

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

**Interview with Sari van Anders**

*Interviewed by Alexandra Rutherford*

*Ann Arbor, Michigan*

*November 16, 2017*

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Alexandra Rutherford, PhD

Project Director, Psychology's Feminist Voices

[alexr@yorku.ca](mailto:alexr@yorku.ca)

**Psychology's Feminist Voices Oral History Project**  
**Interview with Sari Michelle van Anders**  
**Interviewed by Alexandra Rutherford**  
**University of Michigan**  
**Ann Arbor, Michigan**  
**November 16, 2017**

AR: Alexandra Rutherford, Interviewer

SVA: Sari van Anders, Interview participant

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AR: So we are in Ann Arbor, Michigan, at the University of Michigan, on Nov 16, 2017, and my first request of you is really simple, if you could just state your full name, and place and date of birth, for the record.

SVA: Sari Michelle van Anders, Toronto, ON, Canada, April 28, 1978.

AR: Oh, great, ok. So, let me start the interview by asking a question that we ask of almost all of our participants and that is, "How did you come to be a feminist, or what is the evolution of your kind of feminism?" Sometimes we use the term feminist identity, some people find that a bit too sedimented, but the evolution of your feminism?

SVA: I definitely identify as feminist, so I'm ok with that, but I understand what you're saying. I feel like I grew up with feminism and as a feminist; we grew up with "Free to be you and me in the house"...

AR: Oh yeah

SVA: ...things like that. My mom went to consciousness-raising groups. When I was younger I remember reading books that were kind of feminist, a little bit ahead of my age and understanding, but trying. I was also one of those kids, I remember, in grade school, I got my period in grade 5 or 6 I can't remember, and I remember being like, 'I'm not gonna hide the fact that I have a tampon, I'm gonna carry it in my hand and walk around.' And fighting with my family, and various people, not that I thought wearing a dress was bad, but I thought, there's no reason why to be dressed up, a girl has to wear a dress. I often lost those fights but as I got older, [I] won them. So for me, feminism was just a really strong part of what I did. I noticed really early that girls weren't playing with boys, boys weren't playing with girls, that the boys were playing sports at some point, and the girls kind of weren't allowed, on the basketball court or things like that. And I engineered a takeover. Things like that. [laughs]

AR: Oh wow, so you were already kind of organizing and being an activist, even as a kid.

SVA: In a small way. So yeah, I think it was definitely a part of what I was doing and thinking and believing from a pretty early age.

AR: Yeah. Do you, I mean, you mentioned your mother being part of consciousness-raising groups and so on. Were you aware of that, did she express her feminism to you when you were growing up?

SVA: You know, I think it was definitely, my parents raised us to be sort of strong women. I'm Jewish and there's a really strong tradition of strong women in Jewish culture. Sort of speaking our minds, and talking about feelings, you know, Jewish stereotypes are everyone's talking about feelings. So, she would talk about the consciousness-raising groups, but at the time, that wasn't the name, I sort of (2:57) understand that now, that was what they were called. But we still had a really traditional division of labour at home, just as traditional as anyone else for the most part. For example I had an aunt, who was like the assistant coach for the national volleyball team and had a friend who came to everything and my dad would talk about, you know, colleagues who were gay, and how he was fine with that, like, why did people have a problem? So, it's not exactly that they were the most radical, it was a pretty suburban, we grew up Bathurst and Wilson...

AR: Yup. I know it well, yeah.

SVA: Pretty suburban life. But, they were pretty progressive compared to a lot of people's families. So, feminism, I think, trying to remember if it was the word when I was younger, that my mom would use or not, and I don't remember in particular that it was, but I sort of understood it in that way, then or shortly after.

AR: Do you remember any of the reactions that you would've gotten from your peer group when you held your tampon proudly or tried to get girls playing different sports, that kind of thing?

SVA: Yeah, I do, I remember, that there wasn't pushback to things you would think there would be. So, I think, the tampon thing was either so shocking or people didn't know they were... we knew we were supposed to be feeling shame about it, but I'm not sure everyone else knew that other people were supposed to be feeling shame. So there wasn't as much of a reaction.

I remember when we tried to play basketball there was some pushback. I remember, when in junior high, in grade 7, there was the girls' basketball and the boys' - sports were totally divided by gender, and still are actually, at a really young age – and I remember the boys who didn't make the basketball team telling the girls who did that they were still better than them (which actually was probably true in retrospect, they'd had a lot more practice, they had played on teams) and I remember we were like, well, it's equality so therefore, the boys team and the girls team must be equally good. It took a while for us to realize that some of the pushback was this weird sort of reality-based pushback that was actually like, "equality" wasn't actually what was happening.

AR: Right.

SVA: You know, the girls' teams and the boys' teams weren't as good. The girls in general weren't as good at sports, and we didn't have as much understanding of why that would be, and since we were told, girls and boys were equal, it was hard to understand why that might not be. And then, later on, you know, it became clear.

AR: Yeah. I think the role of structural disadvantage still eludes a lot of people, when they think about these things, so I'm not surprised that as a kid that was a little mysterious.

SVA: That's right, in grade 7 we didn't have all the intellectual apparatus to make sense of it. Because, you know, that was an age when the girls and boys wore similar clothes, we had sometimes even similar haircuts. It was, you know, the '80s, and for all its problems, it's sort of right before gender gains for women stalled. Like things were still...there was a lot of hope. So I think, yeah, we were told that girls and boys were pretty equal, although of course not around appearance, of course not around all sorts of things. But in terms of like [being told] "We could be anything."

AR: Right, right. (6:20)

SVA: But I do remember finding out that I couldn't be a professional soccer player, because there weren't girls' teams. I mean, I don't know if that was true at the time, but I remember being crushed, like, my dreams of being a professional soccer player in grade 4 just weren't going to come to fruition.

AR: Wow...

SVA: Yes.

AR: Well, tell me a little bit, did you mention what was your family configuration, you had sisters?

SVA: Mhm, yeah, pretty nuclear family. So, a mom, a dad, and an older sister.

AR: Older sister. Ok.

SVA: Mhm. And the rest of our family's also in Toronto, for the most part.

AR: Oh...ok, so I'm totally tempted to digress into Toronto, but...

SVA: Me too...

AR: I know!

[both laugh]

AR: But maybe we can save that for later. So tell me a little bit then about your education, and what I'm getting at here, is your kind of path into psychology, in a way. In terms of, I know you went to the University of Western Ontario.

SVA: Mhm, for my undergrad and my masters. And I picked it, not for psychology, but because, I was in a gifted program for most of my schooling. And I also went to a school called Earl Haig, which had a gifted arts program, which I wasn't in, but we were able to benefit from it.

AR: Oh nice.

SVA: And so what I wanted to be was a biological anthropologist by day, and an art critic by night

AR: Ah, fun!

SVA: Because I figured, there's not very many jobs for art critics, so I thought biological anthropologist would be a safe plan, and I was really interested in evolution.

AR: Ok, and you were interested in evolution just because of high school and learning about Darwin and evolutionary theory and that kind of thing?

SVA: No, I don't think it was actually high school biology that got me interested in evolution. I wrote a paper, we had to do these things, ISPs, independent study projects, and at some point, I think for a history class maybe, it wasn't a biology class I don't think, maybe history, I did a project on scientific sexism? Or, maybe in high school it was scientific racism and then in undergrad it was scientific sexism, in any case, in both, and I used to go to the library and do like reading projects, and so I would read up about, scientific racism and race, and evolution and things like that. But I was also interested in evolution as a process, but luckily from a really early age I understood the way evolution was misused around humans and human evolution. (8:45)

AR: Wow, yeah. To be aware of scientific racism at that point, that's pretty, I think, ahead of the curve perhaps,

SVA: Yeah, I feel lucky, because then I was able to go into, you know, I had much more faith in evolution as a science for humans, like as a much more neutral science then, than I do now, but even then, I think I was... I thought of it as much less neutral than most researchers might now. [laughs]

AR: right, right.

SVA: So I wanted to go to a school that had those [programs] and there weren't that many options. And at the time you mostly applied within Ontario because that's where you could apply for free, and I couldn't afford to leave home without a scholarship, so it was really important to get a scholarship, because it was really important to leave home. And, Western was the one that gave me the most money and it gave me a full scholarship, so I had a full ride to go there. And it was a great school. But then, when I got there, the biological anthropology wasn't so much

human evolution, it was more like forensic and primate stuff, which I found surprisingly, incredibly dreadful, just memorizing primate lineages. And my psychology course which I took kind of on a lark... I had as an advisor cause I was part of this honours program there called Scholars Electives, my advisor was the associate dean, rather than sort of the regular rank and file folks, and he thought, you know, you might want to take a psychology course, people really like it, and then I just really did. I really fell in love with it. And I took a biologically-oriented psychology class that they had, an intro [course]. And I had so many questions, everything we learned seemed pretty ripe for skepticism. [both laugh] But also kind of explaining a lot, so it was this really interesting mix. And I took hardly any feminist courses in undergrad, because I thought, "Well, I already am a feminist." I didn't understand what women's, gender, and sexuality, and those sorts of fields were.

AR: Ok. And were you aware that there was stuff on offer in terms of that?

SVA: Yeah.

AR: Ok. And was that through women's studies, or ...?

SVA: Yup. At Western there was women's studies, I think that's what it was called. But I thought it was about teaching you how or why to be a feminist and I thought well, I've already got that so, you know, so I regret all those missed years. But also, I kind of picked it up on my own.

AR: Yeah. And I know, well at least in my experience in psychology, I was never aware that there was anything within psychology, even psychology of women was kind of opaque to me at the time. So, yeah.

SVA: I don't think we even had a Psych of Women course. Our department was on the more conservative side.

AR: I went to U of T for undergrad, and let me tell you, there was no Psych of Women. It was a little bit before your time at Western, but I don't think it's changed much. ...well, maybe not... OK, so then you got the psychology bug in a way.

SVA: Mhm.

AR: And, so tell me, did you do an honours thesis? (11:59)

SVA: So I got involved in research at a really early age. They had this research apprenticeship program that some friends and I were so dying to be a part of, and of course it basically meant sweeping labs and handing out questionnaires. And then I think I volunteered in a few labs, and NSERC, the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council [of Canada], had these summer research grants for undergrads, so I got a few of those so I was able to do research. One of them was in an animal lab.

AR: Ok

SVA: And that helped me realize I absolutely did not want to do animals for my research. And then luckily, by my second year I knew I wanted to go to grad school in psychology, and so I remember taking out a book on what do you need to get in and succeed and so that helped because you know I found out pretty early that research was the thing.

AR: Yeah, yeah. And so you did your masters at UW as well. Who did you work with?

SVA: Elizabeth Hampson.

AR: Elizabeth Hampson. Right, right. And tell me a little bit about your work in her lab--I noticed that a lot of your early publications appear to be more evolutionarily based, so can you speak a bit about the evolution of that?

SVA: I think the earlier papers were different kinds of evolutionary work than the work I do now. I think of the work I do now, quite a lot of it is, if anything, even more evolutionary but less near evolutionary psychology. And the earlier papers were more cognitive. I actually wasn't interested in cognition and didn't understand that when I went to grad school you kind of did what your supervisor did, I don't know how I missed that, but I was interested in hormones, I was interested in gender and sex, and things like that. And I was really interested in sex differences early on, and trying to understand the evolution of sex. But taking into account gender norms and things like that. So my work in her lab was trying to understand hormones and sex differences in cognition in ways that you know, wasn't a good fit for me, and so I went to do my PhD elsewhere.

AR: Right, out to Simon Fraser

SVA: That's right. But all the time in my undergrad and grad school I was reading feminist science studies, and postcolonial science.

AR: Yeah, I was going to ask when that entered the picture.

SVA: So I was reading postcolonial feminism and black women's feminisms and feminist science studies, and then also doing my science, but it was very clearly two different lines, and it wasn't clear to me how to bring them together. But it turned out to be really interesting, you know, I read Judith Butler in grad school on my own, and I read Patricia Hill Collins on my own, and *Colonize This*, and books like that and sort of with no formal 'this is what I'm taking from them,' I have taken so much from them and incorporated it into my work in a sort of growing up, like I grew up academically with it. Which is, I think, different from most folks and maybe is why I have felt more comfortable figuring out... The feminist and queer and postcolonial approaches have (15: 21) come into my work from the ground up, I didn't have to fit them in later. Which might be one of the reasons why I feel able to do feminist bioscience in a way that I know a lot of people struggle with.

AR: Yeah. And I know you've spoken about this before, but I think it's something that I find fascinating to continue to unpack. And that is, can you speak about the specific ways in which feminist science studies and feminist philosophy and so on, really influence how you do your work? Even maybe give us some examples where it has changed the way you might otherwise proceed or something like that.

SVA: Yeah, this is something I'm really fascinated by and wish I could speak about better. I think to some extent because I have sort of enculturated myself into it, I end up being not always as articulate as I'd like to be, because people aren't always the best at explaining why they do what they do in their own culture.

So because I kind of made up what I did, and incorporated all these things I was reading, I didn't, along the way, think 'I'm going to take situated knowledge, or strong objectivity... I'm not going to take the concept of bio-materiality...' so it's kind of organic in a way. But I really want to start writing more about that, because I know it doesn't help people when they want to do feminist science. And they don't know how to do it, there's no books on it there's no articles on it, really. There's feminist science studies, but not feminist science practice. All that said, [laughs] a lot of the concepts have been really important to me, things I can pull out, like some of the ones I've mentioned, like strong objectivity. So, people often think, 'oh feminist work,' you know you must hear this all the time like most of us do, 'feminists would be more biased about the work they do.' Which is really ironic because feminism is all about interrogating bias related to gender, power, intersecting identities, and science doesn't have any formal mechanism for relating to bias. So, I think of strong objectivity influencing our work, we're thinking about what our own positions [are], what are our social locations [and how they influence our work and assumptions]. Let's say we're looking at desire. We can't just take desire as a given construct. To do critical research means to critically engage with the object of study, so desire itself is under interrogation.

AR: So how might you do that in your own work – take the concept say, desire?

SVA: Right. So for us, I started out even in grad school looking at desire and I would look at, 'ok, well how are people measuring desire?' A lot of people just measure it by saying, 'How high is your desire on a Likert type scale from 0 to 6' or something like that – very high, very low? And it didn't seem very fulfilling or very meaningful. So I started to find out, 'oh, someone has made a desire scale and it has solitary and dyadic desire,' and that turned out to be really fortuitous because I've been really interested in solitary and dyadic desire. And one of the really feminist and queer things about that is people kind of assume they're the same, people assume that dyadic sexuality is always more important than solitary sexuality. So, even paying attention to solitary sexuality - I feel like I might've done more empirical work on solitary sexuality than most people - has I think made a major feminist and queer intervention into sex research.

But then we started thinking, well this is also sort of high or low just on two dimensions, it's still not really getting into the phenomenology of desire, like what are people actually experiencing? So we started doing some work developing some different types of questionnaires, trying to understand how we might quantitatively think of desire in different ways, different factors that might emerge. So, when people experience desire, is it always desire for an orgasm with another



person, which is how, I think the lay or what I call pre-theoretical understanding is, (19:46) the sort of cultural narratives of desire. Or just sometimes people just want to be close, or do they want to feel hot, do they want to try something new, do they want to alleviate boredom, are they stressed and it's going to relieve that, all sorts of things like that. So, we did some quantitative work about that, which I think is really feminist to think about the multiplicities of phenomena, and also to me, the best part of feminist science is that it's really empirical, so we actually go out and try to see what's there as opposed to assuming we know what desire is.

So a lot of people say, 'well isn't feminist science just good science?' And I'm like, 'well it is good science, it is better science, but it's not just that.' It's coming from a feminist place with feminist commitments. But then we also think of desire - we used mixed methods; we know we can't get everything from qualitative research or interviews, those aren't necessarily more progressive.

AR: Speak a little bit more to that, because as you were talking, I was thinking, one kind of move that feminists make when they run up against something like desire, is they say, 'ok, we have all these scales, but they seem incomplete, we've got cultural narratives, but we really need to do to understand the phenomenology of desire is talk to people about desire.' So that's one feminist move, right? Go to the person's experience, allow them to express themselves... So, talk to me about why you have focused more on quantitative mixed methods, tell me a little bit more about why you feel that interviews also are kind of not getting you exactly where you want to go?

SVA: Right, so I guess the thing we feel is we need multiple methods. That's why we use mixed methods. I think we're one of the few hormone research labs anywhere to use qualitative methods, and increasingly, we've incorporated them into our work, and so we think of it as multiple ways to get at the same thing, or at different things; we don't know whether we're always talking about the same things with our qualitative and quantitative work even if they're the same words.

But one of the things I'm quite concerned with is the idea that we somehow get closer to truth when we're talking to people as if we as researchers aren't filtering, as if we're not culling out certain things from our interviewees. There's lots of people who feel completely uncomfortable being interviewed or speaking about these things. We assume that people have language, there's a concept, a term, you were asking [about] feminist philosophy of science. So feminist philosophy and feminist philosophy of science [have a term], about, I guess there's epistemologies of ignorance, but there's also...epistemic injustice? It's when you don't have the words, you don't have the language, I'll think about it and tell you for the transcript (22:25). [added later by SVA: the term is "hermeneutic injustice"]. The concept is that we don't always have the words to explain our situations, and we don't always have the comfort, or the ability, that there's all sorts of issues of power with these interviews, which I know is part of qualitative research as well.

So one of the things we've tried to do is to make clear is that tools are neutral, but it's in their use that they're feminist. So, quantitative work is not necessarily less feminist, it's just become synonymous with non-feminist work, because it's often been used in non-feminist or anti-feminist ways. And then to segue to bio-material measures like hormones, it's the same thing,

usually, when it comes to gender and sex, hormones have been used in ways that are determinist, in ways that are not helping women or feminine people, in ways that further marginalize, but there's nothing inherently natural about that, and that's one of the things we argued that's for me a primary feminist insight, that there's no fact without interpretation, and other people have said this too. There's no method without use, and there's no fact without application, and so we don't see the methods or tools as inherently one or the other, it's about how we try to use them.

So for example, some of our quantitative work, we're really interested in a sort of feminist quantification, where we're not giving you a scale that has a set factor structure that you think about the factor structures depending on the samples and populations you're working with, so that we're not seeing the same, we're not saying, 'here are the 7 factors of desire that exist across everyone,' we're saying, 'here's the questions we use, we think they're useful, you may want to add or take away from them, and you should do factor structures on whomever you're working with so that you can see what might result.' And that might change over time with the same people, that might be different depending on who's in your sample, and there might be interesting similarities as well. And we think of that as a really feminist and queer move, sort of destabilizing the way questionnaires are used and then opening up a radical contextualization, like a situated science.

AR: Right. So, let me ask you, you mentioned earlier, the feminist relationship to the body and to materiality has been historically quite fraught, as you have already mentioned. But there has been, you're in very good company with a lot of feminists as you kind of reclaim this, because it isn't inherently anti-feminist to focus on the body and so on, it's just the way it's been used. So can you articulate in your work then, given that your work is based on things like hormones and biological substrates of gender, can you articulate what you see then as the relationship between body and culture?

SVA: This I think is one of the main things for most feminist science studies people and people who are interested in materiality, including what people are talking about as the material turn, or the new materialists, and so, ironically or not, I and a bunch of people really don't see our work as fitting in with the feminist new materialists and see our work in opposition to that.

There's this really great concept from Donna Haraway who's a really famous feminist philosopher of science, or feminist science studies person, who talks about *natureculture* as one word. I use the term *gender/sex* a lot, which is in some ways having the same goals and hopes. We can think about this phenomenon of gender/sex as something that is both. For example, if I'm a woman, am I a woman because of my genitals, because of my socialization, because of how I am, because of my legal identity, because of what I say I am, and so on? And the argument is that it's not necessarily any one of those things, although it could be, and that my 'woman status' has to do with some sort of mishmash of them and the whole status of women is some mishmash of them.

Again it is not the checkbox of all of them, but it's like an umbrella that people come to in different ways. And so with nature-culture we have phenomena that we study that even if we're studying cells, they're still existing within things, that exist within contexts, that might be exposed to pollution, because of culture, and so on and so on. But for me one of the problems is -

and with gender/sex I have a slash in between the two, which seems just like an annoying thing post-modern folks do just for fun and to bug people who hate postmodernism. But for me it's actually really important because I actually think people talk about nature-culture as entangled. Entangled is this really great word, there's kind of two things, we're not saying they're one thing, but they're so tied up we can't really take them apart. But with gender/sex I worked really hard to argue that not everything about gender/sex is entangled. There are times when we don't want to talk about evolution, there are times when we don't want to talk about bio bodies. And that's really important to me, that we don't have such a mishmash that we end up not being able to say, this is what we're talking about, or this is a phenomena that really is due to socialization, or gender and equity, or prejudice, or things like that.

AR: So you do want to maintain a space where they are disentangled?

SVA: That's right. So for me, there is an entangled concept of gender/sex, but there's also gender, and to some extent sex as well. So that's why I appreciate and get what nature-culture (28:22) is trying to do, but as a practicing scientist, and as a - I'm definitely not a feminist activist, that's not my day job - but, as someone who's looking to see feminist and queer change in the world, it's very important to me that it's not a mishmash or an entanglement so much that we can't disentangle them when we need to strategically or when it makes sense to. Is that kind of what you're asking?

AR: Yeah, absolutely. I was, yes, totally. We can talk more later, because I have some ideas too, but I wanted to get your take, and I also want to go back a bit to your personal biography because we kind of left off when you had done work already in the lab at University of Western Ontario, but then you decided to make the move to Simon Fraser. And what attracted you to Simon Fraser, what was your thinking at the time about where that would take you in terms of your research and so on?

SVA: So when I was applying for my masters, I didn't know whether I was interested in doing, sort of, evolution and sex, or more socialization and gender, because like I said, at the time I thought they were going to be separate. And social neuroscience didn't really exist.

AR: Yeah, it's fairly recent...

SVA: It really is. But I only got my PhD 10 years ago. I mean, it's older than 10 years, but somehow when I was looking, it wasn't on the radar really at all. So the idea that you could do biomateriality and social stuff wasn't really on the radar. Although even still I would say most of social neuroscience is still by and large a determinist project. So, I did apply to a few places to do work on body image, for example, and gender. And then I also applied to some places to do evolution, and gender and sex. And then I also applied to some places to do hormones, gender and sex, and social behaviour. And I found if I talked to people about the hormones, I don't know what draws people to things, but somehow it was never as full, it was an emptier conversation without the hormones. I think if folks in high school knew I was a scientist, or teachers, they would be really perplexed, they thought I'd be like an arts administrator, or a writer, things like that. So, there weren't that many labs who were doing it, and there weren't that many labs who were doing it in a non-clinical way. I didn't want to do clinical work, and so,

Neil Watson who's at Simon Fraser, was the best fit. He didn't do humans very much, but he was happy to have someone doing humans. He had done a little bit of human work. And so I was there for 4 years, and I think when I got there, was trying to figure out what I wanted to do for my dissertation and pretty quickly - I'll give him absolute credit - I think he was the one who suggested, 'well what do you think about social modulation of hormones?' Which has been my career since then. So then it was picking what social things I was interested in, and I got interested in sexuality, doing work on sexuality, competition, parenting, and relationships. And so, how those things might impact hormones and yeah.

AR: And some of your work has focused on testosterone. Was that also a conscious decision?

SVA: You know, it's funny, because even in my Master's work, Elizabeth Hampson, who was my Master's supervisor, I remember us talking once and I was saying, 'what's your favourite hormone?' Because that's the sort of thing you would say in a hormone lab... [both laugh] and even still, it strikes me as a totally normal thing to say. And she was like, 'oh, estradiol, like I love the estrogens,' and I remember thinking like, 'how could you, like testosterone is so much better. Or like, so much more interesting!'

AR: So much cooler! [laughs] (32:00)

SVA: Yeah. But it's ironic. I've read a lot of feminist science studies about hormones, and so Nelly Oudshoorn and Anne Fausto-Sterling's work and what's become really apparent is that I think testosterone was more interesting for me because I was interested in social behaviours, because people had done more research around testosterone and social behaviors, whereas estradiol was more about reproductive phase and things, and that had to do with how the hormones themselves got crystallized and sort of discovered and found and created, and the research itself got bifurcated in a gendered way.

So because I was interested in social behavior, it was testosterone, because that's what researchers had been working on a sort of gender narrative. So testosterone is the hormone I mainly study, and I started trying to incorporate other hormones and I sometimes do, but I have less passion for them, I have a 'feeling for testosterone' [both laugh] I feel like I understand it, and bringing in other hormones I always thought would make things clearer because we also don't just want to talk about multiplicities in what we study that are questionnaire items or phenomena like desire, but also bio-phenomena, like the hormones are all interrelated, and they're interrelated with the other axes, other physiological processes, but it just didn't make things more interesting, and made things muddier. So I sort of stick a little closer to testosterone.

AR: Stick close to home... Well tell me a little bit then, you characterize the combination of things that you do, as kind of unlikely - you mention you've got the unlikeliest of labs. So talk to me a little bit about what kinds of students gravitate or how has that been to kind of occupy this space that a lot of people don't see as being an easy space to occupy. So how has that gone over with students?

SVA: So, and you're talking about grad students, in particular.

AR: yeah, mainly yeah.

SVA: So, it's really fascinating, I think, what many people don't know is that there are students at every university who are majoring in biology, neuroscience, some field like that, and then also majoring or minoring in some field related to feminist and queer scholarship. Some places there's more than others, but there's always a few. And those students have nowhere to go to integrate the two, you know unless they're at a very few places, like if they were at Brown, with Anne Fausto-Sterling, and even in those places, there's almost no one doing explicitly feminist science in a lab that involves bio-materiality and feminist and queer perspectives. So, because I'm one of the only ones I actually get a fair number of students contacting me. One of the tricky things though with biomateriality is people go 'oh you're a sex researcher, you're a sex researcher, you must do the same things' but we could both be doing desire and it could have nothing to do with each other. Or, you could be doing desire, and you could be doing HIV, and again, very different, or related, right?

AR: Mhm.

SVA: And biomateriality, like for example, I have no interest in doing fMRI, or PET, I'm not even that interested in things like heart rate. So one of the problems is I'm not interested in cognitive neuroscience, doing it at all. And a lot of these students are interested in the actual, you know, the brain, imaging... so part of it is sometimes they'll come to me because they're interested in biology and biomateriality and queer and feminist perspectives, but I try to tell them 'you need to think about the high level—what your questions are, and then the day to day—we're doing hormones and if that's not something that interests you, that's a pretty boring day to day, even if you're meeting that meta-goal of like feminist queer bioscience.' I get a lot of people recommending students, so some of (36:10) my "straight" hormone colleagues do recommend, they're like, 'I have this student who's into that stuff, you know...', which I really appreciate, it's a kindness, I think. And then I have some colleagues who are in the humanities, or the humanistic social sciences, or non-naturalistic social sciences (I don't think that's a real term), and they'll also guide people my way. So I get a fair number of people being interested. Sometimes it's more like I'm going to help guide them somewhere else, which I'm totally happy to do, it's not like I get [such] a huge number that it's overwhelming. The students I have here are a mix - some of them come from that neuroscience and queer studies or women's studies background, some of them come from pretty straight psych background, but they took a lot of women's studies, or sexuality courses, cause I also do some sex research, that is not hormonal, like it doesn't have bio-measures.

AR: Ok.

SVA: And my research in sexuality is pretty broad, I do research on porn, orgasms, desire, masturbation, sexual activity, so students are interested in that as well.

[interruption; phone rings]

AR: ok, now we're recording again

SVA: let's see if I can remember...

AR: Well I have actually a follow up question, which is, are there ways in which when you work with your lab, with the members of your lab, how do you keep the feminist science studies perspective in there, like do you actually have folks reading stuff, or do they come in already kind of primed? I mean, how does that express itself in the day to day, your lab?

SVA: That's a great question. So, some people come in with it. I also teach a feminist science studies grad course, that a lot of my students take.

AR: Oh that's great.

SVA: I would also say - it's funny cause it sounds sort of unlikely - but every part of our doing, we try to think of in feminist and queer ways, so it's not like we sit down and think, 'how are we going to recruit people, is that a feminist way?' But it's more we're talking about, 'ok how are we going to recruit people, well I heard something about that they don't treat their workers well, so if we were going to use that system to recruit participants,' you know, blah blah blah. Or like, 'ok, well in informed consent, how can we improve that to make sure that people can understand it?' And then once we've done that, how can we improve that to make sure people actually enjoy reading it, or feel welcomed into our studies, so it's a continual - 'becoming' is a word people say a lot in feminist science studies - but it's a continual becoming where it's like, when you live a feminist life I don't think it's that you sit down and think, 'how do I make a feminist dinner?' It's a dinner and as a feminist you're going to be thinking about equity in preparation, like are the things I bought, if I can afford to, are the things I bought going to have been produced in equitable ways? Or, fair trade, or however.

So, it's kind of the same thing in the lab, which is I think why I always have a very unsatisfactory response for people. We have a lab guide for example, that's pretty different than most lab guides. We talk about social location, we talk about autonomy, we talk about agency, expectations, making power clear, there's a lot of room for (39:36) people to have intellectual engagement with the projects. So we have, I think I've had about 20 papers with undergrad co-authors, including sometimes first authors, which is kind of unusual.

AR: Yeah

SVA: and we just try to give people room to grow, and then the idea is, I mean people will be reading interdisciplinary, when they're working on a proposal for a new project like a Master's project or a PhD project, they're definitely reading literature from usually all over. So for example I have a student who's interested in porn, he just joined my lab, and he's taking - his background I think is pretty straight psychology - but he's taking a class with Gayle Rubin on the history of sexuality, things like that, so people are getting pretty interdisciplinary exposure.

AR: Yeah, yeah, that's neat. So let me ask you then to speak a little, could you speak a little bit about Sexual Configurations Theory? Could you articulate for us what Sexual Configurations Theory is and how you kind of got to it?

SVA: [smiles] Sure. I'm smiling just because...it's not the easiest to encapsulate quickly...

AR: I know...

SVA: I feel when people ask me it's like a booby trap or something.

AR: It's not a booby trap but I have to admit I attempted to read, and I'm like, wow, I would like to hear how Sari actually can [articulate it], like this is complicated, you know?

SVA: It is. But the nice thing is we actually use it in our research and participants are able to make sense of it. So, there's a few different ways I could tell you what SCT is, I could tell you how I came to it, or I could tell you what I'm doing with it, or I could tell you what I think it is.

AR: Could you do all of those, starting with how you came to it?

SVA: Sure. So, I was doing research on testosterone and relationship status, and I was really interested in how changing relationships changes hormones, how hormones predict entering relationships. And of course one of the things I say is that any time I'm measuring hormones in adults, I'm taking a snapshot. And I don't know how the hormones got to where they are, so even if hormones at Time A predict relationship status at Time B, hormones are never Time A. There's like, you know, letters before there, there's no such thing as Time 1. And I started getting interested in the work people had done and the work I was doing, and sort of honing in on what I thought it was about relationships that testosterone was linked to or responding to, and it seemed to be something to do with many and or new partners. It wasn't just about being single, because single can mean different things. For example, again, do we take single as a category or do we critically engage with it, and sort of deconstruct it a bit? It can mean people who don't ever want to be with someone, it can mean people who want to be having sex but not romantic connections, it can be people who are dying to be with someone, they can't find the right person, it can be people who are having serial relationships and so on... so really the relationship categories themselves are pretty crude.

AR: They are, yeah. (42:45)

SVA: Right, so what is it about them, the thing that testosterone is related to? So I started thinking about the many new partners and I was thinking a lot about polyamory then. But of course polyamory too, doesn't necessarily mean multiple new sex partners, it can mean people who have a poly-fidelitous relationship, meaning they have 2 partners, but that's it. It can mean people who are asexual but romantic, who have 3 romantic partners but no sex. So it's not all about more new sex partners. Which I sort of realized the more I worked with it. So again that's why it's not that common I'm like, 'here's the feminist way to do this,' usually I'm kind of doing it and then thinking about, then sort of circling around and around many times, realizing 'oh, that was a misconception I had,' or, 'these data suggest this to me, and now I realize if I'd thought about it in this way,' and 'oh I was, you know, using the wrong lens' or so on and so on.

And then I did a session at the International Academy of Sex Research in Portugal, and there was another session on asexuality at the same time. And I - from totally a place of ignorance - just

wasn't that interested in asexuality, I thought, you know, it's interesting, it's legitimate, I don't question it, but I'm just not that interested in it, of course not having really read anything about it, so total ignorance. But, I think some colleagues were into it, and I was like, you know what, I'll sit here and listen, it won't be the one session I skip. And then all of a sudden it all started coming together, I got really interested in it. Because, it's like, I don't know if anyone listening knows, but people who study polyamory are here [gestures, pointing in different places], people who study asexuality are here, people who study lesbians are here, people [who study] gay men are here, people who study bisexuality, trans, gender non-conforming, "gender", all these things are completely separate and somehow it was like the juxtaposition of these two panels that all of a sudden made them come together, and thinking about polyamory and asexuality together, as clearly related, but no one had been talking about them.

They both have to do with partner number in a way, I mean that's not all but that's a part of it, and then I started trying to put it together, like how they were related, and then I started to think about gender, gendered attractions as well, and I'd already been thinking about this gender/sex concept, thinking about, for example, butch-femme, which traditional measures of sexual orientation are completely useless for, like, if you say you're a lesbian but you're only attracted to let's say butch women, then how does that work? Trans folks, gender non-conforming folks, genderqueer folks, polyamorous folks, kink-oriented folks, like, so many people have been telling us that sexual orientation as a concept is not just meaningless for them and useless, but damaging. And epistemologically problematic, you know what I mean, the assumptions, it's based on 'I have these genitals, you have those genitals,' but you never actually see the genitals, is it really genitals that we're basing it on, until we get to the sex, if sex is going to be what we get to? And so, it sounds ridiculous but it all started swirling around, and it was, I haven't really ever had this experience before, but you know how artists talk about, they see wood and the art was in it and they carved around it or something, it sounds so cheesy. I always thought, 'whatever,' right? And that's how it was for me, I was like, there's something there that I am trying to uncover, which is, I mean, how many scientists talk and people get really frustrated, but that's what the process felt like for me.

AR: Yeah, for sure.

SVA: So, taking into account narratives and lived experiences around sexual attractions and gendered experiences, and then also thinking about what I knew in my own perspectives on these things or things from my research which didn't seem that related to redefining sexual orientation or gender-sex but somehow actually did give me a basis, and then also pulling from my bio[logy] and behavioral endocrinology background, where people are interested in broader, general questions, (47:07) but also particular [ones], like, I might study this species cause I'm really interested in what we can learn about whip-tail lizards (I mean, not me, but someone else). But also I'm interested in what that tells us about the evolution of broader phenomena. And so SCT isn't about that, or evolution at all actually, but that interchanging lens, that neither is more important, that we can think 'ok well there are people who are interested in penises, regardless of their traditional sexual orientation. There are lots of people who have multiple sexual partners, polyamory is only one of them, there's swingers, there's people using the word slut as a reclaimed term, there's - what's the word for men who have lots of one-night stands, it's kind of a positive version of slut, oh gosh anyway... [added later by SVA: the word is "player"]



AR: I don't know...

SVA: ...anyway, you know, like a guy who goes out and takes a different woman home...there's an obvious term I can't remember...But all these things do have one small thing in common, but they're totally different so I don't want to collapse them, but to say that they all exist in separate rooms also doesn't quite make sense. So I wanted a lens and I called this a sexual diversity lens, of being able to pull things together and pull them apart, like that toy, you know that toy that goes like this [brings hands together and apart and together again]

AR: yeah, I know, I can picture it, I don't know the word for it but I can picture it...

SVA: [laughs] yeah... and neither is more natural or right. And for me it was really important that we're always thinking about power, so for example, if we want to talk about bisexual and straight women together, that we make a conscious decision about that, that has some costs and losses, and that there's power differentials associated with that, and that doesn't mean that's a natural grouping, so I wanted us to be able to think of this interchanging lens. Yeah.

AR: So to be thinking about power just strikes me, when you put it that way, to be thinking about power in all of these aspects is an extremely feminist thing to do as well.

SVA: Right.

AR: So I'm going to push you a little more. Because I really think this is important. If you had to, literally, sum up or state Sexual Configurations Theory, what would your statement be?

SVA: I would say it's a way to look at gender/sex and sexual diversity taking into account lived experiences, bodies, attractions, using a sort of radical multiplicity. So, for example, even if we focus on orientation - what does that mean? We can think of it as attractions, arousals, desires, but also thinking of orientation, identity, and behavior as multiple or branched aspects, or ones that can be folded together. I would say SCT is a way to bring in folks to open up ways of having language and understanding for folks who scientific theories and most theories haven't [included] before. I could go on, but now I'm not very concise.

AR: No, that's ok, that's good. So can you then kind of give us a snapshot of where you're at now, in terms of the work that you're doing to kind of elaborate this theory?

SVA: So, one paper we have that is in press is looking at how sexual and gender minority folks use SCT. So we have some qualitative work where one of my grad students, Zach Schudson, and a former undergrad, Emily Dibble, and I did the interviews, working with sexual and gender minority participants actually mapping themselves out, and we're interested, not actually for this project so much, in how they located, but, because SCT has these models and pictures you can (50:50) draw yourself on, interested in how folks find the process, what meaning-making there is. What was really exciting is that people did prefer it to traditional measures of sexual orientation, people had a lot of insights, people were excited about the ways - so one common thing people say is 'there I am', like, in a way they've never been able to self-locate. And I don't think that we all need to locate ourselves to find ourselves validated. At the same time, if we're

talking about phenomena, and that excludes people, I think that's a real problem for all of us. What else did we find...

AR: If you're not seeing yourself, then that may mean that the theory is not actually doing what it should be doing....

SVA: Right. I mean, empirical theory should be accounting for as much as we see, and if it's not, that's a problem, and not one just to be laughed away. People also found that the disentanglement of things was really useful, so, a lot of social theories will try to work in opposition to focusing on bodies, but bodies are really important for a lot of people, so I think one of the things is that in the SCT many people found that they were able to focus on the things that were important to them, and the things that weren't, they didn't have to incorporate those.

We're also doing work with sex and gender majorities, to see how SCT works for sexual and gender majorities. There's also an aspect of the SCT that, you know when I talked about this radical multiplicity, or this entanglement, or disentanglement, the words that I used in the SCT are *branched* or *coincident*. Coincident meaning, for example, your identity, orientation, and behavior, happen in the same location. And that's how we typically think of those things. But many people are actually branched, they might want to flirt with people of this gender, but have sex with people of that gender. They might have had times they were attracted to people like this, and other times they weren't. They might be romantically interested in some people, but want to experience orgasms with other types of people, and SCT allows us to do that. So one of the things we're doing is trying to explore how branched and coincident works for people, and especially for gender and sex minority folks, where there might be more branchedness, given that making sense of your sexuality or gender might feel more urgent or important if you don't fit onto more hegemonic or cultural norms.

AR: Right.

SVA: And then we're also making a zine and a workbook, because a lot of people have asked me, you know, as you said, 'ok, I read it, and I like it, but I don't fully get it.' So, we are trying to make a zine so that people can understand the concepts, and then a workbook so people can work through it themselves. I've also had a lot of clinical psychologists be really interested in using it for therapy. And one of the interesting things our work does is we've found people actually (I'm not a clinical psychologist, none of my students are, and we're certainly not aiming for this, not that we're not aiming for this), but people actually talk about it as sort of like gaining insights into themselves in a way that is sort of akin to therapy, but also very educational. I think any measure you give to someone is an intervention, right?

AR: It is! Yeah.

SVA: You're telling them what you think the phenomena is, and then you're only able to call forth what you've asked, right? Unless they write- (54:20)

AR: and you're asking them to relate to it in a way that they probably haven't thought about before, because it's an intervention, it's not something they've encountered before.

SVA: Right. But most of the ways we do measures people aren't used to. So, while they're like, 'oh how high is my desire, I've never had to say that,' but it's not so foreign feeling.

AR: Right.

SVA: But with SCT it feels pretty new to most people. So even people who are the most expert in thinking about their sexuality and gender often find some part of the SCT that they're like 'I've never actually put words to that or thought about it and it's sort of pushing me to grapple with something about myself that I haven't.' And I tend to think that's a good thing but it's not always, right?

But anyway, so people end up having this therapy feel sometimes, but [it's] also educational, so some people are like, 'I'm just here, in this simple place, but now I understand where other people would be or why there's these experiences in a way I didn't,' or, 'now I have words that I didn't before,' not in a therapy way, but literally in a "now I understand this phenomena," So, we find there's a lot of that, so I think that's what the clinical therapists saw in it. You know that is one of the things we thought might be useful, but they really get that. And then we also have a video explaining the gender-sex one, for the branchedness one, and we're hoping to make more videos of some of the other ones. So, trying to make it a lot more accessible.

AR: Yeah, absolutely. And I was thinking too, when you were talking about the therapists, and the therapeutic use, I imagine that it's also really useful for the therapist [themselves] to help them understand things in a much more complicated and complex way, and to really educate them about what their clients might be experiencing.

SVA: Right, and I think one of the tricky things too is in progressive spaces right now there's often a resistance to talking about bodies, but bodies come up a lot, so SCT gives us a way to talk about bodies but in non-deterministic ways, and not as the center, but they could be the center for some people. And for many people, for many trans and genderqueer folks, and many cisgender folks, bodies are a big part of their gendered experience, so when we omit sex, we end up omitting a lot of what people say matters to them, and a lot of what people have fought for. There's lots of people who fight for medical transition, and by ignoring bodies we're sort of obscuring that. But the nice thing about SCT is we also get to talk about identities, we also get to talk about femininity and masculinity, and things that might be tied to bodies but might not be.

AR: Right, right. I want to keep my eye on the time, but also I want to ask you about some particular things that I noticed in your CV that I hope to get you to talk more about. One of them was some work you did, and again this may stand out for you or not, it's hard to know until you ask a person to talk about it. You did some work back in Canada, a few years ago, consulting with the Institute for Gender and Health at the CIHR, and it caught my eye. You worked on the development of a gender-sex training course, developing an infographic for sex and gender, that kind of thing. And part of the reason I'm interested in it, is because my lab is also interested in the notion of gender-based-analysis and how we can get more psychologists interested in doing gender-based analysis, and this seemed to tie into that for me, and the Institute for Gender and Health has been really amazing on this project, they put out some really great material, so I just

wondered if you could talk about that experience, and what that was like, and what you actually produced for that. (57:50)

SVA: Yeah, so to be clear I was sort of a consultant. I wasn't producing the material, but consulting on the material that they actually had professionally produced, by graphic designers and people with skills that I don't have. Working with IGH, the Institute for Gender and Health, was really amazing, at the time it was Zena Sharman [who] was the associate director I worked with a lot, and Joy [Johnson], she's now a dean at SFU [Simon Fraser University] and she was at UBC [University of British Columbia]...

I don't know as recently what's going on, but the time I know most is when they were involved, and other people as well, and they did this really phenomenal job in thinking about gender and sex, interdisciplinarily and how do we get, especially for me, the part that I was interested in and that they were interested in me to help with, is to think about people doing bio-sciences and biomedical scientists, how to think about sex at all. And then, maybe even gender. And there aren't that many people who think about both, so I think that's how I was useful for it. And they were thinking in really nuanced ways. I mean it's a real gem that Canada has that; we don't have an Institute for Gender here, and the one we have, it's the one that's focused on women's biologies, is pretty focused on biological sex differences without necessarily what we would think of as a feminist engagement.

And so they were interested in trying to help people understand what the difference was between the two, because people often think of the two as interchangeable. I have some colleagues I remember I asked to read a paper of mine where I was looking at, trying to understand the effects of gender socialization on testosterone, because we think of testosterone differences between women and men as innate and predetermined and fixed, and I'm arguing there might be some portion of the variability that actually reflects social conditioning. And I had a friend read a paper, she's like, 'ok just remind me what the difference is between gender and sex.' This is a smart friend, a biologist, or someone doing biological work, someone who's feminist for sure. So you can imagine, people who aren't all those things, really don't understand the difference between gender and sex. So they were trying to do work to help people make sense of that. Because it's easy enough to have feminist critiques that say, 'don't do this, or do this,' but the how is where it really falls apart.

So Stacey Ritz is someone who also has done a lot of that work. She's an immunologist at McMaster, and the actual paying attention to gender in your cellular science, your cellular biology, is not obvious to the point of sometimes being impossible actually, in your lab practice. And sometimes even paying attention to sex is really hard to do and there's very few guides on it. So I think IGH did a really fabulous job trying to give people tools for that.

AR: Yeah, absolutely. We've been really inspired by their materials, and trying to translate some of that stuff for use in psychology and particularly to teach undergrads what it means to do Gender-Based Analysis, and I'm smiling because I'm so resonating with what you're saying, when we were originally conceptualizing - we just did a video series on this - we were going through the steps in Gender-Based Analysis, and I'm like, 'well do you think we need to actually explain the difference and interrelationships and relationships among gender and sex, everybody

knows that, right?’ and my students were like, ‘no they don’t...yes we do...’ and it’s the one video that’s gotten the most hits so far.

SVA: Oh there you go, yeah.

AR: You know, when you go beyond the simple ‘sex is biology’ and ‘gender is culture,’ which is sort of spurious, right? When you get beyond that it does get a little bit trickier and it’s not easy to actually be really clear about that. (1:02:07)

SVA: And what you’re measuring is usually just someone’s report, but what you’re meaning by it might be something different. So I sometimes - maybe not as much anymore - people have gotten more sophisticated, but I used to have a friend or two who would email me and be like, ‘you know a referee just told me I should be using sex rather than gender, or gender rather than sex, and I’m confused, I don’t understand’ and I’d be like, ‘well you can tell them I say...’ but it isn’t always obvious.

AR: No, it isn’t. I still know that I probably use them interchangeably in ways that are not accurate.

Ok, so one of the things we ask, and I know you’re more of a midcareer person and sometimes I interview people who are more senior, at the end of their careers, and ask them to reflect, but I’d like to ask this anyway, because I know that you’re just in the middle and you’re going to keep going, but to date, what kinds of accomplishments, contributions, do you feel most satisfied by in your career thus far?

SVA: So Sexual Configurations Theory is definitely one of them. I mean, I was trying to explain to people and then I realized I had to stop saying it because it sounds way too grandiose but I feel like I’m really trying to redefine gender/sex and sexuality, or at least some aspects of them, and I think that I’ve done so in ways that meet all my goals - empirical, useful, make sense, are informed by lived experiences and folks on the margins, and make sense to those people, and just help us do work that is more feminist, more queer, more scientific. So I’m really excited about SCT, like I probably say it once a day ‘SCT this, SCT that!’

I’m also really excited about the idea of, I do a lot of work on destabilizing testosterone and its link to masculinity and I’m really excited about the potential for that, so for example I was an expert witness at the International Court of Arbitration in Sport about a case where they’re trying to define who counts as a woman by her androgen levels for athletic competition and participation. And I never thought that my work on testosterone, gender-sex, and masculinity would come in handy for any sort of legal court case, and my work on testosterone and those things I think is helping to change the ways we understand testosterone, the ways we understand gender and sex, the ways we understand masculinity and femininity, in ways that actually have a lot of implications for policy.

I just published a paper on biological sex, gender, and public policy. People are trying to define who counts as women and men in ways that delegitimize trans experiences, intersex folks, folks with any sort of conceived atypicality, and I think my work is some of the few out there that

actually speaks to it in feminist and queer and progressive ways, but that's also rooted in bio-science. And I think my work also in providing feminist and queer models of bioscience, I think because there's just almost nothing out there, and there's a lot of critique and deconstruction and construction of thinking about science, but there's not a lot of construction of actual bodies of feminist and queer science, so I'm really excited about the potential for that and that people who were at my stage were like 'these are separate things, I don't know how to integrate them', now can grow up seeing them in the lab, integrated, and I think that makes a difference.

AR: Yeah. You know we're living right now at a particular historical moment that appears to be becoming much more hostile to I think a lot of the things that you're talking about, right, the ability of trans folks to just see themselves recognized and legitimate in our society, because of certain political stuff. Do you think about that in the context of your work at all, or has it had any impact yet on the way you kind of think about your work?

SVA: Oh, yeah! It definitely does. While there's definitely been a retrenchment, I think it's in part, for me anyway, I do see it as these amazing gains people are making, I know it (1:06:38) doesn't always feel like that, and especially with the pushback, but I think the bigger the gains, the bigger the pushback, until the gains have just totally taken over. So, you know, trans isn't a joke anymore, right? We can fight for using bathrooms that align with your gender, and that many places not only support that, but support that enthusiastically. That professional sports teams cancelled going to certain states because of laws that were aimed at excluding trans folks from bathrooms that match their gender. I mean, someone tweeted something like 'who thought that in 2016 or 2017 professional sports teams would be leading all our political movements,' not leading, but be such major players.

AR: Major players, yeah.

SVA: So, it's pretty incredible to me. There's that, but also these things I'm definitely thinking about. I don't think our science or scholarship, I don't think anything is ever neutral, and so, to claim it is is to support the status quo. To claim that sexual orientation measures that exclude people who are asexual, or trans, or genderqueer, or polyamorous, or kink-oriented, are ok is to be political. So, I'm thinking about these things constantly and the way that a lot of politics infuses my research is by, this sounds ridiculous, but doing a lot of listening, understanding what experiences are being spoken about, and especially experiences that aren't normative, that aren't presented in mainstream media, and thinking about the ways those matter. Thinking about the ways biology is used to contain or marginalize, and thinking about how what we know about the biology or what we could know, doesn't work like that because I am a scientist, and so I do think that there are phenomena there that we study.

AR: Yeah.

SVA: Right. I'm sure there's some scientists who don't think like that, but probably I would argue most of us do, but I don't think there's just one [phenomenon] and I think we study enactments of it, we study the thing that it is going to be different wherever it is. So it's not that there's one essence. Hm, now I've gotten off... I do think it matters what we choose, right? If we choose to study testosterone, and aggression yet again, which is not to say I haven't done

anything with aggression, even though there's almost no support for it, as opposed to understanding the more dynamic possibilities of understanding testosterone, I think that matters.

AR: Yeah. Have you ever gotten any pushback from, I mean you travel in a lot of different communities to present your work, because it touches on a lot of different things, and a lot of different traditions. Have you ever gotten pushback being a feminist scientist from, for lack of a better phrase I'll call them, the more traditional scientific community? Like anyone who says 'you can't be a feminist scientist, that's an oxymoron' kind of thing?

SVA: Right, so I'm surprised at how much if you say this is what you are, people are less willing to deny it to your face. I think if I was like I want to talk about feminist science, then people might say that, but if I say 'I am a feminist scientist' people are like, 'ok, in my head I don't like that, but I'm not going to say it to you.'

I've had a little bit, often by people who are in lower positions of power. I remember another student, we were at some discussion about something and I was talking about 'oh I'm there because of feminist science' and they were like 'you can't do science in feminist ways, that would be biased' and I was like 'I don't (1:10:11) know where to start' but I should because that's my job.

I get pushback... There's a lot of authority that comes with being a neuroscientist and a behavioural neuroendocrinologist, and so in some spaces I'm the softest scientist in the room because I work with humans and sexuality and gender, all suspect things. But in a lot of other spaces, like in my sex research communities, I'm one of the hardest. All irony quotes, people get so mad with 'hard' and 'soft,' and I'm like, I'm not making these social constructions, I'm just naming them. But I guess I don't want to reify them. And there's a lot of authority and privilege that comes with that, that I'm trying to use well. I know if I stand up and criticize the science, it's very different than if a qualitative feminist researcher does. So, I got tenure a few years ago, and before that I wasn't exactly quiet but since then I've been trying to, as time goes on, I see and understand more and more of the things that are happening and I'm able to articulate why they're problematic, and I'm able to do so and be heard, I think because I'm a neuroscientist. And I think there might be increasing pushback, as I'm willing to say more things that are not wanting to be heard. But I also have made my career and my decisions that what I want to do is build a body of feminist and queer science, and I don't think my life's work is explaining why other science is wrong. I think we have a lot of people who are really really skilled, deeply skilled at doing that and making the case. And I can pop up now and again to ask those questions that plant some seeds of doubt about problematic things, but there's very few people building up a body of work, because if we deconstruct this, what do we turn to? And some people would argue to non-biological work, but biology, we don't leave it behind, we leave it under-critiqued, and so I want to build models of biomaterial work that is feminist and queer.

So, I've won awards from mainstream science communities, I get my work published. I do get pushback, people used to be like, 'well we're not going to publish the word queer,' and I'd be like, 'what do I do?' Now I'd just be like, 'yes, you will.' But at the time, the more junior I was, the less power I realised that I had, that we all have, as experts in what we're doing. But, I would say my field's (here I'm meaning behavioural neuroendocrinology, I think!) had a lot of people

who identify as feminists in them, and while they don't want their science to be seen as feminist, I think they're curious about what it has to offer, especially in this time where there's increasing understanding of sexual harassment in science, the need to think about race and ethnicity and exclusions. I feel like I've been pretty blessed, but I've also made very strategic choices.

AR: Absolutely. Ok, now we're almost at 11, so I want to kind of wrap up. One of the things I often ask, and I wish that this were also asked of men, but I'm going to ask it anyway – 'how do you navigate personal and professional demands in your own life?'

SVA: Yeah, so I think I said already on camera that my two-year-old was up last night and the night before, which is why I sort of have no facility in language. Sleep is a really amazing thing. [laughs]

AR: [laughs] yes.

SVA: And I do think, while of course we want to ask everyone of any gender, family demands still fall completely disproportionately on women, so I think recognizing that is recognizing a problematic reality. That's not to say it is for everyone obviously.

AR: and frankly when I teach graduate students and we get talking informally, and they know I'm interested in these issues, I'm the only feminist that they know probably, in my university, and they always want to know 'what have people told you about how they do this, because I find it completely... I can't figure it out.' So that's why I also continue to ask, because I think it's good for people to know, how do people do this?

SVA: yeah, so my partner and I, from the get go, we changed both our last names to a hybrid of our last name, I was Anderson before, my partner was van Leeuwen, so now our names are van Anders. And we decided from the get go that we were interested in equitable co-parenting. It's been interesting though over the past few years, as you become a parent, realizing there are places where gender socialization reached you both, that you didn't know to resist, and there's sort of less time to critically engage with your positionality cause your kids crying or vomiting. The other night my two year old was vomiting, and so on. So, these sorts of things assume you have a partner and lots of people don't. But if you do have a partner, who is not the same gender/sex as yourself, I think that a lot of it is paying attention to metrics for example. Like taking turns at things, or thinking ok, you're going to be responsible for this, and I'm responsible for that, is that equitable in some way, or do you need some other responsibility to add it up? And I think a lot of people think of that as somehow being more neoliberal than loosey-goosey if my judgement is clear, than a sort of holistic evaluation, like, I don't want to keep count of my partner, that's not what love is, and you know what, not all of your day is about love. I think every single person I've ever spoken to - I have a lot of feminist and queer friends, a lot of parents who are feminist and queer. There's just so much backsliding otherwise, because culture's constantly telling you one thing, you have to keep on top of it. That's part of it.

One thing I should say, and I've come to understand this might not actually help as much as I used to think it does, is I only work about 35 – 40 hours a week, and I work a 9-5, but I don't think you have to, I think you work when it (1:18:55) works for you. And maybe I do a teeny bit



of email after that. And lately, picking up kids from daycare, it's more like 9 – 4:30, if that. And I think it's important to set boundaries. The problem with kids is, you have a sick day, you lose out on all this stuff that you had planned to do, and when are you going to make up for that? One of the hardest things I think is, you can balance your life, if you're a parent or if you have eldercare, or something like that, I think you can balance those and work responsibilities, but when your kids are young, it is pretty hard to work in personal time. So if we think about personal-professional, I think, for me I can kind of just barely balance parenting-professional. You know, I get a lot of reading in, I love to read, so I get a lot of reading in. I think once your kids get over 2 or 3, things get easier, or they're starting to. But I think it is hard and our cultures don't have a lot set up to help, and for academics, many of us move, we're away from families, we haven't been here long enough to set up the networks of people who are like 'my kid's vomiting, can you come hold them while I do this thing that's important, but you might get sick from it' you know that requires certain kinds of connections that our culture doesn't set up, relying on blood often. So I think one of the things is to resist the neoliberal idea that you are what you produce. But I publish a lot so I think people don't believe me when I say that, but my goal really isn't to publish any numbers, my goal is to do work I care about. And sometimes my goal is to get through the day.

AR: [laughs] yeah.

SVA: Yes. Let me see what else... One of the difficult things is you sort of have to take your theories door to door. The idea that people are just going to somehow know to read your work that it is that important, isn't how it works, so traveling to conferences can be really important, but of course is costly and time-consuming, especially with young kids. So having support networks, if you have a partner, having someone who's participatory, all those things are really important. And I think that constantly checking in on your goals also really matters, and recognizing that this is now. I have some colleagues who ramp up later. I really wanted to go full steam all the time. So it's been hard for me at times. I was in bed during both my pregnancies for quite a while with nausea, and it's challenging, that's not what I want to be doing. I don't want to be home with my kids, although I really respect people who are able to do that or want to do that, but for me that wasn't the case. I think there's a lot of challenges and we focus on individual fixes, but there's a lot of structural problems. For example, I just worked with a committee here to increase infant spots, because it's usually mothers who are trying to get their kids into daycare, and there's no daycare for babies, or very few spots. And there were actually rooms at multiple daycares here, our university daycares, that weren't being used, cause they didn't want to pay the extra money for supporting babies, even as mostly women faculty are like 'we can't get our kids into daycare', so I think thinking about structural fixes is really important, but of course when you're in the midst of it, it's the last thing you have time for, and then when you're done with it, you want to be able to focus on your career. But I think, when you're able to, thinking about the structural changes you can make that will support people as whole people, academics as whole people, with personal lives, whether that is as parents, which I focus on only because I'm so deep into that right now. Whether it's eldercare, whether it's whatever it is.

AR: Yeah. Is there anything that I have not asked you about that you would like to contribute to the interview?

SVA: Oh, I can think of a million things and nothing, you know? (1:22:50)

AR: Ok. I can tell you some things I didn't really ask about. Again, the questions that I circulated to you earlier, are really just sort of a guide. I sometimes ask folks what advice would you give to feminist students engaging in this work, going forward in psychology and neuroscience, in your field, what advice would you give them?

SVA: I think this is the main advice I might give to anyone, to do work that you find meaningful and fulfilling, cause really that's all there is to this. And if you had told me that I would get jobs on the basis of doing sex research, much less feminist neuroscience, or queer neuroscience, I could never have imagined that, and I think one of the things is I'm passionate about what I do, and I'm - however inarticulate I've been this morning - usually able to talk about it in compelling ways. And I think that's the main thing that you need to be able to do. Sometimes you might need to find other people to help you do that, it might be your supervisor, there might be people you can email and find there's a lot of people committed to helping interested and thoughtful people move forward, at your institution, in your department, but also all over the place. So, finding a community. I didn't have one at all, but things would have been easier. But if you don't have a community, forging ahead anyway. [shrugs] It's hard when you're trying to do new things.

AR: Yeah, absolutely.

SVA: So yeah, I guess I would say that these things are hard, because no one's done them, but that if someone had done them, they wouldn't be so engaging and interesting. And I would wish people good luck.