

Doreen Rosenthal

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Major Employment:

- Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health, and Society –
1992-1999, Professor and Founding Director
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Major Areas of Work:

- Adolescence Sexuality and Sexual Health

SRCD Affiliation:

- Member Since 1975

SRCD ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

Doreen A. Rosenthal
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Interviewed by Shirley Feldman
Stanford University
At Melbourne University, Australia
July 15, 2008

Feldman: This is Shirley Feldman of Stanford University interviewing Doreen A. Rosenthal of Melbourne University. The interview is taking place in Melbourne, Australia and the date is the 15th of July, 2008.

Doreen, tell me a little bit about your family background and your childhood and adolescent experiences that may be of interest in terms of your career.

Rosenthal: I come from a family of immigrants, and I think that had a particular influence on the latest interest, career interest that I had. I, my parents were not well educated, partly because they had come to Australia in their early teens. My mother, as was typical of women of her generation, didn't work after her marriage, and my father was a businessman, very successful in retailing. I'm the oldest of three girls and I was born in Melbourne and grew up in Melbourne, so my lifelong associations have been in this city and in this country. My parents were, I guess, lower middle class in terms of income and I went to what was then one of the most prestigious government funded schools for my primary or elementary education, and subsequently to the most prestigious schools, government funded school in Melbourne, which actually had selective entry so that I was one of a number of very bright girls who were encouraged to think about themselves as having careers subsequently, although interestingly given the times, of the 120 girls in my last year of school, only a handful went onto other than nursing or teaching occupations, which is very traditional for young women in those days which were the early to mid 1950s.

I absolutely loved school, I remember my four years at MacRobertson High as among the best of my life. I had very good experiences there. I was captain of the house and the prefect so I had highly responsible positions, and I expected that I would go on and have some sort of career. That actually didn't happen initially anyway. What did happen was that my parents encouraged me to take a course that I didn't like rather than to do medicine, which is what I had my heart set on. As a consequence, I gave up study

partway into my first post school year, married very early at 19, again as was fairly common in the late '50s, and had three children by the time I was 26, at which point I decided that there had to be more to life than being a wife and mother of three.

I think I was encouraged in this not just by my husband who was very supportive of my desire to go back to study, but also his family who were, his parents were both academics. His father was director of a unit at the University of Melbourne and his mother was one of the earliest Masters graduates at the Melbourne University and had been teaching for many years. So there I was at 26 with three children aged four, three, and one setting out to do social work part time. Fortunately I realized very early that social work was not the thing that was going to satisfy me, nor would I be very good at it, and I became thoroughly entranced with psychology, which fortunately I had to do as one of my early subjects. So that's really how I set out on my career, and found that--I always thought that I'm an accidental academic and an accidental careerist in a way, things just somehow or another evolved as I went on.

Feldman: So in your early adult experiences, that is your college and post college years, why did you choose the field of child development? What kinds of influences acted upon you or were you exposed to that made this field of particular interest to you?

Rosenthal: I think partly I found psychology extremely interesting, and particularly developmental psychology because I had young children at the time. So what I was learning about mapped on to what I was actually experiencing in the family in a very real-life way. So I think that was a very important experience. I think psychology is a subject, a field of study that in one way if you're a bit older, you can get an awful lot more out of it than if you come to it as most young people do, straight from school. The Melbourne University Psychology Department was in fact one of the best in the country at the time and had a very strong emphasis on developmental psychology as well as social psychology. So that, I think, was a great stimulus.

The other thing for me, which sort of lead me into cross cultural psychology with a developmental flavor to it, was the background, the family background, and the background of most of my friends who were children of immigrant parents, or indeed immigrants themselves. So I was very interested in the ways in which coming from a different culture to Australia, which in the mid '60s was still a fairly isolated sort of country in terms of variety of interests, still very dominated by the English, the old time English immigrants. I was just interested in how people acculturated to new cultures, and in particular, how young people juggled the sorts of issues around identity and trying to be members, if they were trying, to be members of two cultures simultaneously. The other thing that I think was important was when I was studying--and it took me quite a long time because I was doing it part time, my kids grew to adolescence. So by the time I was doing my PhD, I had adolescent children. And so that fostered my great and enduring interest in adolescence.

Feldman: And at university or outside of university, were there any individuals who were important to your intellectual development--research mentors, instructors, significant colleagues? Can you talk a little bit about those kinds of people and perhaps any influence they had on you?

Rosenthal: Yes, when I got to the point where I--I chose to do honors in psychology so I was very embedded in the psychology department, and there was some wonderful people there. Norma Grieve, who was one of the early influences and who was a woman of great intellectual qualities who started the first gender studies course in Melbourne University, and indeed, one of the first in the country. And Norma was always very willing to talk about research, to talk about ideas, to encourage one to stretch in whatever ways you possibly could. The other important colleague was, and mentor, was Dr. Susan Somerville who was my supervisor for my honors thesis and for my PhD, and who left towards the end of that period to take up a position in the United States, and subsequently became editor of *Child Development*. So Susan has had a very close involvement with child development.

I guess the other interesting thing for me at the time was that there was a very strong influence in Piaget in Australian psychology, largely because Gavin Seagrims who had translated one of Piaget's book, the one, I think, on moral development, was working in Australia, and brought back a lot of Piagetian ideas to

Australia. And Norma Grieve, in fact, was one of the best proponents of Piaget's work. And I found it absolutely intriguing, this man who observed his three children and wove a whole set of theories about cognitive development out of his observations. So I was entranced by Piaget and Sue Somerville herself had done her PhD in adolescent reasoning with a very strong Piagetian bent, so that was what I followed.

Feldman: Were there any political and social events that influenced your thinking, your writing, your research, and your other professional activities?

Rosenthal: Absolutely. The things, I think the most profound event that has influenced my entire career was the wave of feminism that swept the universities and elsewhere in the late '60s and '70s and Australia. And that brought home to me a lot of, a sense of the role that women had in a sense been placed into in society, and I felt that it was very important to find out why this was the case, and to make changes. And so I guess really, most of the work that I've done since that period has had very much a focus on the impact of gender as a social determinant of behavior, and subsequently in my later career which I'll talk about in terms of young people's sexual health, so that was one critical event that I think has carried right through my entire career.

It also, actually, brought me into very close contact with some wonderful women who have remained as long-term colleagues through a gender studies group that we set up. The other major event I think that has profoundly influenced my later career, or at least my career in the last nearly 20 years now, was the concerns about the likelihood of an HIV/AIDS epidemic in Australia. So the, in the mid '80s I guess, we began to be very concerned about whether or not HIV was going to have the same impact here as it was having in Africa, and to some extent, in the United States. And there was a lot of political will to ensure that this didn't happen. So there was bipartisan political support for a national HIV strategy, and a lot of money was put into funding research, research in virology, research in epidemiology, clinical research, but from my point of view particularly, social research into HIV and how we could prevent the epidemic from occurring. I was able to secure some of these funds, which really enabled me to conduct, with a colleague, Sue Moore, one of the first surveys of young people and the knowledge, attitudes and behaviors towards HIV.

Feldman: -- HIV.

Rosenthal: Yes, so HIV, we secured some funds, we carried out this big survey, and that really was my entry into the HIV field. I subsequently became very involved in the policy aspects of HIV and continued researching in this field.

Feldman: So would it be fair to say that your career has not really followed a linear, gradually incremental path, but has had punctuated changes or sharp turns in direction since you've already mentioned adolescent development, excuse me, cognitive development, adolescent development, and sexuality, HIV, and I know there are other things as well. Would you comment on the sort of shifts in direction and perhaps any other comments you have? You've addressed some of the issues that led to some of these shifts.

Rosenthal: Yes, certainly it was not linear, and I probably should have said a little more about significant colleagues, because in a way, they're the people who helped make it non-linear. So if I think about my career, initially it was very clearly in cognitive development and I was interested in the way adolescents, in particular, think. And I spent quite some time in that field, although moving to a teacher training college for my first position I was probably much more interested in younger children, and very much in gender. Then I, as I said, I became interested in cross cultural psychology and the ways in which young people deal with being members of, if you like, of two ethnic or two cultures. And one of my first trips overseas, I was fortunate enough to spend some time at Stanford with you, Shirley, and you and I revisited some of that work and did some very exciting work with Chinese young people in America, or in Australia, and in Hong Kong.

So that period, when I was heavily involved in cross-cultural development I guess, was very influenced by the work that we did together, and that lasted probably for about five years. And I think I remember talking

to you at some stage about the fact that five years was about as long as you might want to stay in some field, although I know many of my colleagues have remained in the one field for closer to 50 years perhaps. I then, through working on ethnic identity, met up with another colleague, then at Columbia, who is now at UCLA, Mary Jane Rotheram-Borus. And Mary Jane was very influential in, I suppose, supporting the work I had done, and encouraged me to continue to work around HIV and AIDS, because that's been the field that she'd been working it once she, too, had switched from cross cultural psychology. So we had very parallel careers. So it certainly has had sharp turns.

In terms of research style, I think having come out of a positivist psychology tradition where one tested hypotheses (or pretended to test hypotheses is probably closer to what we actually did), what I found in my later career is that I actually value enormously the contribution of qualitative research. And I think the positivist, quantitative tradition can be very much enriched by qualitative research where one is able to dig a little more deeply about the meanings of various experiences, and indeed, capture people's own life experiences. So, and my theoretical views have changed very dramatically having initially been embedded in Piagetian theory and neo-Piagetian theory which I've just about forgotten about, and then in some of the work that came out of Bristol University with Tajfel many years ago in cross cultural psychology, and Berry, I'd say I'm now pretty atheoretical because most of the work that I've been doing, has been applied research for the last 20 odd years.

Feldman: What continuities in your work are most significant to you? You've talked about the shift in methodology from quantitative to both, to a mixed methodology including qualitative, and a move from theoretical to more atheoretical applied, and perhaps to policy-relevant research. What are the continuities that underlie your thinking and underlie your research?

Rosenthal: I guess the two significant continuities have been an interest in young people, in adolescence, and an interest in the impact of gender. And they have been the two things that have really remained with me through my working career. So the focus within the life stage of development, of adolescence has shifted from cognitive development, through to identity issues, through to acculturations, through to sexuality and sexual health, but that particular period of life has been the one that's been of most interest to me even though my children are no longer adolescents, and long past it, and although I'm now at the point where my grandchildren are entering adolescence.

The gender issue has been particularly important to me as I've continued to tussle, I guess, with why it is that gender has ... the expectations that we have of males and females, men and women, these ways in which we construct masculinity and femininity, or better, masculinities and femininities. I think that that's still a very important, and in some respects quite unresolved issue. And it's particularly important for the area of sexuality, which is the one that I've been interested in for the past nearly 20 years. The shifts I think I've talked about, and I think the shifts came partly because I suppose I could describe myself as an intellectual butterfly, going from one thing to another over a period of time. I'm constantly fascinated by new ideas, and also by the people with whom I'm mixing. So as I've moved from one job to another and I've met up with different people, I've been very taken with the sorts of paradigms that they work within.

Most of my work within the last 15 or more years has been very much multidisciplinary so that coming out of a department which I think was very limited in terms of the research it did, very much about research for its own sake rather than research for the sake of how it might improve people in the community, to a field where, an applied field, where really the focus is very much on what is this research going to mean for the people that you have researched. What does it mean for the people who're working with these, your participants, what does it mean for policy. So I think it's been the shifts in my employment that have been responsible for the shifts in area of interest.

Feldman: When you think about your extensive list of research, both published and unpublished, what do you think best represents your thinking about child development? Which of your studies is most significant? And perhaps the converse of that, which contributions seem to you now, looking back, perhaps the most wrong headed or less likely to lead you into A positive direction? So will you reflect on the strengths and weaknesses and what you think is your best work?

Rosenthal: I think my best work has come most recently or certainly in the '90s when I really believe that I was in the forefront of social research as working in HIV, not just in Australia, but internationally. I think that the work that we did, for me, it was significant because it actually impacted on policy very strongly.

Feldman: Was this work focused just on adolescents or was this a departure from a developmental perspective and a focus specifically on HIV per se?

Rosenthal: It was focusing on adolescents as particular group in our community. So I got funded to look at ways in which we could promote better sexual health for young people. So of course in doing that, I had to take into account where were adolescents at in terms of their cognitive development, their social development, their emotional development. So all the work that I had done previously in adolescence was brought to bear on the work, this applied work that I was now doing. But I would have to say that it was not theoretical, it was very much aimed at providing information that policy makers and health professionals could use to develop programs, intervention programs, health promotion programs which would bring the message about HIV to young people. So that, all the work that I did on HIV I think was extremely significant.

Now for the last six or seven years, I've been working very much with homeless young people in a major cross national study with Mary Jane Rotheram-Borus at UCLA. And that, again, has been certainly in Australia, a groundbreaking study. It was a longitudinal study of young people experiencing homelessness, came out, we have some 25 or 30 papers published, but the main outcome from me, again, is that the work that we did, the findings have actually been used and are part of Victorian and Australian young people's homelessness strategies. So it directly impacted on policy and again on practice.

I think one of the most significant shifts more generally has been that I moved into a health related field so that instead of being a pure psychologist, I really now became very interested in the ways in which my work on adolescents in particular could impact on health more generally. My most recent appointment has actually been in women's health, which is sort of moving into a very much later stage of the lifespan.

Feldman: Would you please reflect on your experiences with the research funding apparatus over the years? There are a number of different components here: Your participation in shaping research funding policy, the extent to which you were able to secure support for your own work, and related funding matters.

Rosenthal: Well I guess I took over the role of director of a funding center, a research center that was funded by one of Victoria's preeminent non-government organizations. It's a health promotion organization. It's short name is VicHealth and it secured its funding through a tax on tobacco consumption, so it's really a quasi-governmental organization, but they were very keen to fund centers of excellence, research centers of excellence in various fields. And I was appointed Director of the Research Center of Excellence in Prevention of Sexually Transmittable Diseases. So it was my job in a way to secure funds, additional funds for this center. And I did that, I guess, in a number of different ways. As I said earlier, I became very involved in HIV/AIDS policy at the national level. I was on the Australian National Council on AIDS and its deputy chair for a period, and chair of its education subcommittee. And in that way, I was able to influence the funding for HIV/AIDS in Australia, not just for adolescents but more broadly, and indeed was able to secure substantial funds for my own center.

In terms of an organization like VicHealth, I was on their research committee and other sundry committees that they had, and in that way was able to help shape policy. One of the things that I did do, was VicHealth had instituted a policy where they were funding fellowships in public health for fairly senior public health researchers. And it became apparent to me very early on that this left very big gaps. It left gaps in terms--this was in terms of building capacity in public health researchers. It left gaps at the post graduate level and it left gaps at the early career level, and I was instrumental through a paper that I wrote in actually having VicHealth offer post graduate PhD scholarships and early career fellowships to build capacity in public health. I was on the council, I was international chair and on the council of the Society for Research in Adolescents and had some input into the sorts of matters that they discussed.

In terms of securing support for my own work, Australian funding is very low compared to American funding. The percentage of grants that get funded is low and the amount of funds that one receives is low. And usually one doesn't receive the funds that one has asked for, even if you are fortunate enough to be successful. I've been on a number of the funding committees, but it's a very tough battle in Australia unlike other countries where it might be tough, but the amount of money that is available is considerably greater. And I found that to my advantage when I was involved in the National Institute of Health grant with Rotheram-Borus where we had funds that were extremely generous by Australian standards to do our work. And that enabled us to do work that we couldn't possibly have done through Australian funding. The other group that I've been involved with has been WHO, the World Health Organization, and trying to encourage them to put more resources into gender research, gender related research.

Feldman: Doreen, did you ever get funding from foundations for any of your research projects?

Rosenthal: I did from local foundations, so organizations like Rotary, the Spencer Foundations many years ago. It's interesting, Spencer was, I think Shirley Feldman, you brought it to my attention and it's amazing what you can do in Australia with very little money. It's better to have lots of money, but I remember the Spencer Foundation had very small grants of ten thousand dollars, and you simply had to write a very small proposal, and they usually gave it to you. So I was the beneficiary of several of their grants for which I was extremely grateful. Through my work in my most recent career at the Center for Women's Health, I have had funding from organizations like Ford Foundation, from WHO, possibly others that I can't think of at the moment, and I've had small amounts of funding from small Australian funders. But for them, 20 thousand dollars is a large grant, and so you can't do very much with that.

Feldman: Doreen, you've spoken at different points about different positions you've had. Could you step back for a minute and paint sort of a large, broad-brushed picture and describe the institutions you've worked at, the dates, and your roles in your different positions? Could you give us sort of a chronology of your career?

Rosenthal: Sure. Well, my first job was, in fact just after I got my PhD in 1975, I worked at Melbourne State College which was a training institution for teachers. It was the preeminent teacher training college in Victoria. It had a long history and was very highly regarded, and I worked in the psychology department there as a lecturer, and that's where I met Professor Susan Moore who's been one of my most long standing colleagues. And Sue and I brought to that institution an interest in research, which just didn't exist previously, and I remember that Sue and I in fact managed to spend the institution's entire research funding which was some of the order of 500 dollars at the time. So I worked there as a lecturer until--

Feldman: Excuse me, and a lecturer in the Australian university system is equivalent to an assistant professor. It's a regular tenure track appointment.

Rosenthal: It's a tenured appointment.

Feldman: It's a tenured appointment--

Both speaking at once

Rosenthal: Yes, so I could have spent--

Feldman: --so it's like a tenured assistant professor.

Rosenthal: Yes. Is that, assistant professor is the lowest or the--

Feldman: Right, the lowest.

Rosenthal: Okay. Then I, in 1980 I was appointed as a lecturer again in the psychology department at Melbourne University so I returned to my alma mater, to my old department and I worked there for 13

years. I rose to the position of Reader in Psychology, which would be a sort of lower than your full professor but higher than your associate professor.

Both speaking at once

Feldman: Associate professor, correct.

Rosenthal: Part of that time I'd been a senior lecturer which would have been like your associate professor.

Both speaking at once

Feldman: Associate professor.

Rosenthal: Yes. When I was there, I did a lot of teaching in development. I supervised many, many honors students--and I'll come back to this later, in the field of adolescence and conducted lots and lots of research. I then went, I was involved in the Melbourne University application for the VicHealth funded Center for the Prevention of Sexually Transmissible Diseases--

Feldman: And VicHealth refers to Victorian Health, which is the name--

Both speaking at once

Rosenthal: Promotion Victorian--

Feldman: --of the state that you live in.

Rosenthal: Correct. And it was, its full name is the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, and this is the organization that I referred to earlier. Melbourne University didn't, it wasn't awarded the center, that went to La Trobe University, which is another of the universities in Melbourne, which was founded in the mid '60s, so quite a new university. I then applied for the position of director and was successful and I had the extraordinary privilege of developing a center from nothing, so I was able to employ the people I wanted, I was able to set the research agenda. This was a research center, so there was no teaching involved other than postgraduate supervision, and the center evolved under my vision, I guess. And I worked there as director until 1999 when I retired.

I thought I was retiring, or semi-retired, and I was offered the position of Associate Dean (Research) in the Faculty of Health Sciences at La Trobe University which was a position that was designed to encourage the research activities and promote the research activities of the faculty which included occupational therapists, physiotherapists, nurses, -- public health department, social work department, it was a very mixed bag. And many of these people had no interest in research whatsoever having been clinicians, and very good clinicians. So my role there was to encourage them to think about research as an activity that was worthwhile.

In 2003, I returned to fulltime work and took a five-year appointed position as Professor of Women's Health and director of the Key Center for Women's Health in Society back at the University of Melbourne. This was a commonwealth-funded center originally, center of excellence in teaching and research, and then when the commonwealth funding was completed after ten years, which was standard, the university took over the funding of the center. And I remained in that position until the beginning of this year, 2008, and I'm now retired.

Feldman: Okay, describe your experiences as a teacher of development, developmental research, and/or a trainer of research workers. Tell me a little bit about the courses you've taught and perhaps comment on the tension between teaching and research in the field of development.

Rosenthal: I've had very different experiences. In my first position, many of the students that I taught were doing psychology not because they were interested in it, and they weren't particularly interested even in developmental psychology even though they were training to be teachers. It was something that they

had to do so it was really not a great deal of enthusiasm and they were by and large not particularly outstanding students, and there were no opportunities for individual student research activities. So that was, it was a good experience in that it gave me, I guess, a fairly easy entry into teaching because the expectations were not particularly high.

When I moved to the psychology department in 1980, I found it a very different place. I introduced the first course in adolescence, I think, the Psychology of Adolescence at honor's level which is a fourth year level in Australian Universities for students who had done a great deal of psychology, five full courses in it, full subjects in it prior to their honors year. This was the first Psychology of Adolescence course taught in the country, and it was so popular that I had to run it twice for the first few years because of the number of students who wanted to take it. At the same time, I was very much in demand as a supervisor of honor students because the topic of adolescence was one that was quite dear to the heart of these adolescent young people, so that I had a lot of experience supervising honors theses, which were quite substantial independent pieces of work, and they were all in the field of adolescence.

The psychology department put its best teachers into first year after a while when they realized that they were losing students, so after a few years I was placed in first year where I taught development - child development, and a lot of Piaget. And I enjoyed that because I think teaching large classes, we had two classes of about 400 students each, and it's a great performance. And you can motivate and encourage students to continue with psychology, which is what many of them did. I guess the course that I enjoyed most of all, apart from my adolescence honors unit was a course that I called Development in Context. And what I did then, in that course, was to try to look at the ways in which child development is influenced by the social, cultural forces that are at play. And that, again, was a very new course that brought together my interest in child development as well as my interest particularly in cross-cultural psychology. And I very much enjoyed that course, probably most of all in a way.

In terms of the tension between teaching and research, I didn't ever find a tension. The only tension, I guess, was that which did you give more time to, and at times when you wanted to be doing research you might have to be doing teaching. But it seems to me that it's incredibly important for teachers to do research and for researchers to do teaching, because each informs the other. And I found that as I researched areas, I was able to bring that knowledge and the findings from my own research as well as the research of others, to the courses that I taught. And similarly, teaching courses, teaching students, talking with students, supervising students, was a marvelous way for me to think about new ideas that were worthy of research. So I just found the two things are in a sense so intertwined in terms of optimal outcomes, that they need to go together.

Feldman: And yet when you took on the position of the Director for the Center for the Prevention of Sexually Transmissible Diseases, I think you gave up classroom teaching. Will you talk a little bit about that? And you had both administrative and very heavy research responsibilities.

Rosenthal: I did give up classroom teaching and to be honest, I think I was ready to give it up. I think it's very difficult to retain your enthusiasm and your passion for teaching large classes in particular when, over many, many years. So I was ready to give up that teaching, not the supervision, because I think supervision of post graduate students either at the Masters or the Ph.D. level is a very exciting, challenging, and rewarding activity. So that remained, but the undergraduate classes, certainly I gave those up, and not really with any great degree of distress. And I think as you quite rightly said, what I took on was a very heavy administrative load and of course not only my own research, but encouraging others to do research, guiding them in what they were doing, being involved with others because many of the people that we took on board in the center were very early career researchers and they needed to have somebody with more experience on board with them initially in the projects that they took on.

Feldman: Now you've had extensive experience in applied developmental research. Could you please comment on your role in putting theory into practice and your shift from the more sort of pure research of your early years to the very applied focus of the last 20 or 25 years?

Rosenthal: Well, as I said before, I think that I found the applied work that I've done far more satisfying than the early work, because I guess it's always been very important for me to do something, whether it be teaching or research, that has real meaning for our community. And I think the fact that not only was I able to do applied research, but I was involved in some of the policy decision making where I could see the nexus between the research I was doing and the policies that were being developed, and the fact that policy makers and indeed practitioners were desperately keen to have made available to them research that answered the questions that they were asking.

Feldman: So a propos that, where did you publish your research since many of the traditional journals in the field seemed to have a leaning towards more theoretically driven, pure research? Can you talk a little bit about the application of your publications, that you wanted to affect the lives of real youths?

Rosenthal: That's a very interesting questions and it's been something of a dilemma. I have continued to publish in the more traditional, particularly adolescence journals, but you have to pick the work very carefully. It has to be more theoretical, although I think as time's gone on, these journals are actually more open to taking applied work, and especially in my field, sexuality, which has been such a burgeoning field over the last ten or 15 years--

Feldman: And so atheoretical.

Rosenthal: And it is atheoretical, that, I have continued to publish in those journals. But it's a question of who your audience is. Who is it that you actually want to reach, and so a number of the papers that I've published have been in public health journals, or indeed even medical journals, because that's the audience that you want to reach, both in Australia and in the United States. But it is a very tricky one, and I think other people find it so, hence the sort of plethora of new journals that seem to be appearing with very specific focuses.

Feldman: Let me turn now to your experiences with SRCD. When did you first join and what were your earliest contacts with the society?

Rosenthal: Goodness, I think I joined SRCD way back in the early '80s or something of that, around that period anyway. You, Shirley, were one of my earliest contacts with the society and I think actually it's an interesting experience when you live in a distant country. So my involvement with the society in a way has been perforce fairly minimal because even going to a conference in America is a very costly exercise that we can't always afford. There's very little, I think, very little incentive for international people to become members of the society even though it's the preeminent society for research in child development in the world. There's not a great deal offered to international members. And I had this issue when I was on the council of the Society of Research in Adolescents if I may talk about--it's not a rival society, I know that you work together very closely, where I was trying to encourage them to become more international in their outlook because really, again, that's the preeminent society for those people who are interested in adolescent research and it seemed very much in house. So my earliest contacts were very minimal other than just simply joining as a member and I think I came--

Both speaking at once

Feldman: What was your comfort level when you went to your first conference?

Rosenthal: I was about to say that. I think the first meeting I attended was probably fairly early in the '80s and I think it was in Baltimore, and I was extremely uncomfortable. I felt a stranger; I felt that there was very little done to encourage people who were not part of the inner circle so to speak. I did know people, Sue Somerville was there, you were there Shirley, and you were both very attentive, but you had other activities and other people that you wanted to be with. So having gone to that meeting, I actually resolved never to go to another SRCD meeting, and I haven't. I find those very large, by psychology standards, meetings not, quite intimidating and I thought there was very little done to encourage not only international people but early career people, junior people, to feel like they were welcome.

Feldman: Doreen, you've described your participation in the scientific meeting as being relatively sparse, and you've also mentioned that your publications in recent years were not in the society journals; you've moved away from them. Are there any other aspects of your connection with SRCD that you want to mention?

Rosenthal: There are no other aspects of my connection. I was generously given a life membership after a certain period because I actually wrote and said that I was giving up my membership. And somebody very kindly wrote back and said, "Well, you've been a member for so long, we'll make you an honorary member." So I've continued to receive the journals for which I'm reasonably grateful. That sounds very mean and ungrateful but in fact, I actually find child development not a journal that I enjoy reading because of its, I think, narrow focus. It still seems to me to be back in the olden days of psychology rather than understanding that really we need to look at the ways in which psychology can be applied to real problems and real issues in society.

Feldman: Okay. I know you've been involved in the governance of SRA, the Society for Research in Adolescents. Have you been involved in the SRCD governance at all?

Rosenthal: No, no.

Feldman: Okay, what do you believe are the most important changes to occur in SRCD in your association with it, and I would like you to address this particularly as an international member, somebody outside the inner circle and outside of the country. Do you have any thoughts on that?

Rosenthal: It's difficult to me, for me to talk about important changes because I've been so divorced from the society, but I think what probably hasn't changed to my knowledge is an embracing of people from outside of America, the United States, possibly Canada as well. I think it would be really valuable, because a country like Australia has a large number of developmental psychologists. They're actually, I wouldn't say they had their back to the wall, but they're really under threat in a way as the discipline certainly in this country moves much more to the neuropsych end and feels like developmental psychology and social psychology becoming less popular, more marginalized. So I think if the society wanted to benefit the many people in Australia who are still interested in developmental psychology but who feel like they're somehow being left behind, it could embrace them much more and involve them much more in the life of the society.

Feldman: Is this just the case with Australian members of SRCD or does that apply to European or Asian members--

Both speaking at once

Rosenthal: Well I would th--

Feldman: Do you have any thoughts?

Rosenthal: I would imagine that it applies to members all around the world. And one of the things that we worked with very hard when I was, for the four years that I was on the council of SRA was the observation that the journal, that society's journal and I would say it was absolutely true of child development, was very much filled with papers from the U.S., occasionally Canada, and the U.K., and Australia, and Europe, but very, very much the Western world. And we were encouraging people from Africa, from Asia, to submit papers and the society put in place a mentoring program which would help people by editing their papers, because of course, if English isn't your first language and you don't have access to a good English speaker, the papers are often not of the highest quality. And the research is often not of the highest quality, but I think we need to encourage it in some way.

Feldman: Okay, alright. As we move towards the end of our interview, I'd like you to reflect on some larger, substantive issues. Could you please comment on the history of the field during the years that you've participated? How have your views changed, or have they changed over the years?

What do you see are the major trends, the continuities, the discontinuities and events related to these?

Rosenthal: I think one of the interesting things that I've learned in all the years that I've been working is that theories come and theories go. When I was a student, Piaget was, wrote the rulebook really for cognitive development, and it wasn't long before he, his views were changed somewhat. There certainly was no sense of any links between cognitive development, clear links, and brain development for example that have come out in recent years, so that the links between neuropsychology and other part of psychology, particularly developmental psychology, were certainly not there. But the point that I wanted to make was that it's very interesting, the emphasis that's put on theory, I guess, and the energy that's put into sort of examining a theory, ten years on, that theory is history. And I remember spending many, many hours as a very junior student learning about Hull and Hebb, and who knows about them these days? And as Piaget is a--

Feldman: Freud.

Rosenthal: And Freud, a historical figure. Now that's not to say that their ideas haven't moved the field on, but I think we, my own view which is probably not one that many people would agree with, and it comes from my very, now very profound involvement in applied work, is that we can put too much emphasis on theory which changes.

Feldman: Okay, and so to wrap up, what are your hopes and fears for the future of the field?

Rosenthal: Well as I said earlier, I think that developmental psychologists are somehow, certainly in my country, being marginalized as people move to a more "scientific" view of behavior, and so that I, I have a very strong view that while I accept that nature has an important influence on behavior, I myself have always had a very great fascination for nurture and the social determinants of behavior. So I would be very sorry if the influence of the social, the cultural, the emotional somehow or another was lost and that we pinned all our ideas about development on the brain. Where the field is going in the future, I can't, I don't have a crystal ball so I can't tell you.

Laughter

Feldman: All right, as a final question, do you have anything you want to tell us that you've not already mentioned about your personal interests and your family and the ways in which your family has had a bearing on your scientific interest? Is there anything else that you omitted that you would like to comment on now?

Rosenthal: My family, my children and now my grandchildren have been wonderful fodder for my research, for practicing my research. My children got very tired of doing conservation tasks when they were very small. My grandchildren are very tired of answering questions about sexuality and the sexual activities of their peers at school. So they've been wonderful both victims, and I guess supplies of ideas about research.

Feldman: All right Doreen, you've been a great informant, thank you for undertaking the interview.

Rosenthal: It's been my pleasure and I hope it will be of interest to some people.

End of Interview