in the system but doing it your own way. They're so smart and they read such a lot but they don't feel their education, in a way, counts that much. So I was very used to education but not used to the institution. I would feel, at this institution, I would feel very out of place.

And I also thought it was related to the fact that I was a woman. Because I think we were seven or eight junior fellows at the time [at the International Research Centre for Cultural Studies], they have junior fellows and then they have post docs and they have professors and you're use to interacting with them on an equal level. We were treated as experts [but] I didn't feel like an expert. The women among the junior fellows, we were constantly talking about how insecure we felt and how much we thought we were inadequate. I remember one of my colleagues sitting in the kitchen. We were having a coffee and we were talking about how she would constantly expect someone to come in and say, "You are not a scientist, you are not a scholar." At the time, I thought it had to do more with us being women, and maybe it does, because science is more a male institution. When I read Bourdieu, it occurred to me that it was kind of a natural feeling, reacting in that way, because you're claiming a habitus that's not your own. Also as a woman, but maybe also coming from a family that has moved upwards so quickly [has contributed to me feeling out of place at the institution]. [I am] always afraid of losing this position because my grandparents were workers and then my parents made it to the middle class, and now I am here, but I could lose this position any minute, so it's precarious. That's really typically middle class, this fear of losing your social position any moment.

AR: Do you recall any…I mean, you spoke with other women and shared with other women this sense of insecurity and I guess what often gets called the 'imposter syndrome' kind of vibe.

NR: Yep, yep.

AR: Did you ever experience or did you have any recollections, conscious recollections, of experiencing sexism or discrimination of any kind during your training or experiences? Sort of explicit messages that made you insecure?

NR: No…I think, no. I mean, during my PhD studies I didn't. Actually I think with my advisor, I always experienced it as a kind of advantage in a way. He's been mentoring lots of women, so his relationships with women tend to be a little different than his relationships to men. I don't know.

AR: Do you a have a sense in what way?

NR: I don't know. Maybe…I have a feeling he doesn't experience strong women as competition, maybe something like that, because he likes strong women. He wouldn't call himself a feminist but he's mentored a lot of feminists. There are so many [of his] students who are doing feminist stuff and he's very interested. He was also supervising this team of four that we had then and it was two psychologists. It was me and Julia Riegler. He was advising both of us and he would show very much interest. He would organize advanced reading courses about our subjects and do

feminist theory with us. He was very interested. In a way I always felt he felt less threatened by strong women.

So no… in my work, I don't recall having ever been subject to explicit discrimination. I mean, I have a kind of…suspicion that one of my proposals [may have been discriminated against based on its content]. Actually, this one proposal that got funded by the European Commission, the fact that it was so explicitly feminist was not a good thing when I handed it to another funding institution but I don't know [for sure]. You know, it's a funny process and it could just have been a false suspicion. Thinking about it I do recall, however, that one funding proposal I handed in with a research group got rejected because we ended up with one reviewer who complained that our team consisted only of women. The review was really bad not only in the sense of trashing our proposal but also in the sense of being of really meager quality. The guy clearly had no idea of qualitative research designs, he had spelling errors in his review, and he asked questions he could have answered if he had read the proposal. I am pretty sure it was a guy because it was not hard to track him down on the basis of the erratic reading suggestions he gave us. But he was also clearly sexist and it caused our proposal to be rejected because the way the funding system works, if you have one slightly critical review you're out. To be honest I'm still really pissed at this funding institution that they would not rule out a review that is clearly sexist and also just of such poor quality, there should be a more serious evaluation of the reviews themselves. That was really an exception, though, this blatant and really idiotic sexism. Most times, however, it's just not that explicit, I guess, academics usually know better than to be explicitly sexist, they have other ways that are just much harder to recognize and describe.

But now, thinking about it some more, I had another experience in a PhD seminar on soft skills. In this seminar, we had to imitate being in an assessment center and applying for a job as a teaching assistant at the Faculty of Psychology at the University of Vienna. One male and one female seminar participant and I enacted applicants for the job and we had to complete a task while the rest of the seminar participants watched and then evaluated our performance. My female colleague took on a very active and talkative role during this task while my male colleague remained rather in the background and I took on the task of structuring and organizing all the ideas that we were brainstorming. I received the best evaluation, my female colleague was second best, and my male colleague was not considered good enough for the job by any of the other seminar participants. When everyone was done giving reasons for their decision, the seminar coach told us that he would hire the male candidate. He thought the male candidate had been tossed into an impossible situation, competing against two women. He could not take on a dominant position because that would have made him a bully and a macho. So he basically had no other choice than to stay in the background. Furthermore, the coach reasoned that the psychological field was so dominated by women that it was important to hire a man. What enraged me most was that he just assumed that the male applicant was at least as qualified as the best female applicant. The male applicant had hardly talked at all during our task so there was no proof whether he was at all up to it. I took this entire thing both personally and politically and I exploded right there and then, telling the coach and my colleagues why the coach's decision was simply enraging. The negative highlight was that the entire seminar spent the first half hour after the lunch break empathizing with the male applicant who confessed to us that he had always

worked under female bosses and how hard this had been for him. The incident at the seminar had triggered this old "trauma" of his. He seriously expected us to feel sorry for him for always having had female bosses. It was unbelievable and I can still feel the anger rising up in me just thinking about it. For me, this incident was rather unsettling because for all the coach's apparent insanity I think he just spoke out loud what goes on in many heads when they're hiring.

AR: Can you speak a little bit about your take on the state of feminist psychology in the Austrian context or even German speaking context? We've talked about it a little bit.

NR: Yeah [laughs]. I mean when I started my PhD, I didn't call myself a feminist psychologist. Never. Sometimes, I would call myself a cultural psychologist and a feminist critic of science. Sometimes I would call myself a critical psychologist and feminist critic of science but it never occurred to me that those two identities could be merged in a way. I mean a feminist critic *of* psychology. There is no such thing as a feminist psychology in German-speaking countries. Me and two colleagues, Anna Sieben and Julia Scholz, are trying to promote feminist psychology. We're trying to build a community, organize conferences and this sort of thing, because I know there is a lot of interest from students or from younger scholars. Many of my students, they're so confident in feminist theory. They know so much about it and when they come to my class they know a lot. I think in my generation it's not an uncommon thing to be feminist psychologist, but there's no tradition in a way.

AR: There's no tradition of some kind of a change within academia as a result of broader changes in a German society vis-a-vis feminism and women's movements or that kind of thing? Within psychology I guess is what I'm saying.

NR: Within psychology I don't think so. What was very important to broader changes in psychology for a while was the student protests of the late 1960's and 1970's. A lot of critical traditions emerged there. I mean they're very explicit about their connection with the student protests. So there's Critical psychology in Berlin and also political psychology over at Hannover and Frankfurt, the latter two are more psychoanalytically inspired. All of them are Marxist inspired [laughs]. That's like the common theme, but I don't know. In this generation there are some feminist thinkers like Frigga Haug. I don't know if you know Frigga Haug, she's a socialist feminist. She's very known for thinking about modes of production, always in tandem with modes of reproduction so she's always combining the critique of patriarchy with capitalism and…

AR: What's her last name again?

NR: Haug. H-A-U-G. Yeah, and she comes from… I don't know if it would do her justice to say she comes from this kind of school of Critical psychology in Berlin but she was related to it. When you read her works, a very important term in Critical Psychology, with a big 'C', is "Handlungsfähigkeit". I think it is agency, she talks a lot about that. Because they have this distinction between restrictive kinds of agency that you experience when you master a system or you master an institution. You feel confident when you master an institution like university, for example, but it's still [a form of] restricted agency because you accept the kind of framework and accept power structures. As opposed to restricted agency, there's a general or generalized

kind of agency that aims at changing the system, that aims at including everyone. So she talks about these notions a lot and she engages with Klaus Holzkamp who is considered the founder of Critical psychology. But [Frigga Haug has since] moved to sociology. She didn't stay in psychology. She engaged in very many women's groups, she's also very clear about the collective side of her scientific work. They authored many books collectively so certainly the women's movement changed this line of work but it didn't happen in psychology. [There appears to be a tradition of] the psychoanalytically inspired [moving towards sociology]. There are some very prominent feminist thinkers, there's [people] like Gudrun Axeli Knapp or Angelika Wetterer, [who are] also very Marxist. [They engage in] psychoanalysis, critical theory, and feminist theory but they're also in sociology so [when] engaging with them, some might consider them psychological [and] some [might] consider it psychological theory. [However], institutionally, they are not in psychology, they are in sociology.

AR: Right so it sounds like there's sort of a disjuncture between what's going on theoretically and psychologically, small 'p' and what's actually happening in the universities at an institutional level with academic psychology. A lot of theories that are psychological *[in nature]* aren't being produced within academic psychology, would you say that's a fair estimation? (31:40)

NR: Yeah, or also [there probably] is a lot of feminist psychological knowledge out there but it's not being produced within the discipline. I've been wondering about this a lot because it doesn't make sense to me in a way, it just really doesn't make sense. I mean, Germany and Austria they had the first and second waves of feminism and by the third wave of feminism they had a very strong women's movement and at the same time some very strong critical traditions also in psychology. And I never really know if it's linked to this, the kind of critical monopoly that was taken by those critical psychological traditions. I think there are some feminists who are doing feminist work within those traditions but they wouldn't call themselves feminist psychologists maybe. For example this kind of psychoanalytic psychology in Hannover where also many of the men are engaging in feminist theory and are very knowledgeable about it so it has a very strong feminist cast but it doesn't come under the name feminist psychology, it has a very different tradition. Still in a way it doesn't really make sense to me so I'm just wondering about it, especially now with my two colleagues, we're trying to create a community of feminist psychologists. Last week we were thinking about producing a special issue for a journal [but] it's very last notice so we can't engage new authors so we thought about just publishing older texts. Evidently we looked to the American context, where we can translate some of the older texts, we could make them available to broader audiences and I was like, "Why don't we use older texts in the German speaking countries because I think there are some but where?"

(33:40)

AR: Can I ask you, does anyone want to jump in at this point about anything that we may have already talked about but have further questions on?

TD: Directly related to what you were just saying, If you've noticed in your globetrotting of institutions, what the different needs that different societies have for feminist psychology? Small 'P' or big 'P'.

NR: [In terms of] needs, I really don't know but what I've noticed is that in the German speaking countries [where] there is critical psychology that engages with feminist theory, [it also happens to be] very Marxist. So that is something [that] I think [is] peculiar to the German speaking context; that many traditions are very socialist. Also in my own work I'm always trying to think about the relationship between gender inequalities and economics structures. I don't really know if it refers to a need or if it's just inevitable engaging with German speaking traditions that you end up looking at economic structure that's in tandem with other power structures. I don't know.

TD: That was what I was getting at.

NR: Okay, okay. (35:29)

JB: I actually have a question sort of related to what you just said as well. I was actually just wondering if you felt your experience…this is taking you back a little to your experience as a masters student, if it was infiltrated by American psychology and do you see a difference between European or Austrian psychology and American psychology? Or North American psychology?

NR: It was very infiltrated by American or maybe North American psychology. My studies were very focused on U.S. American inspired experimental psychology because that was what students were expected to learn. Now, knowing the U.S. context myself because unlike many of my former teachers at the University of Vienna I have actually spent a year doing research at a U.S. university, it seems to me that academics in Austria often tend to have images in their heads about what U.S. American psychology or U.S. American universities are like. The APA is so diverse, for example, it has so many divisions and a very broad understanding of what psychology can be, but that never trickled down to Austria it seems. There was very little besides this U.S. oriented experimental focus and it was really hard to do anything else. At my time, there was the possibility of trading some courses from the mandatory curriculum for a so-called individual curriculum and I chose an individual curriculum in cultural psychology. It was not regarded psychology proper by the head of the curriculum at the time, however, and he rejected it twice although it fulfilled all the formal criteria. My individual curriculum only went through at my third try because Thomas Slunecko pushed it through. It was terribly repressive. But also when I started engaging with critical psychology, most of the critical pieces I read at the time were North American. In cultural psychology, maybe [less North American Psychology was incorporated] because my advisor was also engaging indigenous psychologies and then at the same time he has also this kind of science critique that we should actually regard psychology as a cultural product. He's very self-reflexive so he's thinking about the Austrian and German context too. But I think it took me a long time to discover there were actually traditions worthwhile reconstructing in the German speaking countries because I had only engaged with North American traditions at the beginning. I had read a lot of social constructionism and I thought this was really cool [but] it was mostly my detour of feminism [that led me to German context]

because some of my feminist friends were very fond of Frigga Haug. They were like, “Yeah but she’s a psychologist” and I said, “Yeah but I don’t know her” [laughs].

As I said, in feminist psychology first what we do is we look at the North American context because as far as feminist psychologists are concerned or the kind of relationships between feminism and psychology, the differences are so vast. To me it is just so stunning what there is in North America. There is such a long tradition. For example, Division 35 has such a long tradition of community-building of feminist psychologists. There’s a reconstruction of tradition going on, there’s so much going on. So there’s a big, big difference between the North American context and the kind of German-speaking context in this regard.

AR: This is shifting gears a little bit. How do you bring your feminism into your teaching? (38:30)

NR: Hmm… How do I bring my feminism into my teaching? We read a lot of feminist stuff, so theme-wise it’s very present because generally I would say that feminism is a way of thinking about lots of power structures. It is not limited to gender inequalities or gender oppression or whatever you might call it, but it is a way of engaging with many power structures and I do intend to focus on power a lot in my courses, so theme-wise, that’s that.

Apart from that, I don’t know. I mean I’m not missionary about my feminism in my courses. I hope that ultimately they’ll see, maybe the ones that are not already [feminist, will see the benefit to feminist thinking]. The ones that are feminists already it’s easy, because it connects very well with what I want to do in the first place because I just want to provide them with space to do their own thing, so with them it’s easy. With the others, I’m just hoping that they’ll see that I’m a feminist and that I’m a cool person because I know that there’s lots of stereotypes about feminists going on. I’m not imposing anything on them. After reading the texts and after seeing how I handle the situation, if they don’t think that feminism is an important thing to do, I’m not going to force them to do it. I think a very important issue in the German-speaking context, [is] the gender-neutral language or gender-balanced language [issue], which is a big thing because the German language is very, very gendered. So but I’m also not imposing this [in my classes]. I’m using it [but it is not mandatory for my students to use it].

AR: You’re using gender-neutral language?

NR: Oh yeah, of course. And also of course I use it when I’m communicating with them, it’s there on all the materials I give them but I’m not forcing them to use it themselves. I know that other teachers do because they won’t accept papers that are not written in a gender-neutral language. And I’m never sure about that actually. I’m never sure if it’s a good thing, to be so laissez-faire about it. It’s just not me. Saying, “You have to use gender-neutral language because otherwise I’m not going to accept your papers” is just not me. I can’t do it.

AR: I don’t know much about this idea. Is this a recent movement towards using gender-neutral language? Can you describe that?

NR: No, I think in Austria it’s not. At least it’s been part of the second wave of feminism where they turned to the power of language where they evidently encountered that. I mean, German

language is so sexist. You have to use a gendered article; there are three different types, female, male, and neutral, and also nouns denoting people are usually gendered, so a male teacher, for example, would be a 'Lehrer' and a female teacher a 'Lehrerin', so in the German language gender is basically everywhere. And people traditionally use the male form for all people, claiming that it includes women, which of course it doesn't. So they'd speak of male students, male teachers, male politicians, you name it, always claiming that women are included. There are psychological studies that actually show that when you are using this supposedly general form, it's called the "generic masculinum", people think of men, they don't think of women. So when you're talking about a medical doctor for example, in English there is no gender to it, but in German there is. So you'd talk about a "Arzt" and decidedly it's masculine and people see a man when they imagine a "Arzt".

So these debates have been going on for a long time but it's only been the last say ten years that official institutions like government have started to use the gender-neutral form, or sometimes when I handed in proposals to the government I was required to use the gender neutral form. That was actually how I learned to do it because when I was still a student, I'd submit a proposal to a government institution and it said, "You have to use the gender neutral form because otherwise we're not going to accept your proposal." So yes, it is a big issue. And I've heard it's a much bigger issue in Austria than in Germany because I'm very used to using the gendered version of my title "Doctor". For a woman you would say "Doktorin" {43:34} and it marks that I'm a female. I do it because in feminist circles you do it. You gender your title. German colleagues, however, thought it was "sweet", they'd be like "Can I ask you why you call yourself a 'Doktorin', I've noticed many Austrians do it, it's so sweet, is it something Austrian?" and I'd be like "No, it's something feminist". They always think everything Austrians do is sweet [laughs]. They thought it was sweet that I would gender my title.

Another way in which I bring my feminism into my teaching is that I try to use my position of power as a teacher to really nurture students. I still have not found the right way to do it and I think that sometimes I am a little too influenced by my own conceptions of what my ideal mentor looks like, which is trying to give my students the feeling that I'm always there for them, that they can always count on me and my support, and that my most important goal is to support them while they make their own way. I want to be there when they grow. I'm also increasingly fond of participatory didactics. In the summer term 2013 a group of students asked me if I wanted to organize an autonomous lecture together with them. That they asked me was probably one of the happiest moments of my teaching career until now. So we organized this lecture in the summer term 2013 and it was meant to provide a space for students to choose their own topic and their own lecturers. We tried to organize everything as collectively as possible and it was just the most wonderful experience working with this group of students. The idea is and was to make this lecture a permanent thing. At the moment it's organized by the students together with my colleagues Markus Brunner and Peter Mattes but I'm planning to get involved once I'm back in Austria.

AR: I noticed there are a couple of things on your CV [that] I want to ask you about because [I'm not familiar with them]. It also might be because they don't correspond immediately to things

[that I'm aware of from a North American standpoint]. I just want to hear about more about them. It says that you're doing psychotherapeutic training So can you tell us a bit about sort of what led you to psychotherapy training?

NR: I mean I've always wanted to do it all along as part of my studies.

ARL Okay, you started off with art therapy.

NR: Yeah, art therapy. And then I sort of forgot about it because I was so enthusiastic about science. And then I started psychotherapy training after my PhD because it was a pretty rough time. Finding a job again was pretty rough, and it took me almost two years from my last employment to my current one and in a way, for me personally, it wasn't a good time. I started seeing a therapist myself and I started thinking about these matters much more. I also started thinking about why I studied psychology in the first place and if you're in a crisis it makes you very [empathic] to the suffering of other people in a way. The theme was just much more present because I was in crisis myself and I was evidently in need of a therapist myself and it did help me. And also I didn't want to depend on the academy, at that moment it was so clear, I did not want to depend on the academy, for me it was not going to work. For me, it was too insecure, there's no prospective [opportunities] in Austria. The few prospective [opportunities] that are there are just very erratic, you can't plan a life in academia in Austria and it's pretty clear to me that I want to stay in Austria for the long term, so I wanted to have a second professional choice.

AR: What kind of training is it? Is there a particular modality or a particular kind of psychotherapy that you're being trained to do?

NR: Not now. There is a kind of two-part training. The first part is very general. In Austria, everyone can become a psychotherapist so they made sure there's a kind of general training in psychology. I don't have to do all of it because I already completed a degree in psychology. Then the second part is going to be specializing in a kind of school. I haven't decided yet but I have some preferences. I was much more interested in the practical part, you are also required to do a lot of therapy yourself so I did a self-awareness training with individual therapy, group therapy. I did some group analytic groups. You are also required to do an internship. I did my first internship at a kind of outpatient rehabilitation clinic, the Gesundheitszentrum Leopoldau. It was very behavioural-therapy-oriented. That was okay [laughs]. Then I ended up at an institution providing mostly therapeutic support for survivors of war and torture, it's called Hemayat. So I've been volunteering with them for about a half a year or a little more. I feel very at ease in the institution I think I'm going to, even after I finish with the hours I have to do there as part of my training, I think I'm going to continue volunteering at the institution. I like the institution, I think their work is very valuable. I can bring in what I'm good at. I'm very good at writing proposals and they are notoriously out of money [laughs].

AR: Yeah, they can use some of your academic skills to their [advantage].

NR: Yeah!

AR: That's great. I wanted to ask you a little bit about this tenuousness that you refer to as being an academic, the precariousness about being an academic in Austria. Can you tell us a little bit

more about why that is? Specifically I'm thinking that you've identified [as a feminist], we've been talking a lot about your feminism, you also describe yourself as a person who does history and theory of psychology, critical psychology and at least in the American context, those are not areas of psychology that are well-supported institutionally. So I guess what I'm trying to ask is, is your feeling of precariousness as an academic, what is that due too? Is it in part because of your identity as a history/theory/critical psychologist? Or is it because the system itself is just precarious overall? Or both or neither [laughs].

NR: I think it's both. Science funding has been cut radically especially after the crisis so I don't know. The Austrian government isn't as smart as the German government. They've cut science funding in all fields, for universities, for extra universities, in institution and science funding. I'd also say that increasingly precarious conditions and the lack of tenure positions is also just an integral part of neoliberal science politics, I mean neoliberalism is all about increasing the conditions for competition and about de-regulating the economy, so it's pretty logical that scholars are put in a position where they're forced to stay in competition with others all their lives. Not to forget that many improved working conditions at universities were due to union efforts and they're increasingly cut down to size. But it's also due to disciplinary mechanisms because basically I'm not hireable. With what I do, in a regular psychology department, I would not be hireable. And it's not due to one of the particular fields like critical psychology, feminist psychology, or history and theory, it's just due to the fact that I don't do quantative work. So I'm pretty sure, I know for a fact, that it's due to this, of course. And then what's left for me is this kind of extra university funding. There's Sigmund Freud University, it's still a very young institution but it's a very neoliberal institution [in terms of their] personnel politics. So what's left is this kind of extra-university funding that I've been doing since I started my PhD, all my employed positions at universities including my current one were financed by funded research projects, by the Austrian Academy of Sciences, for example, or by the European Commission. For me that's actually a pretty important thing to stress: I brought in this kind of money, I financed my own positions. I think it is a chance for critical feminists [to engage in] whatever political projects because it is not bound to discipline. They don't depend on reviewers from psychology, but every time I hand in a proposal, I put a cross next to gender studies and then I'd probably get reviewers from gender studies or other types of interdisciplinary fields. It's a chance on the one hand but it's just extremely competitive and it also makes you complicit with the entire neoliberalisation of the academy and everything that goes along with it, extreme competitiveness, the de-regulation and the increasing precariousness of jobs. So it's inherently ambivalent. Also with the funding decisions you just never know because sometimes they depend on reviewers within their institutions that have a board and then it ends up being a board decision. I can't do it forever. If I don't have a position in a university by age forty or forty-five, it's just not going to happen anymore [laughs].

AR: Yeah. That's a sobering thought. Does anyone else have any other questions?

ER: This question is sort of about discouraging [prospective opportunities in academia.] [laughs]. Where are your academic interests going? Do you see a trajectory in the projects that you're looking at or that you want to work on?

NR: Yeah. I think what's continuous is the relation between science and society. In my PhD thesis, it was much more related to criticizing a strand of psychology as an ideology, criticizing the relation between power and knowledge. I think this is something I sort of had to understand for myself. I'd been through this kind of training and I had to learn this relation between this type of psychology and society. What I'm much more interested in now is how critical strands within psychology reconcile their social values with their scientific commitments. So I'm still interested in science and society but I'm more interested in an emancipated, liberated, socially responsible psychology now.

AR: Does feminism play a role in that project?

NR: Oh yeah, it does. I think I'm going to focus on feminist psychology actually. I really want to focus on the way they reconcile their feminism [and other] social values in being [within] academia, in doing scientific work. How they manage and how they do it in public, how they engage the public. They address other audiences, not strictly academic audiences, do they reach out to other public. That's sort of my interest now.

PG: You talked about the scarcity of people calling themselves feminist psychologists and now as you carve your own way as a feminist psychologist, how are you received by colleagues in the psychology world in Europe and maybe here?

NR: I think in Europe I don't really engage with other psychologists [laughs]. I mean, I engage with psychologists but all of them are critical and/or feminists. So I just try to avoid everyone else [laughs]. I changed institutions, so I left the University of Vienna, I'm employed with the Sigmund Freud University now, it's a very common thing to have a social values agenda of any kind among teachers at the Department of Psychology at the Sigmund Freud University so that's not a problem. I [do] have lots of colleagues from other disciplines, as for other psychologists, I'm not really part of any professional body in psychology and if I was I'd probably choose one of two professional organizations in Austria, one is called "Berufsvertretung Österreichischer PsychologInnen", BÖP, the "Professional Organization of Austrian Psychologists". The other organization is called "Gesellschaft kritischer Psychologen und Psychologinnen", GkPP, the "Society for male and female critical psychologists", which is interesting, because they already had the grammatical inclusion of women and men in mind when the society was founded in 1985. So if I joined a professional body it would probably be this institution. I'm not doing any lobbying work, any bigger professional bodies, I am not interested in that. In many ways, I feel that German critical psychologists tend to be rather separatist, if they don't like the way things are done in the main professional organizations, they just found their own ones.

AJ: I wanted to ask you about your feminist identity. You kind of talked before that you had this transition in your early twenties from being against feminism to having this feminist identity. I'm assuming since then have you had any further transitions or transformations in your identity or has anything influenced how you view yourself as feminist?

NR: I think it never stops and basically I don't think it started there. I've read a lot of feminist literature and not only because my mom gave it to me but also I loved Ingeborg Bachmann, I loved those themes that she was engaging in. I loved Frida Kahlo, those themes. I also was not

that interested in stereotypically female activities. I was very interested in rather male-dominated sports at the time; I was a very, very dedicated basketball player. I would rather work with wood than do the kind of sewing work. I mean, what changed was I started calling myself a feminist and I started to explicitly analyze power relations.

After that, what might have changed in my theoretical interest is that I started out with a strong interest and lots of reading in poststructuralist feminist thought and I moved very freely to socialist feminist thought. So it's changed on a theoretical level. What might have changed as well, in this rush of being a recently discovered feminist, I was very focused on gender relations and I think that changed because now my feminist perspective is just about realizing I'm extremely privileged. I have an Austrian passport, I'm a white woman, I'm of a middleclass background, I'm a heterosexual, so I think now my feminist agenda is about recognizing the political problems at stake at this time and this moment. For example, in Austria at the moment we've had a very conservative government for a while and those kinds of politics have influenced many different realms, but I think who's suffering most are refugees in Austria and I think it's a very feminist thing to do to engage in this struggle.