Psychology's Feminist Voices Oral History Project
Interview with Rhoda Kesler Unger

Interviewed by Alexandra Rutherford
Cambridge, MA
January 18, 2006

When citing this interview, please use the following citation:

Unger, R. K. (2006, January 18). Interview by A. Rutherford [Video Recording]. Psychology's Feminist Voices Oral History and Online Archive Project. Cambridge, MA.

For permission to use this interview in published work, please contact:

Alexandra Rutherford, PhD
Project Director, Psychology's Feminist Voices
alexr@yorku.ca

Psychology's Feminist Voices Oral History Project
Interview with Rhoda Kesler Unger
Interviewed by Alexandra Rutherford
Cambridge, Massachusetts
January 18, 2006

A: Alexandra Rutherford, Interviewer

R: Rhoda K. Unger, Interview participant

A: Tell me a little bit about your very early experiences with the AWP, the Association for Women in Psychology. What was it like, how did you get into it?

R: Well, it was very informal. AWP - and I am sure this has come up in the formal histories as well, really got started in terms of women who went to psychological conferences, and there was a really small percentage of them at the conferences. Also, the conferences were extremely sexist, so you got hit on all the time. If you went out with a group of mostly men and paid for your own meal, it would still be assumed that you would go back and sleep with one of them. So we started to get together for dinner, just to have a comfortable group of people to talk to, without having to worry about sexual innuendo and harassment and so on. When AWP really got started, it was partly because these people used to go to meetings and knew each other, and wanted to have some safe places to go. Then, of course, it was also about the same time that the feminist movement was getting started and so it became very clear that there was a place for a political organization, and that sexual harassment was not just a personal problem. Now I did not go to the first couple of AWP meetings. I certainly didn't go to the first one. I was among one of the relatively few married individuals and I was having kids at the time. Although they kindly considered me as one of their foremothers, strictly speaking I wasn't in it for the first couple of years.

A: Well tell me about the group of women who comprised these very early meetings.

R: They were mostly either - and I think almost entirely at one point - young graduates; graduate students who were not so young; people who were just about getting their PhDs done; a few post-docs (although a post-doc was not a usual thing in those days-not everybody did them); or young untenured faculty members; and some people who were going into clinical psychology, who were not going into academic careers. So we were not important; we may have given papers at some of these meetings. We all somehow thought that meetings were important, I'm not sure if we knew exactly why. And it was a very mixed bag of people. It was people like Mary Parlee who did very early empirical work on the menstrual cycle and has a PhD from MIT. People like Leonore Tiefer. I'm trying to remember (pause), Joanne Gardner, who was very, very active. Florence Denmark, in fact Florence was very important in convincing me I should get involved in psychological organizations. I didn't think they were relevant. We all sort of knew each other, and when we would get together a part of what the conversation would be at dinner was all the

ways that we were being screwed, to be very blunt, with our faculty advisors, getting our dissertations done, getting our first jobs; a little later on, it was getting tenure. There was one year that I think four people who were involved in the AWP (00.03.48) didn't get tenure at different institutions. It was pretty depressing, and we would talk about strategies and of course we were also affected by the women's movement. We talked about ways, as a group, that we can do something about APA.

A: So a couple of questions come to mind, but one of them is, from your point of view, personally, when did you become involved in the women's movement? Was it part of your development as a psychologist or is it something that happened independently and then you brought it into your…

R: I think it was really psychology. I was never a member of NOW [*National Organization for Women*], I was never really officially part of 'the women's movement.' I was part of the women's movement in psychology; it was always part of my contact with psychology, to be involved with women. It happened, I guess, pretty much after I got my PhD. I did not recognize that those issues existed when I was a graduate student; I've actually written a bit about that. There was a kind of festschrift for Naomi Weisstein in *Feminism & Psychology* a number of years ago, and Naomi and I were in the same cohort at Harvard, although she was in social relations and I was in psychology. Naomi recognized sexism in graduate school, and the rest of us women, us few women who were around, wanted nothing to do with Naomi because she was "crazy" and she was a "trouble maker" and she was going to get us into trouble. And I apologized long ago to Naomi and she certainly accepts it, but I actually did write a little bit about this.

A: That's neat; I was going to ask you a little bit about your relationship with her, because it hadn't come up before, in terms of what you knew of her when you were at Harvard.

R: Well I didn't know her real well. She was in social relations and I was in psychology. But also it was deliberate; I mean, we all thought she was a troublemaker. And Naomi understood well before the rest of us that it wasn't personal; I remember I mentioned it at lunch, that I went through Harvard feeling like I was really mediocre, and if I didn't do spectacularly well, it was because I deserved it and I wasn't good enough. And Naomi was one of the early people to recognize that this was not personal but structural and that any woman in the same position would probably get treated exactly the same way. And I also thought about it when I was writing this paper for her festschrift - why would she have been able to recognize that at a much earlier stage than the rest of us? I realized that Naomi came from what's known as a "pink diaper family." They were communist, or at least communist sympathizers and they could recognize structural variables much more easily than those of us who came from much more apolitical backgrounds.

A: So your feminism was really embedded in your work in psychology, as opposed to existing either before or independently of that?

R: Well, that's a little hard to say. I mean obviously I got involved with the AWP, so I was already starting to become socially activist. And among the very early pieces of research I did

was on discrimination against women in social contexts in which people aren't aware that they are discriminating at all – field research. And what we found was that, sure enough, women asking for the same kinds of help as men got less of (00.07.39) it. And so, it goes very far back to my need to be empirical, to demonstrate the obvious, which was that women were discriminated against.

A: Well, let's talk a little bit, since you bring it up, about your identity as a feminist empiricist. Could you describe, first of all, what that means, and second of all, why you identify with that?

R: Why - because I haven't completely betrayed my training as an experimental psychologist. I did believe that psychology is one vehicle for understanding the world, I am not ready to throw away that baby with all the bathwater, I think that, to some extent, the whole notion of control is a very useful way of approaching situations which show that there are cause and effect relationships; otherwise, I don't know how you demonstrate that. And so I always believed that you can use empirical research as a kind of rhetorical device to demonstrate, maybe it is the obvious, but people are not willing to accept the obvious when you tell it as an anecdote, but they might be able to accept it if you demonstrate it empirically.

A: Okay. How do you respond to people who say that the very same empirical findings can be used for cross-purposes, for opposite political views?

R: Well, sometimes they can, sometimes they can't; it depends on how you ask the question. One of the things that Barbara Wallston did and it was a very fine paper that would have gone further had she not died relatively young, was the whole question of what kind of questions do you ask in psychology. And we teach our students, and we ourselves were taught very carefully how to tear apart any piece of research. We are really good at shredding research; that's our job; and showing why it isn't good and why the piece of work we are doing is better. But in fact, what we don't teach our students, and it's really hard to learn, is, "What are the appropriate questions?" If you ask the wrong question then you aren't going to get an answer that's going to be useful or helpful, so we really need to put more work into the kind of questions we ask, and I think that's one of the places that I differ from, say, a straight empiricist psychologist. I am going to ask questions that have social meaning, that have to do with politics, that have to do with social movements, and that's how I generate my questions. I don't necessarily generate them from theory.

A: Okay - so you use the 'real world' of politics and

R: Social problems

A: Social problems, to generate

R: Social issues to generate questions. And I've never really been part of any theoretical framework. At least I don't think I have.

A: Okay, you mean, cognitive, behavioral, psychoanalytic, that kind of thing? (R: right). Because you certainly have written a lot about epistemological, (00.11.07) philosophical issues.

R: Yes, but that isn't such a theoretical framework for research. I mean partly, but not completely.

A: I suppose, although if you are social constructionist maybe it will influence, again, the kind of questions you ask.

R: I think that's a lot of it. Social construction is not very well structured in terms of theory. I thought it was going to go that way, and I remember how excited I got when I read Ken Gergen's original article on social construction. I said, 'My god, I'm a social constructionist! I didn't know that.' I really thought it would go in that direction and somehow it got kind of caught up in a lot of fog. And it hasn't really developed into a theoretical framework which, in fact, suggests research; at least not for me.

A: Okay, okay. Could you talk a little bit about psychology's reluctance to embrace social constructionism?

R: I think that really is epistemological. It has to do with the framework social constructionism comes from, as compared to straight, mainstream psychology. Straight, mainstream psychology is very determinist. It believes that it is going to discover at least the facts, and maybe the truth; that there are absolute cause and effect relationships. And social construction says things like 'what kind of results you get depends on who does the research.' That is the kind of thing that is very disturbing to someone who really buys into a scientific model, which says just the opposite, that anybody doing exactly the same thing is going to get exactly the same result. We know that's not true.

A: And perhaps even at odds with psychology's unspoken ontology, that is that human beings are themselves causal agents in the world, that cause and effect flow linearly from the individual into society, and so on and so forth.

R: There is no place in psychology for accident. Nobody that you talk to would ever admit the role of chance in our lives. We always used to kid because women would say it was luck and men would say it was skill, and attribution theorists have demonstrated this gender difference. There is no place for luck, there is no place for accident, and that is part of the social construction framework. It's that it's not predictable. I've always liked Steven Jay Gould, it's a funny person to bring into this, and I am not talking about his *Mismeasure of Man*, but he has this very interesting book on the Burgess shale which is all about these odd Cambrian fossils. And some of the fossils that go way back are really weird-looking creatures that never turned out to be something that existed much past a million years ago. But if you take a view of evolution as a progressive set of events, so that things get more and more complex and more and or adapted to the environment, then you always believe that you go from primitive fossils to very sophisticated creatures. But some of these Cambrian fossils that cease to exist were extremely complex. And they didn't go anywhere. Gould's view is of course punctuated equilibrium, and this notion of periodic catastrophes, in which it was sort of accidental which creatures survived long enough to keep going. (00.15.00)

A: There is an element of chance

R: There is very much of an element of change. And this is the kind of analogy I like to bring up when I talk about social construction, because people tend to believe biology more than they do psychology

A: Yeah, yeah, that's true. It has more validity somehow.

R: Yeah.

A: Well let's go back to some of the early history of organizational feminism in psychology. And only a few years after AWP coalesced in a formal way, there was proposal for the division for psychology of women. And you're written about, and others have written about the tensions between those two groups. But can you tell me what was your view of that? From your eyes, what was that tension and maybe you could just talk a bit about that.

R: I hope that you got some information from Martha Mednick on that, because she was certainly very much involved in it, although she was probably the person who was most caught in the middle of it. And I don't know if she talked about that or not. What happened was that unbeknownst to AWP, which already existed in some early fashion as an organization of primarily graduate students and young faculty remembers, with very few senior people involved. Florence Denmark was one of the senior women, and she wasn't all that senior, but compared to the rest of us she was. Unbeknownst to us, CWP managed to get enough signatures on a petition campaign to establish a division of APA [*American Psychological Association*]. The first AWP heard about the establishment of that division was a note in the APA program of that year (and don't ask me exactly which year it was) that there was going to be a meeting towards the end of the convention to elect officers to this new division of psychology of women.

A: Well, why no communication?

R: Well, let me try to tell you a little bit of the story. AWP had and still does hold its meeting before the APA. So some of us had come to Montreal early for the AWP meeting and there was this incredible consternation about what were we going to do. I, at that point, had a couple of small children at home; I had not planned to stay around for the entire meeting, and a lot of other people had not planned to stay for all that week. But we all hastily changed our plans to stay for the meeting, for the Division 35 organizing meeting. There are two different versions of this and I can't really vouch for either one. One is that the people who were establishing Division 35 simply did not know about AWP, which is possible because the networks were completely different. The only person who might have overlapped was Florence, and as far as I know, Florence didn't. The other interpretation that I heard from people was it was deliberate, that AWP was regarded as a group of ornery, radical, low-level junior faculty and graduate students who weren't important enough to be informed and in fact, we might likely be trouble-makers and therefore should not be contacted. I don't know.

A: You were a fringe element.

R: We were a fringe element. I honestly don't know which of those explanations is true, although I would rather believe the former - that they just didn't know about us. Anyway, we turned up at this organizational meeting and it was very clear that there were more of us than there were of them. And I remember Joann Gardner in the middle of the meeting when we were electing officers for the following year, and Joann yelling, 'I demand five minutes for a caucus.' So we get together, we were trying to figure out, "What are we going to do?" Here is this group who really did the work to really establish a division of psychology of women, and this is wonderful and we want to support it; but on the other hand we want to have some say in the future of the organization, and therefore we want to be part of the executive committee. And how are we going to do this? I mean we could elect everybody, but we don't want to do that. So how are we going to decide how are we going to elect people, who we are going to elect;' and we sort of decided two things. And this is all in this big five minutes. One is that we are going to not run people for the really senior offices like president, because they really did deserve to have their people become president. We also decided that we would run for the more junior positions, especially if the people who were nominated weren't at the meeting. That just seemed like an easy way out.

So we did, in fact, elect people to low-level offices. I was the first membership chair. Barbara Wallston, I think, was secretary or treasurer, I'm not sure. But it was all low-level kind of offices where you worked very hard and got very little for it, but at least you were putting in your time, and people wouldn't get too upset if this group came in and did that kind of work, after all that is what junior women did. But it was in many ways, from the perspective of the people who had organized Division 35, it was a hostile takeover. Or at least a partial takeover. Some of their friends who they fully expected to be elected to office were not. So there was a lot of hostility. The women who established 35 were more senior. Martha got caught in the middle trying to get everybody to get along, and the result was nobody trusted her from either group; hostility existed for a lot longer than one might have expected. I mean it was really for the first five or six years, everybody knew which camp the other person had come from. And I think it actually ended about the year I became president. I was sort of the last of the original "trouble-makers" who got elected president. I was the eighth president of the Division. And I think that was the last of it. The senior women were very conciliatory and congratulatory and I really had the feeling that we had finally gotten together. And now I don't know how many people even remember just how hostile it was.

A: Well some AWPers have spoken about feeling heavily ambivalent about there being a Division of the APA for psychology of women. Felt it was 'selling out' to the establishment, etc, etc. What were your opinions on that issue?

R: Well first of all, I was an academic and I think the insider-outsider component of the AWP and 35 really revolved around whether or not one was in academia. Most of the people who have been very heavily involved in AWP have not been (00.23.09) full-time academics, they have tended to be clinicians or they were in and out of academia. And the other factor was that although there have been lesbian officers of Division 35, not too many of them have been out. A few have, people like Laura Brown certainly have been. But there have been others in the earliest organizing group who never came out. None of us would be comfortable saying who they were, but we knew who they were. There was a sense that there were opportunities available by being

involved in 35, more respectability, and if you were a true radical and you wanted to change the system, you should not be buying into it. I guess I was never quite that radical.

A: You've written and you've mentioned that you became a feminist through writing a textbook with Florence Denmark. Tell me a little bit about how you met Florence and how she influenced you.

R: That was a pure accident. I was a faculty member at Hofstra [*Hofstra University in New York*] and there was another faculty member at Hofstra who, for some reason - I don't remember why - was a friend of Florence. She had a party and I went; and it was a purely social event, and I met Florence at this party. This was after the two first two psychology of women texts had come out, authored by Bardwick and Sherman. I had already started to teach about women. They weren't psychology of women courses, because we couldn't call them that; they were special seminars on women (chuckles). I was interested in those areas and I was lamenting the fact, with Florence, who was also starting to teach those kinds of courses, that neither of the two textbooks that were available was good, for different reasons. The Bardwick book was incredibly sexist. I mean it really is amazing how sexist that book is, even then; of course from our perspective now it's even worse, but even then it was very obviously not a book that you would want to teach if you had any grain of feminism in you. And the Sherman book was considerably better, but to be really blunt, it was boring. I mean it was just a dull book. So Florence and I were both complaining about the fact that this was true, and we decided well, why don't we just do a book together; and that's how it happened.

A: Okay. And what material did you draw on in the book?

R: I think I talk a little bit about this in *Resisting Gender*, we drew on everything. I mean there was no literature, there were no journals. The first really incredibly important piece of work was the *Journal of Social Issues* issue that Martha Mednick and Sandra Tangri did on women's achievement, and it had a Matina Horner article, and some of Broverman's work. It had some of the very first articles in psychology of women before we really had much of a file. So we drew on anything we could get; we drew on Bem and Bem, which also came from nontraditional places. We drew on Naomi Weisstein and certainly her article was published in a very bizarre place -

A: Yeah, I can't remember the name of the journal, it was strange.

R: Yes. It wasn't even a journal, it was a monograph of some sort. We took newspaper articles, we went to sociology, it was a very much more eclectic (00.27.10) mix than one would do now, because there was no literature, but there were a few articles. There was wonderful one by Linda Fidell that came out in *American Psychologist* in which they sent résumés with the same information to departments of psychology to see who they would hire; and this was a study you couldn't get away with now. And of course, sure enough, they were more likely to hire the men than the women with identical résumés, and if they did hire the women, the men got better jobs and they got higher salaries and higher ranks. And again I always like to use that Fidell study as an argument for feminist empiricism. Because people recognize the result of that study as being meaningful.

A: And it's hard to argue with those results, right

R: Very hard

A: And it's hard to use those results *against* women.

R: Right. Helen Astin, who was the second president of the division of women, was a counseling psychologist and therefore never quite as much in the mainstream as some of the other people, did a really fine book for Russell Sage on women doctorates in America where she looked at what happened, why women didn't get promoted, which looked at publications and degrees and all kinds of factors and came up with something that will still show up today, and that is, with the equivalent backgrounds women still didn't get promoted as quickly.

So there was a literature, it wasn't big, and you really had to dig for it. On the other hand, there wasn't much we could find, and what we did is, I mean the book was actually a text and reader. I have never been sure whether I consider myself an editor or an author. So what we did is we had chapters, but we also reprinted articles from these kinds of classic studies. And it's useful because they are all in one place.

A: What are some of your remembrances or memories of having taught psych of women in its earliest days? I guess what I am fishing for is, how did the students react?

R: Oh, it was wonderful in those days. There really was a feminist movement, at both Hofstra and then at Montclair. We had a lot of older women coming back who had not finished college or maybe not even gone. And they were really motivated and very interested in the field; ate it up, were eager to learn. I mean it was not just a faculty member teaching a student, we were all learning together; it was a very exciting period.

A: Yeah, yeah, it sounds like. Well let me ask a few more questions about that period, partly because I have a personal interest having run across some archival material recently on this issue. And that is in the late 60's, early 70's, as the AWP and Division 35 were making their demands of APA and so on, at the same time there was a lot of black activism within psychology. A lot of black, generally male, psychologists were demanding their place at the APA table as well, and occasionally, at least from the archival records and some published materials, it seems that the aims of these two groups, largely women, feminist, and largely black male psychologists and activists were, instead of being viewed as congruent, were in fact in conflict. Did you have any experience of that at that time?

R: I didn't have too much direct experience, although I think part of that was deliberate of the part of the power structure, to divide up the groups and make them feel that only one could get (I: divide and conquer) whatever advantage they wanted. I do know that there were, even early on there were a number of black women involved in Division 35 and AWP, and in a couple of cases I remember informal conversations with people who I felt trusted me and I trusted them, black women, asking them about their involvement, and they said, "Why do you think we are

here? Because in fact we are more comfortable with women than we are with those black men." So even very early on there were black women in feminist psychology, many of them, and I think she has been really undervalued for it, were students of Martha Mednick, Martha taught at Howard, Gwen Puryear Keita was one of Martha's students, and if you talk to Gwen about this, I really think that Martha has been undervalued for having brought in a lot of feminist black women.

A: Right; interesting. So your sense of it is then black women who were involved in 35 felt more comfortable in a feminist organization than they would have with the Association of Black Psychologists.

R: They sort of saw that women should step back and let the men achieve. And I mean if you read, it is an old book, but it was very good one, I think it was Michelle Wallace, but I could be wrong, which talks about black macho and the myth of the black superwoman. And she talks about how black men really felt that black women usurped their place and that they could only rise if black women stepped back and let them do it. And it wasn't too acceptable to the feminist psychologists.

A: There seems to also have been some tensions between white feminists and black [*male*] psychologists, too - maybe competition for resources - or tension at the time, I am not sure. But also the feeling that it was one of those classic 'my oppression is greater than your oppression' type of scenarios. And I wonder if you experienced anything like that?

R: I didn't see too much of that. What I did see was the problem of being lesbian; I mean AWP was perceived to be - and to some extent that's correct - has always been a more comfortable home for lesbian psychologists, especially if they are out. And there was certainly some discomfort with open lesbianism in Division 35, even though some of the founders were, in fact, themselves lesbian, but they were closeted. I don't know when, or if that ever completely got resolved; it may still be going on. I mean there haven't been a lot of open lesbian officers in 35; there have been a few.

A: Yeah, yeah, I know. And of course today there is a section of Division 35 devoted to lesbian, gay, and bisexual issues; yeah, yeah. (00.34.45)

R: But I think that was very controversial, the whole breaking down into sections, first we had one on black psychology and then we had one Hispanic and now we have one on gay, lesbian, bisexual. And that was very controversial because of this concern that we are fissioning the field; I don't think I was for it, I don't remember anymore what my feelings about it were. But certainly it has been okay, it hasn't been as destructive as we thought it might be. I think one of the arguments was, I remember someone raising the issue when we first started talking about sections, was 'what are we going to do if we have a section on men?' And the consensus was we didn't need to, because of course of all the APA was that.

A: Well can you tell me or talk a little more about the role of identity politics and how that has affected feminist psychology?

R: Well, I think 35 has, on occasion at least, fallen into the trap of identity politics. There is 'identity politics' and there is 'identity politics.' There are some very smart people who are interested in identity issues. Aida Hurtado or Beverly Greene, who are not anti-white, but they take a very reasoned, very conceptually deep view of how identity frames the kinds of questions one asks and the kinds of life one lives and so on. But then there are some other people who seem to think identity politics mean what color skin you have, and don't get much beyond that. And sometimes 35 falls into that. And I won't get any more specific than that.

A: Sure, sure. Tell me a little bit about how you got involved with the *Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues*.

R: Actually, it was about the same time I got involved with 35. Florence Denmark convinced me to join APA which I did not belong to when I first got my PhD. After all, Harvard PhDs didn't need things like APA. So I joined APA and I started to give papers in social psychology. I was gradually shifting between fields between the time I got my PhD in '66 until about '72 when I joined the APA. I had been trained as a physiological psychologist, and I was really getting into social psychology. And the first papers we did in social psychology had to do with the role of attire and race and how people helped other people - field studies. The first one actually had nothing to do with women. Then we started needing outlets for these publications. I was doing this with another woman at Hofstra, Beth Raymond, who had been trained in verbal learning, and the two of us were just trying to get out of our fields that we felt were both dull and irrelevant and started to do work together in what was then social psychology (we were really-self-taught social psychologists). And we realized that when we started to think about giving papers at conventions the places we wound up on the program were with people from SPSSI, which made a great deal of sense since the work was in fact, social issues-oriented. And so I got involved in SPSSI because they seemed to be the people who were interested in the same things I was, and got elected in fact to SPSSI's executive committee and president of Division 35 at the same time. I served in both positions the same year, which was insane.

A: A lot of work! What role did feminism play in SPSSI politics? (00.38.53)

R: Not a lot. I've written about this a fair bit. One of the things that continues to appall me is this very socially progressive organization that didn't notice there wasn't any input on the part of women for the first twenty five years. There were four female officers in SPSSI in twenty-five years, and interestingly enough three of the four had networking connections with some important person, also within SPSSI, or some important person in psychology like Ruth Tolman, who was the sister-in-law of Edward Tolman. There just weren't a lot of them, and when we had the 50th anniversary celebration of SPSSI and I at this point was getting interested in history, and I had a conversation with Doc Cartwright, who I didn't know at the time, a lovely man. And I asked him, 'Can you tell me, I am really puzzled by the fact that this progressive organization just didn't have women officers; didn't you notice? What was going on?' And he said, 'Well to tell you the truth, Rhoda, we didn't notice.'

A: It was a blind spot.

R: It was a blind spot, and of course this was also true for African-Americans, but there were fewer of them around than there were women. There were a couple of times, every once in a while there would be a little ripple of somebody being interested in women's issues, and then it would fade away again. And I have written about this to some extent, so I am not going to get into it. But one thing it takes to sustain a feminist commitment on part of the organization is enough people, enough of a network, and enough time for the group to coalesce to think about what the issues are, to start doing things like setting up programming at APA, editing special issues of journals. And until you have a critical mass -

A: Critical mass

R: That's the word I was trying to think of – you can't do it. And it took a long time for there to be a critical mass of women in SPSSI, and it had to be women who have feminist commitment and that didn't happen until the seventies.

A: With people like Kay Deaux?

R: No, Kay was not involved early on. Clara Mayo, Martha Mednick; there was suddenly Marilyn Brewer; suddenly there was an interesting click when two women in a row got elected president of SPSSI and everybody suddenly realized that there had been a real change, and that was Clara and Martha.

A: Okay, interesting. So that was a real catalyst, or something shifted there?

R: Yeah, something shifted there; and of course it was the seventies. And you know, people were more self-consciously concerned about being feminist.

A: Well tell me a little more about SPSSI politics; one thing that somewhat surprised me coming into SPSSI of late as a newcomer is the amount of on-going dialogue about whether or not SPSSI should have position statements on things. Like (00.42.50) actually espouse a position, a value-laden position on an issue; or whether they should remain more or less impartial, scientists who simply study these things but don't actually say anything about them.

R: Well there is nothing new about this, this has been going on…

A: Well, tell me about this, yeah

R: I think it has to with the fact that SPSSI really has two kinds of people who get active in the organization. They have two different sources of energy. One group are social activists who want to use psychology for political means; anti-war, anti-racism, anti-sexism, anti-disability - name whatever social issue you would like. They come in committed to social change, to using psychology in that way. You have another group (and some people are both) who are what I would call applied social psychologists. They want to use psychology for social good. They'd like to figure out how to use psychology to get people to drink less, or not to use cigarettes, or how to protect the environment. And I am not quite sure what the epistemological differences between these groups are, but they are really very different. And one group puts great priority on

the value of empirical research, the scientific model, to do good, but don't believe that you can be both political and a good scientist. And then you have the other people who feel you should use science for political, activist purposes, or what's the point of being in SPSSI? And it goes back and forth, the organization flip flops depending on how many of which kind of person happens to be in office at any given time.

A: And where do you fall in terms of those two camps?

R: I fall under the political action group. I really do think that we have to use psychology for social activism.

A: Mm-hm; okay. Okay. Let's talk about a little bit about, we got on to this at lunch, but I kind of curtailed it. What do you see as the most important changes that feminism has been able to produce in psychology? And then the second part of that question is, what have been the failures in terms of its impact on psychology?

R: Well, there is no question there are a number of real advances. One is the whole notion of looking at women. When I was a graduate student, not only did we only look at males, but we even only looked at male animals, and so just the notion that we need to look at women, not simply just the sex differences. That there are issues that involve women that have nothing to do with sex differences, I mean questions like menstruation and menopause, aging, which are really different for women and men, you name it. And I could probably find some reason why we should be looking at it or have looked at it; mental illnesses that are more common for women than men, the whole issue of anorexia, depression, a lot of areas which never would have been studied if we hadn't said that women have to be a legitimate concern in their own right.

A: Object of study (00.47.05)

R: Object of study. So that's one issue there is no question about in my mind. The other issue that we have been important on (although maybe not as successful in making people recognize) is the extent to which the social context is important. That you can't study people simply in the laboratories in isolation from their real-life context. And so some people believe that I am really a crypto-sociologist and not a psychologist at all. Social psychology has always been a little problematic within our discipline because we don't fall well into either of its two major paradigms. One is the kind of individualist, personological approach, and the other is the more experimental approach which generalizes across individuals. Social psychology really does have some problems in that regard. And I think that feminist psychology has certainly been able to raise the issue of context, like looking at roles, which is something that came straight out of sociology and psychology did not really pay much attention to this notion of roles; the notion of power. Power does not make any sense when you are talking about subjects in the laboratory because you artificially eliminate power differentials, but in a real context, power is incredibly important.

One of the earliest papers I ever did, and I remember someone thinking I was delightfully naïve because I didn't know the sociology of it, but in fact it was the whole notion of power and status and sex, and how sex is itself a power/status category. I thought I was finding out something that

was incredibly original and I remember Judy Long Laws - who was at a conference where I was talking about it - sort of tsk, tsk'ing about how I hadn't really read all the sociology which had already made this point. But again you don't see as much attention to power and status in current feminist psychology. I think that one of the things that has gone wrong- I don't know if it's our failure or the backlash - but the notion of feminism has become so problematic that it is being removed from the psychology of women. One of the developments that bothers me a lot, and I've written about it in at least one book review because I was very unhappy with the book, I am still trying to figure out the difference between the psychology of women and the psychology of gender. What is the psychology of gender and how does it differ from the psychology of women? As far as I can see, the psychology of gender is psychology of women de-politicized from its feminist roots. Now other people argue that it's more inclusive, but if you look at the way that psychology of gender books go about their business, what they do is they spend much more time on sex differences than psychology of women books do. And, of course, to the extent to which you pay more attention to men, you are paying less attention to women. So I think this is a direction I am not happy with.

A: I would've thought it would have been the opposite, that psych of women would pay more attention to sex difference and psych of gender would talk more about social constructionist approaches, power, context.

R: It depends on who is doing it. One of the problems is that I think psychology of gender people either deliberately or not so deliberately (maybe accidentally or naïvely) are still viewing gender as a noun. There are men, there are women, they have these properties, and we can compare and contrast them. But it's a gendered world in most ways and not just because of the early socialization differences between males and females. So they look at gender really as a noun. I think that some of us who were social (00.51.19) constructionists early on still argue that gender has to be viewed as a verb, and the way we behave towards other individuals genders them. But that isn't the approach that has been taken so far by the people who have been writing these psychology of gender textbooks. Abby Stewart does take a very sophisticated view of gender, it's not that gender in itself is bad word, it's how it's being used.

A: Okay, interesting. Can you talk a bit about the role that psych of women has played in women's studies generally?

R: That's a good question. I don't think it played as much of a role as I would have liked to have seen it do. There are really two things going on. The parts of the psych of women that have had the most impact on women's studies are the more clinical, personological approaches. Carol Gilligan was incredibly important in women's studies, even though those of us who are empirical kept saying there is no empirical evidence to support her point of view, and this is really poor research, methodologically. And I remember being yelled at by my friends in women's studies, because it felt right; I really do want to believe that women are more compassionate and moral than men, and you are just being male by considering things like methodology and evidence. Part of the reason some ideas have been more acceptable to women's studies is that clinical personological frameworks are more similar to disciplines like history and literature. They tell a story. The more social empirical work is too much like male-dominated science. It has also to do with the fact with people who run women's studies tend to see numbers as a male domain. They

don't like to use numbers; they don't feel comfortable with them; they feel it is a bad model and it's very difficult to get them to accept an empirical viewpoint. I've had arguments, I have been involved in women's studies for a long time, and I've had lots of arguments, some public, and some private on the subject of insisting on doing what I consider to be empirical research. I've had arguments with important philosophers in the field, like Alison Jaggar**,** on the subject and essentially she regarded me as being persistent, but wrong.

A: Hm, interesting. Well you know kind of a converse of this issue is psychology's conservatism in not allowing more feminist epistemology into the canon of psychology.

R: And in fact, one of the things you recognize, if you've been around women's studies, is that, in fact, psychology and economics are probably the most conservative disciplines, certainly in social sciences, followed maybe by political science.

A: Why is that? Do you have any conjectures?

R: I don't know. It may be this male model of how you go about doing the work. It's not an accident that these are the more numerical of the social science fields. Experimental psychology certainly wants to mimic the natural sciences, and the economic and political sciences are very male, mathematical, number-driven. I don't know if that's a factor or not, but they are certainly the most conservative areas. I don't know why. (00.55.14)

A: You spoke a little bit earlier, before we started taping, about your sense of - I hope I am not overstating this -disappointment or discouragement with what feminist psychology has been able to accomplish, or the status of the field at the moment.

R: Maybe I didn't know what we were going to do, I mean honestly I can't save the world, change the field, I really don't know what I expected. But I really don't feel we've made fundamental changes. We have done some important things. We've managed to get journals, we've managed to get courses into the curriculum. But on the other hand, a lot of the work that I regard as the most interesting work being done that's related to sexism, related to feminist issues, is not being done by people who identify themselves as primarily in psychology of women. They are people who identify themselves primarily as social psychologists; often, social cognitive people. You know, research on things like the self-fulfilling prophecy, showing that you can manufacture sex differences. That was done by Mark Snider. He is a nice guy, he is pro-feminist, but he is not in the psychology of women. People like Mark Zanna, people like (I mentioned her at lunch) Maserin Banerji, who has done some really interesting work on non-verbal behaviors associated with sexism and racism. Again, it's not coming out of, it's not coming from people who are primarily identified with psych of women. The people who I think are doing some of the most exciting work, people like Michelle Fine and Brinton Lykes (who are doing essentially liberation work, you know, liberation psychology) - it's not derived from feminist psychology. Even Abby Stewart's work, and I think Abby Stewart's work is wonderful, and Abby certainly regards herself as a feminist, is more social-psychological than it is psych of women.

A: Is it because feminists don't feel they need a home like that that has been provided, by, say Division 35, anymore, or…?

R: I don't know. I don't know what the figures are, I am concerned about the question of how many young women are joining Division 35, becoming active in it; it seems like the same faces recycle a lot. It is certainly true that the backlash has told women that in fact they don't need feminism because they have it all; all the problems are solved, the playing field is now even and all you have to do is go out and do it. A lot of people don't want to claim the title of feminist because they see it as problematic, we never got rid of that. So I don't know. I think that one of the things that feminist psychologists need to recognize is that they need to get into coalitions. I am concerned because I don't think that feminist psychologists are concerned about current politics, and maybe they are not specific to women, but if we don't do something about the erosion of civil liberties and civil rights, the growing authoritarianism of our government, it doesn't much matter whether you are a woman or a man. I am depressed by the fact that I can't get my feminist colleagues to get excited.

A: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Would you have any advice for young women who do identify as feminist in terms of how they should proceed?

R: It's still a minefield out there, and I know that Abby Stewart and Stephanie Shields have written about this and the kind of advice you give to your graduate students who are going out in the field and telling them they still (00.59.35) have to do twice the work as somebody who is not a feminist. You have to have a domain of interest that's not specifically feminist or on women, and have two fields of work going on at the same time, one of which is straight and acceptable to psychology, whatever it is, and then you can also do your other stuff, but of course we all recognize that we are asking women to do twice as much work. And yet if we don't train women that way, a woman who is kind of tagged as feminist, who only does feminist research, is going to have problems.

A: In your assessment now, in the stage of your career where you are right now, what is your sense of how that's played out in your own professional life?

R: Well I'd like to say it's because I'm brilliant, but I don't think that has anything to do with it. Partly I am lucky and partly I am politically savvy. And I really sort of carved out a niche for myself that sort of makes me one of the spokespeople for the psychology of women, and I'd like to say that I am a legitimate representative of a field that nobody is quite sure is legitimate. And that's just because of having done it for a long time, being persistent, maybe because I have to pay lip service and do, in fact, some empirical research; maybe it has to do with my credentials, I am not sure what it is, but I've been able to carve out a niche and there aren't too many niches available. I don't know how to tell younger women how to get one of them.

A: Right. I am conscious of time and I know we need to wrap up a bit, but there are a couple of questions that I have that don't really relate to any of these bigger themes, but I want to ask nonetheless. I know you've written about this, and you've talked to me about it, having felt very honored by your relationship with Carolyn Sher*i*f, Sh*e*rif?

R: She pronounced it Sh*e*rif, he pronounced it Sher*i*f.

A: Can you tell me a little bit about your relationship with Carolyn and how it influenced you?

R: Well that was very lucky. Carolyn was president of Division 35 the year before I was. She really was a mentor, and she was one of the very, very few senior women around, period, and we all respected her enormously, I mean if you just read anything that anybody says about her, they talk about how wonderful she was. The reason why she was so wonderful was she was willing to read our work, and to comment on it. She wasn't necessarily kind, well she was very kind, but she was also very rigorous. I've never been able to figure out how you do it, but she was able to really critique your work and still make you feel good about it. So she would say things like 'Well I am only telling you this because I know you are so smart and I want to help you make this really good piece better.' She made everybody feel really special, that they were her students, her children, her friends. She never talked down to people, she never gave you this notion that she was this important psychologist and the rest of us were callow youth at her feet. She would share some of her own worries and concerns with us. She was just very wise, she had been in the field a long time, she was smart, she was critical, and she was supportive. You can still hear the hero worship. (01.03.39) In many ways it was just lucky on my part, it was just sheer luck, I got elected the year after she did. So I was president-elect when she was president and I was president when she was past-president, and she was always very helpful.

A: Yeah. Sounds like maybe in some respects she was a role model for you and how you might interact with students or…

R: I don't know. I've never been as good at that. I've had other people who have been helpful, Martha Mednick was helpful, Florence Denmark was certainly helpful, and it was in different ways. I've never been able, I mean I still come across on occasion as being too critical. It's not that I mean to put people down, because I don't, but I am pretty tone-deaf about criticism. I mean I can separate criticism of my work from criticism of me as a person and not everybody does that. [64.33] So sometimes I will just try to be what I think is helpful but it's seen as critical of the person. I will say "I know you need to do this and that and the other thing…" and it will get heard as being "Well you don't really think too much of me." I don't know how Carolyn did it.

A: To both criticize and yet motivate at the same time.

R: And just come out as warm, enormously warm. Interestingly enough I had a dialogue with one of Carolyn's daughters not long ago. We met in Japan - it's a very long complicated story I won't get into. I met her in Tokyo, and she's a friend of a friend and we were in Tokyo at the same time as visiting professors. She's a student of Japanese literature who teaches at Oberlin. I had met Ann once before a long time ago, and it is very clear that she is much more ambivalent about her mother than I am. Which I guess would be true if you talked to my daughters too. In some ways I think that Ann felt that we were Carolyn's daughters more than they were.

A: There was some sibling rivalry, even though you didn't know that you were the siblings in this scenario.

R: Carolyn really was special. She would read papers by *my* students. I had graduate students who idolized her.

A: Is there anyone I haven't asked about, or anything that I haven't asked about, in terms of the history of feminism in psychology?

R: No, I think you need to be a little… there are sort of three areas that I think you need to keep separated in some way because they are not the same thing. One is organizational feminism: Division 35, AWP, there are whole cohorts of people in that area some of whom never did any scholarly work at all but who were very important in terms of organizational development. Then you have women in psychology, many of whom did very important work but weren't necessarily feminist, and then you have feminist scholarship which isn't always done by women at all. I don't know how much overlap you get between those three things. I've sort of been all three to some extent, but I can tell you about people who are in one or the other of those but not all three. I don't know what that distinction means but I think it should be kept in mind.

A: I think any good history, or any complete history, would have to take into account all of those areas and how they fit together, converge, diverge.

R: There are women who did some extremely important scholarship, early scholarship, in feminist psychology who were never involved organizationally, as well. And sometimes we resented it, because we wanted them to be. And some had to be dragged kicking and screaming into organizational work because they didn't see themselves as being feminist and had to be convinced that they, in fact, were.

A: Sort of reluctant feminists.

R: And then there were people who wore all the hats. Irene Frieze is another person who has been involved for a long time and you might want to talk to her.

A: In both 35 and SPSSI…

R: Well SPSSI, 35, AWP, research and scholarship. She has a fairly independent network of people, different than mine. I know Irene well but we don't overlap in terms of our work.

A: OK. Well let's stop there.