

Psychology's Feminist Voices Oral History Project

Interview with Asuncion (Siony) Miteria Austria

*Interviewed by Edna Esnil, Tera Beaulieu, & Alexandra Rutherford
San Francisco, CA
August 20th, 2007*

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

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SA: Siony Austria, Interview participant

EE: Edna Esnil, Interviewer

TB: Tera Beaulieu, Interviewer

AR: Alexandra Rutherford, Interviewer

EE: Well, I wanted to first ask you about your emergence and development of your feminist identity.

SA: Well, actually it dates back to my upbringing, to my mother. Although she didn't go to college, she was a feminist, though I didn't know that she was. But looking back, as I became more involved in feminist activities, she was [*a feminist*]. She was very modern in her approach, and she was my best friend, very mothering, her approach. She was a Catholic and she believed in divorce, during *that* time. She believed in divorce. She believed in abortion. She was very liberal in her thinking. In a sense she planted the seeds and then I have always been kind of independent, free-spirited, you know, because of that relationship.

Then, in college, I was mentored by a feminist professor, a man, at the University of the Philippines. That's where I finished my Bachelor of Arts. He was, again, a feminist, although not a card carrying feminist. But, again, he was very inclusive, all of those values that feminist psychology espouses. He demonstrates, you know, the same thing with my mother. So, when I became involved in APA, I was involved in the clinical psychology of women. That's a section. Then that's where I met Judy Worell. I was invited to the first national conference on research, education, and training of feminist psychology. That was held in Boston and that was in 1993, I suppose. I have never been with a group of powerful women. I was so impressed. It was an empowering experience to be with all those people you read about. So, I got hooked at that time. Although, I'd been writing about them because I was a newsletter editor in the clinical psychology of women, so I knew about Rachel Hare-Mustin, and I knew all of those people. But to have been involved in the first national conference where all of them gathered together, it was really an experience that I, you know, I was so overwhelmed by that experience. That was, in short, my journey to feminism.

My son is a feminist. My daughter is one, but she doesn't call herself a feminist. And my husband is also [*a feminist*].

EE: You talked a little bit about your work with clinical psychology and women, that section, a little bit about how you bridge psychology and feminism. I'm wondering if there was anything else that you wanted to expand upon about bridging feminism with your work in psychology.

SA: With what again?

{5:00}

EE: With your work as a psychologist.

SA: Well, first of all, I also developed a course in the psychology of women. I also developed a course in lesbian and gay studies in my department. I was just talking with Beverly Greene yesterday. I went around looking for some sample syllabi and I couldn't find one. That was in 1993 that I couldn't find one. After I came from the conference, it so energized me that I developed two courses in succession. As I looked for a syllabus for study of gays and lesbians, I couldn't find one, so I thought Beverly Greene would have one. And Beverly said, "no, not in my school." And I looked all over, and I had to really scrape hard for a sample syllabus. Finally, I found one. Esther Rothblum gave me a sample syllabus. So, after the psychology of women, it went very well. I mean, it was passed right away. The administration approved it and then also for the gay and lesbian [course], I was able to have it approved. I had a lesbian woman who taught the course, and it was a very popular course because then it was accepted by the students. It helped them have a new attitude, a new perspective, on gays and lesbians and also on women. I said, as a feminist, I had to educate the students, it doesn't mean that you bash men. We're not also a bra-burning group of women, but as a feminist, one of the values is inclusivity. We're inclusive and then we also work for equity, equity between genders, equity between all of those areas of diversity.

Let me know if I'm not answering your questions ok, so you can do a follow up. Because sometimes I know I get distracted.

EE: What attracted you to psychology?

SA: Well, what attracted me to psychology... You know, as one who comes from the Philippines, you either become a doctor, lawyer, or engineer. That's how we are. Asian cultures: lawyer, doctor, or engineer. I wanted to be an MD, but then there are five of us in the family and we're not a rich family. My father was not rich. There were not too many scholarships. So, my plan was to be a doctor, but there was no money. But then, at the same time, it appeared to me that people were asking for, "How do I do this?" and "How do I do that?" So I would make recommendations and then the psychologists in the Philippines, they worked in the mental health hospital, so I thought that was the closest to be working in the hospitals. You know, being a psychologist meant I would also be working in a hospital.

I had a very lousy professor for general psychology and quite a few professors were recruiting me to be an English major because they said that I spoke and write English well, to be a political science major. I was being torn into different kinds of major disciplines. That was a difficult choice because when you do well in many of these disciplines, you just don't know what you'll be good at. {9:32}

So, I took psychology, having been under a lousy professor [so I thought] perhaps I would work in a hospital. That's the closest to medicine. So then I finished my BA in psychology, became a graduate assistant in the department, the first graduate assistant in the department of psychology and the first to have been sent to America as a graduate assistant. So I went to Columbia University. They never sent graduate assistants. They sent instructors already to pursue further study, but I was sent as a graduate assistant. Then I said, this is really for me. Psychology is for me.

I was made to teach as a graduate assistant. Again, graduate assistants in the department in the Philippines, they were just being used as clerks, but for me, because my professor had just come from Harvard and worked with Skinner, so he had knowledge of how graduate assistants in America were being used. They teach, or they grade papers. So, that was what he did with me. I taught a course and helped him out and then later I was sent [to America] as a graduate assistant. Then, when I came back I assumed the assistant professorship.

I was sent back again, under Rockefeller. So the first one was a [ECICA] they call it, sent by the university. I finished my master's at Columbia and then in '66 I was sent back with my family. Again, I kind of have first-time experiences because when a woman is sent by the university, she leaves her husband and her children behind. We have an extended family system, so it's the mother-in-law, they take care of that. In my case, I said I wasn't going unless my family was going to be with me. So I had my husband and my two little children, aged one and two years old. I was sent by the Rockefeller Foundation to do my PhD at Northwestern and then also I even had help. I brought help and the embassy in the Philippines said, "Well I know American women who do their PhDs, and they don't have help," but I had my help, so that I could just be focused on my studies. So I was the first instructor from the University of the Philippines, after my master's at Columbia then I was promoted to assistant professor. I was the first faculty member to have been sent with the family. Usually, as I said, women scholars, leave behind their family, but I brought my family with me.

So, in a sense, this is a part of the feminist in me, blazing new trails and not being put in this box, you know, as a woman scholar you go alone. But men scholars bring their family with them, so why can't I? Why couldn't I? I was the first woman scholar sent by the university and brought my family. Usually, again, then men bring their [family, but not women] because men there have jobs. My husband was then vice president of a company there, but he resigned and came with me.

{13:47}

Remember that saying, [“**where Ruth goes, the men goeth**”] or something like that? But it’s my husband who goeth with me.

EE: It’s so wonderful to hear your unique story. It really is. I’m wondering what kind of involvement you had with the feminist movement. You talked about this blazing trail, about being a woman who said, “No I’m going to take my family,” I’m wondering if there’s any other...

SA: Right. While my involvement has not been formalized, we lived on the University of the Philippines campus for faculty members, and we had women activists. So that was also part of my involvement with women activists. In fact, when we left for the States, they lived in our house on campus. This is like an underground movement, kind of. It’s called Kabataang Makabayan. What would be the translation for that? The youth movement for nationalism, or something like that.

Like I said, I have always been kind of, and I think it was my mother who did this, I don’t go with how things are being done. I always do my own stuff and that’s part of being a feminist. I have always been critical and that’s what they said about me when I received the Campus Leadership and Teaching Excellence [*Award*] this year from my University. It’s an award given to faculty. I’ve always been critical of inequity, and I would speak for a man as much as I speak for a woman. It’s not an organized movement that I do, but they know that I have always been for equity, and inclusivity.

I have a secretary and, usually at the university, secretaries or staff people get together for lunch. I eat with my secretary, and she brought that out to me. “You’re the only one,” she said, “who eats with me.” And I said, “why?” “Take a look at the corners,” she said. “Maybe they want to get together.” “No,” she said, “Take a look at their bosses, they’re eating somewhere else.” So, it’s not organized, but the little things that I do are, what they say, ones of compassion. That’s how they did the citation. [It’s] one of equity. Right now I don’t introduce my secretary with the title of secretary. I introduce her as my assistant. I involve her in many of the things and ask for her suggestions, ask for her thoughts about the problems we have in the program.

EE: I’m interested in knowing about your involvement in Division 35.

SA: Well, first, as I said, the beginning was the Clinical Psychology of Women, which is a section of the Clinical Psychology Division. So, I worked with Judith Worell and some other feminists. Annette Brodsky was also a member of the Psychology of Women and then Violet Franks, the one that I mentioned. So, those were the people in the Division of Society of Clinical Psychology. The first involvement was when I was invited to that first national conference on feminist training, education, and research that was held in Boston.

Then, what happened after that? I liked the welcoming atmosphere of Division 35. I was new and I didn’t know people, but Judy Worell made me Program Chair.

So then, I think it was Jan Yoder, she made me Governance Chair and I worked with Linda Forrest. Linda is one good feminist person, also. She belongs to Division 17. She's a very nice person. I worked as a Governance Chair for two years. I was reappointed.

EE: What is Governance Chair?

SA: A Governance Chair is when you make nominations for APA boards and committees.

EE: I see.
{23:03}

SA: I'm obsessive. I'm really obsessive, so I work really hard to see to it that Division 35 nominees get into the boards.

So I held that [position] for two years and then [inaudible] (24:18) said, "Do you want to be Treasurer?" I said no because I was treasurer already of the Clinical Psychology of Ethnic Minorities. Then she made me choose, "Do you want to be Program Chair?" I said no, so then I became the finance committee chair. And I developed the policy for [inaudible] (24:38). I developed the policy. So, all of those policies we have, I developed them because there was no policy before. I always leave something when I get involved. No matter how little the contribution is, I always have something that I leave behind me.

So, did I answer your question?

EE: Yes, well, I was curious about your involvement. So, it sounds like you were Program Chair, you were involved in governance, the finance committee.

SA: And then also, in terms of the activities that I do outside of the division, like for example, I taught Psychology of Women. Also, they keep saying in terms of the citations I get, that I give voice to those who have none. I am always advocating for women. So, it's not only within the division, but my activities also extend beyond the division.

At the university, also, in my daily life, when I see someone, I encourage them, even the store clerk. There was one who came back to me. She was a check out person at one of the supermarkets and I said, "Oh yeah, I think this is good, but why don't you get on and get out to the evening session?" The next time I came back I said, "I hope you get enrolled." I really don't push. Some people call me a pusher...but yes...I [do]... Especially when I see like-minded, not like-

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minded, but ethnic minority women and men, both my husband and I, we kind of encourage them to study because I keep on saying that education is the only passport for mobility. It is the only passport. I mean, for people of colour, there are already things against you. Sometimes, even with education, there are still things against you, but at least you want to level the playing field. Although, it's not level, you still want to level the playing field.

EE: You're talking about instances of encouraging ethnic minorities. I'm interested in finding out if you have experienced discrimination based on gender or ethnicity.

SA: Up to now, that's a daily hassle. That's a daily hassle, even with professionals. Even with professionals. The people who know me, they have respect for me, but people who don't know me [*don't*]... For example, some people cannot call me Doctor. Women are not supposed to be Doctors, right? And especially because I have an accent. I was just doing this with the Marriott, trying to confirm my reservation. I said, "this is Dr. Austria." Over the telephone, I have a very heavy accent. Then they said, "so, Dr. Austria..." and then later on it became Ms. Austria. Sometimes just Austria, or Australia, even. Then, with the Citibank card, you know, I was complaining about the security number at the back, it does not match with the security number they were giving me [29:02]. So I was telling them, and, in the beginning, he was calling me Dr., but then I kept on saying that I had to leave, and I needed the card and he said, "Ok, Ms. Austria!!" But that's all the time, you know? You cannot be called Dr. when you have a heavy accent.

At the university, where I had been for thirty-four years, it's a very welcoming university. It is non-denominational, although the one that sponsors it is a Catholic organization, Order of St. Francis. There are still some people there who, up 'til now, they just pass me.

EE: How do you deal with these experiences of...

SA: In the beginning, I would feel very bad about that. When I first entered the university, when I first got hired, I was hired as Chair already, right away because I had previous administrative experience. I attended a meeting and then I participated. One administrator said after the meeting, "Your English is impeccable." And I thought that was an insult because if I were Caucasian, that would be expected of me to speak as good English as a PhD, right? But they were so surprised that I had good English.

You know, now I no longer mind that. When a person tells me, "You speak good English," I dismiss it jokingly saying, "Yeah, I learned it on the way here on the boat." {31:10}

EE: I'm going to say that I'm just going to have a little dialogue since we have about 10 minutes. I have about half of the questions left. Is there any particular order you want me to ask the questions or...

TB: No, I think you've been going along pretty well. I guess maybe it would be interesting to ask, because you've spoken about having children and about coming here and how you brought help, so maybe about how you balance those personal...

SA: Oh how I balance those...right, right. That was good, right. At that time, when I came here to Northwestern, that's where I did my PhD, they were on a trimester and so, as soon as I came, there was an examination already. And my children contracted pneumonia because of the change in weather. So, I was studying and then, in the meantime, taking their temperature. My husband was unemployed. Again, they asked for local experience and the first experience that he had was in the [inaudible; 32:20]... But he was helping me.

I did not go to conferences when the children were small because my priority was family. My priority was family. And my husband was very, very supportive. If you're a woman and you want to go farther, you have to have a feminist man, a feminist mate. At that time I wanted to go home right away so that I could be with my children and my husband knew that once I go from the university to home, that I will never go back to study, that I will just be with the kids. So, he would bring me food. At that time, I remember we had the station wagon, a Ford station wagon that you could flip down, and he would bring food. Under the tree at Northwestern he would serve me food because he didn't want me to go home. So we would eat and then he'd drive me back to the library or drive me back to one of the towers where I could do research.

It was very difficult. Not too many women in the sixties who had children were going to school. My women friends would say I was crazy. They didn't know that I was a scholar that was sent from the Philippines. They thought that I was crazy doing this. Then also, my Filipino friends would talk about decorating their homes and I didn't have time to decorate my home. They'd talk about recipes. They'd talk about all of those domestic things and all that I was doing was the daily chore of my husband was helping to cook, so cooking and laundry and taking care of the children and my studies. It was as if I was kind of left out because they had all of these things about the drapery, etc., etc. and I didn't.

Some of my friends, loyal friends, stayed with me, but I was not able to reciprocate their invitations to parties. You know, they would invite us and many a time I

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would send my husband as my representative. I did not go to those socials, so it would be him who would go. Then, I was never able to reciprocate. So, [*my life was*] my family and then my studies. I'm glad that some of them [*my friends*] stayed with me. I didn't have excuses. I just said I had work to do. It becomes a tired excuse, you know, "I'm busy and I cannot go, but Roger will go." Up 'til now he goes. He goes as my representative to all of these social functions.

It's very difficult to balance. When my children come home, you know, they're old, I cook their favourite food and then there is a function and I say, "Well I have to do something." I no longer say, "I am busy." But I would rather stay with them [*my children*]. Also, in the seventies, I brought them to APA conferences. They were little. I brought them to all APA conferences, so they have been to all these different places. My daughter just stopped last year when she got married, but they attended sessions, or they would go sightseeing with my husband and then we would meet at dinnertime. So then, I didn't have time, again, to have dinners with some of my professional colleagues because I was with my family. I have been doing that.

EE: You talked about some wonderful mentors, from the Philippines to helping you with your studies here, I'm curious to know about the role you play as a mentor.

SA: There are two types of mentoring: the organized, formal one and the informal one. The formal one is where I tell you I am going to mentor you and everything is so formal, but I do mentoring on an informal basis. I am available for consultation any time. I share whatever knowledge I have and also encourage them, share all of these tips that I have to succeed and share my resources. I have, ever since I joined the university, brought my students to conferences. At that time, I didn't know that that was part of mentoring and that that's the definition of mentoring. I would bring them to conferences and introduce them. There was no one else in Milwaukee who was doing that, bringing their students. We have one we call a Milwaukee Area Psychological Association. That was my introduction for them because it was cheap. For ten dollars, you have food and you have a presentation. So, I would bring them there and then, also, I would encourage them to attend any kind of a conference. Whatever flyers I had, I shared with my undergraduates. That was unheard of. That was not done at that time. So, it was more of an informal way of mentoring.

Then, later on, I got letters from them [*saying*] "thank you for all of the things that [*you've done*]." Then they dedicated their theses to me. But, as I said, it was not the organized way that I am assigned these people, this group of women or this group of men. I encouraged both of them and some have done very well. Two of them have now finished the Master of Arts in Clinical Psychology that I

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developed in 2000. Quite a few of my undergraduates are doing very, very well and they write back. So, it was more of an informal way of doing it.

I remember quite well that there was an African American woman who would come late to class and leave early, so one time I talked to her, and I said, let's say her name is Tracy, "Tracy," I said, "you've got to shape up, you know?" I was using the language of [*the time*]. That was a long time ago. I was a new teacher in the university. I said, "You've got to shape up if you want to really do something with yourself." You know, now she has a Doctorate. She has her own private practice, and she was going to hire me as one who works for her. But that was what I encouraged her to do. She was doing

drugs. Now she has a lovely home in the suburbs and two children. She called me and invited me to her graduation party, and she called me her guardian angel. I said that no, she was responsible. And I said, "Don't do this. Don't introduce me as anything else." She had a big graduation party, and all the relatives were there and [*she said*] "this is my guardian angel (41:37)." And the relatives were acknowledging that if it were not for me, she would not have finished. But she is finished now. She went further with her studies. Now she no longer calls me her guardian angel. Now she calls me Siony because I would not let her call me 'guardian angel.' When she finished, she called me Siony because I told her, "Call me Siony."

AR: Is there anything else that, Edna, you'd like to ask, or Siony, you'd like to add?

SA: Maybe we will have to edit because we had some distractions.

EE: I think that you've answered the questions throughout the interview. I'm wondering if there's anything that you might feel that...

SA: Well, the Society for the Psychology of Women is [*something*] both men and women should belong to as it's a very inclusive organization where you're abilities are enhanced. All you have to do is put up a task force and whatever contributions you want to make, they can be realized. I belong to some other divisions and it's only the Psychology of Women that has this kind of agenda where you can present a project and then see its completion. It's a very good organization, not only for women, but also for men. That's where I met, as I said, all the powerful women that I just read about. I saw Judy Worell . I saw all of these women and said, "wow." You see, prior to that, lesbians had come to me for counselling. So, I would see them as clients, not because of their sexual orientation, but because of some other concerns that they have. So, that's the kind of relationship that I had. But over at that conference, I met these lesbians who I read about, like Esther Rothblum (44:31). You know, I was reading about

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her. There was this person, and I'm not going to mention her name, I was sitting next to and she said, "You want to go shopping?" And I said, "Sure, we can go shopping." So we were going to go to Sims, but then she was very manly in [*her clothing*] . She had her hat on and was wearing jeans. Then she said to me when we were on the bus on the way to Sims to go shopping, "I should not be seated next to you because you're a Filipino and, you know, for Filipino women you're not supposed to be with lesbians. I said, "No, I'm going to sit with you!" [*She asked*], "Even though some Filipinos will see?" I said, "Sure." From then on, my relationship with them changed because, as I said, prior to that, they were my clients. Now, some of my very best friends are [*lesbian*]. And then I have male gay friends also. The experience that I had with the division was just a life changing experience. Even though, as I said, prior to that, I had always been [*for*] equity and parity (46:18)]. I mean that my behaviours manifested all of those equity things, but it was only when I realized that I didn't have those prejudices...

So, as soon as I came back from that conference, I developed those two courses: The Psychology of Women and Gay and Lesbian Studies, and I asked a gay person to teach the course. This gay person happened to be the dean of our college who had not come out. I knew she was and then she came out to me. I was the first person she came out to. I told her I had just had a beautiful experience. I just came from a conference where I met these powerful women and some of them were lesbians. She said, "Well, you're talking to one right now and you're the first person [*I've told*]." I said I knew that. She said, "What did you think?" I said, "Nothing, I thought you were a good dean, and I thought that you were approachable. I'd like to develop a course and would like you to teach it." Then, because she was not a psychologist, she was an English person, I had to get around that by having a title of "Psychology and Literature of Gay and Lesbians." So, she taught that, and I gave her all psychology literature and then also she introduced literature on gays and lesbians. Then I had our chaplain take the course and he said, "I am gay." So, it was a beautiful course.

So, 35 has really been good in terms of really formalizing what I had been doing over the years, the training that I got from my parents. I didn't put a stamp on that as feminist, but Division 35 made me realize that all that I had been doing for inclusivity and equity, that's what they call feminist. So, I owe it to Division 35 for formalizing my thinking about men and women.