

Therese Guoin-Decarie

- Born 9/30/1923 in Montreal
- B.A. (1945), L.Ph. (1947), and Ph.D. (1960) all in Psychology from the University of Montreal

Major Employment:

- University of Montreal - 1951-Present, Professor, Department of Psychology

Major Areas of Work:

- Infant development, cognitive development

SRCD Affiliation:

- Member since 1965



SRCD ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

Therese Guoin-Decarie

Interviewed by Maryse Lassonde
April, 1994

Lassonde: Dr. Decarie, very few Canadian scientists have accomplished so much in the field of child psychology. Your work has been recognized by several agencies. You are a member of the Royal Society of Canada, I believe you also have won an award from this Society for the excellence of your work. You have received two honorific doctorates, one from the University Ottawa, one from the University Concordia. You are the first woman to have received an award, a scientific award from the French Canadian Association for the Advancement of Science. You are a member, an officer of the Order of Canada. You are an officer of the National Order of Quebec. You have a long list of awards which I won't specify in detail today but this is, I think this is a testimony to the excellence of your work in the field of child development. Before we talk about your research experience could you please tell us about your background?

I'd like to start with your family history. I know you were born and raised in Montreal and you come from a very well known family. Your grandfather, if I am not mistaken was Premier of Quebec and well I think it would be important for our readers to know more about your own parents, their education, their occupation and how this might have influenced your own career.

Decarie: Well, I do come from a very political family because my great grandfather was Premier of the Province of Quebec he was Honore Mercier, and then my grandfather Sir Lomer Gouin was also Premier and my father was a Senator. I guess probably because I was raised in such a political, let's say climate I have never tried to play any kind of role at the Federal or the Provincial level. I think that I was rather scared of politics probably because they were linked to persons and that I had seen in my own family, especially between my father and his brother, my uncle whom I liked also very much, that it was a source of tension and I just wanted not to be in that kind of conflict so politics really have played very little weight in a way at least in my career. My family was, well certainly from the point of view of let's say culture, was a

family wonderful to grow up in because my mother was a writer and she was the first woman to have a play produced in Paris and she was full of imagination while my father let's say had the kind of rigor of a lawyer. They certainly helped me greatly in the way that for them it was perfectly natural for me to go to university and my father I believe would have liked me to take his lawyer's office but he accepted, though he was a little bit surprised, when I wanted to become a psychologist. This was true of my family, it wasn't true at all of the convent where I went.

Lassonde: Yes, you did study in a very good school, Sacred Heart. A very proper school for ladies.

Decarie: That's it, well it was a good school for ladies probably but they didn't give the B.A. while they already did have the B.A. in other convents but in that one I was told when I said that I wanted to go further and that I wanted to do the B.A. I was told that "higher education was not for young ladies" so we were really seen as young women who were to, let's say be the wife of leaders but that was it. We were not supposed to be leaders so I had a little bit of trouble. I'm grateful from what I received from the nuns but I'm still astonished that to be able to do what was the B.A. at that time I had to come to the university with three other students and we had to find our own professors. In a way it was a wonderful experience because I had a very good professor in physics and chemistry. They became later my colleagues and that was fun but it wasn't an easy path.

Lassonde: So you obtained your B.A. at the University of Montreal, you were among the first women to obtain the B.A.

Decarie: Oh no, no, no. There were quite a few before me because they had gone to another convent where it was easier to get the B.A. No I was certainly not among the first to get a B.A.

Lassonde: But then how did you decide to go into psychology, why not law, why not medicine for example?

Decarie: I thought of going into medicine but what really interested me greatly was not just the physical aspect but very much how a person in conflict let's say manages to cope with conflict. I guess I had seen at least political conflict in my family and then was very new, it was taught in an institute at that time. It was a very new institute and I decided to see what psychology was all about. But certainly at that time we had no idea what it was going to lead to. We didn't even have practicing psychologists. It was just the beginning of the institute which is now 50 years old.

Lassonde: Yes and how many professors where there at the beginning when you just entered the institute?

Decarie: Maybe six or seven but on that I think there was only maybe one full-time professor which was a Dominican father, Father Noel Mailloux who was the founder of the institute.

Lassonde: And was there any child psychology at that time?

Decarie: There was no child psychology but everything was taught almost by everyone. The task was very clear that for a Father Mailloux: what he wanted was to initiate us to psychoanalysis

and to try to make a kind of raccord between psychoanalysis and Thomas Aquinas and he did manage to do that!

Lassonde: So now we are talking about 1945, 1947. You finished your B.A. if I am not mistaken you finished your B.A. in 1945.

Decarie: That's right.

Lassonde: Then you went on for a license, which is the Masters in Psychology which you also completed in '47 here at the University of Montreal. After that what happened?

Decarie: After that I was mostly thinking of clinical psychology and I was very interested already with the young child and I had heard of the James Jackson Putnam Center in Boston where Beata Rank was and I asked just to go for a short while and I saw autistic children. I stayed for a short while and went to Paris. At that time I was not just thinking of the Ph.D. I was mostly thinking of finding my fiancée and we were married in Paris then in 1948 and I discovered everything at the same time. Marriage and also Piaget because I found the books of Piaget who was relatively unknown, let's say in Quebec or even in Canada. We hadn't had any kind of teaching. I knew the name very well but that was about all and I was fortunate enough to start by the beginning. That is to start by his three books on infancy and that then really that was a fascination. My husband had always told me if you work on an author try to find someone who is a genius. He has been working all his life on Aristotle. I couldn't find Aristotle but I was absolutely delighted to find Piaget.

Lassonde: So you decided then to work, to be like a disciple of Jean Piaget if one may say it?

Decarie: I went on doing some work in France with Andre Berge who was at a clinic, "medico-pedagogique". So I did clinical work, I did some training in psycho trauma and things like that. I came back to Canada and I did a little bit of psychotherapy with children until I found out that I couldn't do both. At least for me it was impossible with my very deep yearning for a family, to have a family, do research and do also applied clinical work and then I chose, but not without a little bit of, let's say pain that I could do research and have my family and that's what I decided to do.

Lassonde: So then you became, you were already a faculty member at the Institute of Psychology when you came back from Paris?

Decarie: I was named when I came back yes. One must remember that at that time the requisites to become a professor were not those of today. I mean I didn't even have my Ph.D. and I started to lecture, but the lectures I did at first were on the New Schools. That is let's see Sommerhill and other schools in other countries. That was very far away from my interest but I never regretted trying to learn something that I wouldn't work in. I think that was interesting and I had studied a lot of those pioneers let's say of the New Schools in Paris so that I felt that I could do that kind of work.

Lassonde: Were you the first woman on the faculty here at the Institute of Psychology?

Decarie: No, there was Brenda Milner, a very great neuro-psychologist who was already teaching at the faculty.

Lassonde: So that was in 1949, you came back from Paris, started to teach and decided to do mostly research and to quit the work you were doing on applied psychology then. What were your real interests in research at that time?

Decarie: I wanted to see if there was any kind of link between the Freudian theory of psychoanalysis as applied to the young child so that meant mostly at that time the work of Renee Spitz and the cognitive development of the infant and I did experimental work at that time to try to see what kind of link there was between object relationship in a Freudian context and the mental development of the infant in relation to what we call object permanency. I had met Piaget in 1954 and had been extraordinary stimulating just talking with him and he was delighted with the idea that I would try to put together two great schools, let's say to compare two great schools in an experimental way and using statistics. He didn't like statistics but he liked other people to do statistics using his observations, his own direct observations. So it was really a wonderful opportunity and after that he opened all doors for me for the publication. I sent him my thesis and he is the one who asked me to go to Switzerland and then to meet the people who were going to publish my thesis.

Lassonde: Yes, your thesis was published as a book in Switzerland under the title of "Intelligence Et Affectivite Chei Le Jeone Enfant." It has been translated in Spanish and English since then. It is a major piece of work of course.

Decarie: It's already of course an old book and I certainly wouldn't write it in that way any more. My interests have changed but at that time I think that it was fortunate enough that I was the first to do that kind of work experimentally. People had done theoretical work comparing Piaget and object relationship development in the infant.

Lassonde: So the book was published in French in 1962 and then in English in 1965 and later on in 1970 in Spanish. This of course is a major contribution but there have been other contributions also. What do you consider your major contributions apart from this book that really did link two schools?

Decarie: I really can't answer that. I don't think it is a book or I don't even think it's an article. I believe that if I think of that I have to think that I, in a way have managed to have some people interested in Piaget's theory at a time when it was not well known at all and where he was seen almost as a philosopher more than a psychologist. Of course he's not, he is not a child psychologist, he's an epistemologist and that is his right place but there was a kind of under assimilation of Piaget at that time especially in the United States and as people were interested at that time very interested in psychoanalysis and by that kind of, let's say of detour through their interest in psychoanalysis many got interested in Piaget and I think that, I just happened at that time to be interested in both.

Lassonde: So after the publication of your book you became very famous in Quebec and at the same time also there was a social medical problem that occurred here in Quebec maybe less than in the States. It was the problem of children with thalidomide. I believe you were called in to do the investigation, the cognitive investigation of these children. Would you please tell us a little more?

Decarie: Yes, we had more infants that were the victims of thalidomide than in the United States. I just want to mention that because it was stopped earlier in the United States, it was

stopped by the Food and Drug Administration and by a Canadian woman and while here the prohibition of thalidomide came later than in the United States so that we had about a hundred children all through Canada. It's nothing at all compared of course to Germany or even to Japan but it was enough for the Federal government to decide to invest funds. They were extremely generous at that time and they invested funds then but for the physical welfare of these children and for some research in the prosthesis because everything had to be miniaturized to give those children a prosthesis and it was very expensive, also they had to change with the child as the child was growing up. But there was no studies from the point of view of the emotional and cognitive development of those children and at that time then we had a very good institute of readaptation and the psychologist knowing that I was working with young children asked me to do something and after wondering a bit if I could do it or not I saw the children and I decided to work and to have some of my students working with me. We had a team but no money. We had all the facilities of the hospital but I didn't have anything to give to the students so I got a grant from the Medical Research Council and this study then lasted for, because we did follow-up, lasted for about six years.

Lassonde: Six years and you found out that the IQ of these children was ...

Decarie: There were more retarded infants in the group than in the normal population but not more than any population of children that had some kind of handicap. So what we found was what in a way we could expect to find but not at all what the doctors had said because most of the articles, the medical articles at that time without any kind of testing were all saying that those children had high IQ or were above average. I think, let's say the medical corporation wanted to feel less guilty after all they were the ones who had recommended the drug.

Lassonde: So your studies had a great social impact but also I believe you presented those results in London.

Decarie: Yes, at that time Tony Ambrose who was director of the Behavioral Development Research at St. Mary's Hospital Medical School in London and who had read my book, I believe in the French edition asked me to participate in the Tavistock study group. The group was chaired by John Bowlby and they were the members of that meeting at the CIBA Foundation were people like Mary Ainsworth and Betty Caldwell, Jack Gerwartz, Dr. Hinde, Harry Harlow. I remember well Henry Ricciuti and Harriet Rheingold and of course Lou Sanders and Peter Wolfe so that it was a very eclectic and knowledgeable group. I was in awe with all those people and it was extremely fortunate that we managed to really work together for at least five or six days. John Bowlby was a masterful chairman and he kept us together from breakfast to dinner late and even late at night and there was quite an exchange then of ideas. Of course the theory of attachment was beginning to be very important and the psychoanalysis theory represented by Myriam David was maybe losing a little bit of ground, but one problem that kept cropping up and I believe it was the core of the expose of Betty Caldwell, was the reaction of the infant to the stranger and there were questions of those people who were also working with primates and wondering why is it that within the human species the infant seems at one time to be afraid of a member of its own species only because that person is not familiar to him or to her and that started me on a research where I tried to find if there was any kind of components to that reaction and to the evolution of that reaction with the cognitive development of the object permanency and that produced another book which was The Infants Reaction To The Stranger.

Lassonde: Which was published in 1972?

Decarie, T. by Lassonde, M.

Decarie: Yes, it was the work of a certain number of my students and one of them had died while doing that work and nothing of his work was published and for me that was very important that he should at least go on living at least in that way by publishing his M.A. thesis.

Lassonde: And the book was also, as the first book, was also translated in English and published at New York. The translation appeared in 1974 and from then on did you go on also working on this same topic?

Decarie: From then on I worked really in two, let's say two different kinds of researchers. One was still very Piagetian and I was fortunate enough to have a very bright student, Marcelle Ricard who now occupies my position since I retired and who worked on identity, instead of working on object permanency she worked on object identity. Piaget was beginning to be criticized and it was very clear that research was needed to read with a kind of capacity of a critical appraisal what he had written because there was an under-assimilation for a while in the United States of Piaget's theory and work but after that there was a period where he was really the great man and that wasn't good either. It was much like a clique and this is always I think, very dangerous in science and at that time people were beginning to really try to test many of the hypothesis of Piaget and that's what we went on doing and at the same time working also on the let's say the reaction of the person to the strange infant and we became very interested and we have published on that. It is in another article by Marcelle Ricard and myself on the reaction of the infant to the stranger that we are trying to put the infant in context, let's say where he controls the situation and that leads to something very different than a reaction of apprehension or a negative reaction. At the same time we began to wonder when does the infant react differently to an unfamiliar object compared to an unfamiliar person? We started trying to build situations that can never be equivalent but maybe a little bit similar, we began working on the reaction of the infant to a strange object that reacts to let's say manipulation and to a strange person who also reacts to vocalizations or manipulation and this started for us a new field which is infant social cognition and I think we are now working in that very fascinating field that is infant social cognition.

Lassonde: You mentioned that you retired, that was in 1992 I believe?

Decarie: It was in the spring of 1991.

Lassonde: Oh 1991, but you are still very active.

Decarie: I kept my research students with co-supervision with Marcelle Ricard and so that our lab is very, I think very alive. We have three Ph.D. theses coming in this year and I do hope to go on doing some research. I have always kept and I'm just leaving them now my administrative responsibility as member of what we can call the Board of Governors at the University and in other societies.

Lassonde: Well throughout those 45 or almost 45 years of career...50 years of career here at the University of Montreal, you have seen of course a lot of changes. Have you had any difficulties with funding? Was it easier before then it is now, how do you find it?

Decarie: I was really very lucky I think with funding. First probably because my first request was for funding the research on thalidomide children and for that of course people were ready to give. It was such a social aspect that was very, very important. I was really fortunate once I had

a bad surprise. Most of our researches are longitudinal and I still believe that to be able to target the development of a social or cognitive capacity (and I shouldn't separate them ever) the best way is to take a baby around, I don't know, four or six months and see how that capacity develops and changes until 18 or 20 months which is usually the earliest period we are working on. But those studies take time. Those studies request a lot of dedicated students because when they are doing their Ph.D. just gathering the data means a year and a half usually and what I was very surprised when with a clear cut request for grants that required the same amount for three years suddenly it could be cut in the third year, but we were doing the same work the third year that we were doing during the first year and needing just as much money. So there is a lack of logic there I think some agencies don't take into account the methodology of the researcher and pushes us in a way in doing a simpler research a transversal research which doesn't always give as rich I think data as longitudinal do.

Lassonde: Yes, and you find that this change of attitude has happened when from the funding agencies?

Decarie: Oh, I think maybe let's see maybe around the 80's maybe or something like that because they were probably more strapped for funds.

Lassonde: And you find that it is also the same thing, your colleagues complain about the same situation now...

Decarie: I see very few colleagues who do longitudinal studies here at least in the department. Elsewhere when they are working in some aspects they take about, we are working on social cognition, most of the research except one maybe took about two levels, maybe three some times but that was it while we tried to have six, so maybe we're presumptuous also but I do believe that the agencies should take that into account and they have trouble, they want results rather quickly and sometimes you can't do that. You compare, if you want to do real follow-up you've got to take your time.

Lassonde: You were yourself involved in the policies of granting agencies and I think that you were in fact the first woman and the first psychologist to be named at the National Research Council of Canada.

Decarie: I was the first francophone psychologist woman named at the Research Council in 1970. I had very quickly a colleague who was also a woman in biology. I think that at that time and I have mentioned it often enough to the other members that I was really a token woman. I was a francophone in a mostly English country. I was a psychologist working with people in physics and chemistry and engineering and I was Catholic which was a little bit unusual even there.

Lassonde: In the 1970's psychology as such was not considered too much of a science; did you help in changing that image?

Decarie: I think that if I had an impact at that level besides I hope shaping some research funding policies just by being a member of the council, I helped my colleagues to better understand that psychology was a science. That it required just as much research and rigor than physics or chemistry. I believe that that was an important aspect that psychology in a way gained credibility that it hadn't had in that kind of milieu.

Lassonde: So you had an influence then on the funding policies, you also had a big influence here at the Department of Psychology. You were the first professor to start a laboratory on child psychology and now how many professors are there in the department doing some research with child psychology?

Decarie: We are quite a few doing research in child psychology, I would say I don't know maybe twenty I suppose if you include applied psychology but at the level of infancy there's still very few of us really working with infants. Maybe I think we can say three or four, that's about it.

Lassonde: At the beginning you were alone.

Decarie: Yes, but I am sorry that there is not maybe even more of them. Many of my former students are in other Universities and there are labs in all our other universities in Quebec where they have at least one or two professors working with infants.

Lassonde: So your former students; they can't find work here at the University of Montreal but are rather spread out.

Decarie: I feel that I have taught generations of students and they are really now all over the world.

Lassonde: Which courses did you teach more specifically?

Decarie: I taught within a team teaching course. I taught infancy and that meant from all the different points of view. That is the neurological development, the cognitive development, the affective development that was when they had no choice that was a compulsory lecture so they had to go through it. I gave also a series of lectures, some that were on cognitive development, some that were on social development. I remember when it was, let's say 1975, it was easier. The program wasn't that structured so I felt at liberty to give 45 hours just on the origins of intelligence.

Lassonde: Some of your courses were very theoretical, do you find that also had some impact on applied psychology?

Decarie: I've always tried to build a relationship just like my first work was between psychoanalysis and Piaget. I really regret when you have barriers let's say between fundamental psychologists and applied psychologists. My work is certainly mostly fundamental but I see that my students who did their, let's say their Ph.D. with me, they have gone to be at the head of Child Study Centers or they have done some clinical psychology. So that the applied aspect of my work has been done mostly by others.

Lassonde: Would you tell us when you joined SRCD and what has been your relationship with the Society over the years?

Decarie: I joined SRCD in the late 60's or early 70's and I went to meetings, gave a few communications but my involvement in fact became more intense, if I can say that, within an off shoot of SRCD which was the Conference for Research in Infancy. That is a small group of researchers that were specialized in infant development and felt that SRCD was in a way too global to really always offer very, very update presentations. We felt that we had to meet and to discuss between ourselves not of what had been done, not what we had completed like in

the case of symposia or other kinds of meeting at SRCD but we wanted to know what we were actually doing or thinking even of doing and the group was very stimulating because we had the kind of policy where we sent each other preprints, never anything that was already really published. I believe I was the only Canadian with Bill Fowler of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education and we met then regularly before SRCD and (I do believe that many people are more knowledgeable about that than I), that this gave birth in a way to ISIS, that is to the International Society for Infant Studies, which now meets every year when SRCD doesn't meet and we have of course, we have the biannual meeting in Paris this June. I must also mention just as a historical point that in the 1970's there was an attempt to create the Society for the Advancement of Research in Child Development in Canada. That is a Canadian branch in a way of SRCD which we called the CAARCD and we had quite a few meetings but the Canadian Society was really short lived. Really I believe that the Canadian researchers in infancy now have a very good niche where they can meet between themselves but fortunately also meet with specialists all over the world in the framework of the International Society for Infant Studies.

Lassonde: You have just talked about changes over the years with the Societies and so on, do you see any changes that happened in the field also?

Decarie: Oh, I think there were major changes. First there was a kind of let's say, explosion of research in infant perception which became really a kind of revolution on knowledge of the infant of discovery of course of the extraordinary competencies in the cognitive field and in the social skills also of infants. So that we cannot talk anymore just of the infant. We have to say the 5-day baby, the 7-week infant and the 3-month, they are all different, very different individuals. I've also seen a kind of gradual decrease in interest in the psychoanalytical aspect, and less let's say posters of course in that field and more and more in infant cognition and I myself have also left it completely (after a phase of course where I was deeply interested in attachment theory) I have left psychoanalysis. I think it's still in my heart but I've left behind psychoanalysis and attachment theory to focus really on infant cognitive development and we are now working still mostly at a theoretical level but working very hard on what I would call the precursors of the child's theory of mind.

Lassonde: That is beautiful. Do you have any hopes or fears in fact for the future of the field? Where do you see it leading?

Decarie: I don't think that I'm worried about the future of the field I have never seen it so stimulating and really, let's say developing. It's the development of the infant's development and I have no worry from that point of view. I have worries about the individual researchers and the great difficulty for them to survive the kind of competition we are living in. I have a little bit of worry also about people that have worked, let's say mostly with adolescent and who want sometime to find the roots of, let's say misadaptation or delinquency and say well we have to look at the infant and I think that sometimes they don't know that they're really traveling in a foreign land for them and that you have to work very hard before you become knowledgeable in infancy. When you haven't got language compared to even the toddler who has language well you have to be like an anthropologist and really get to know the people if you want to perceive their culture and things like that. You have to take a very long time before you know infants.

Lassonde: Dr. Decarie, apart from being an excellent researcher you are also a mother and a grandmother. Please tell us if your family has any impact on your work and how did this affect your work, positively or negatively?

Decarie: My family helped me tremendously especially my husband who is a philosopher and an Aristolician. He was in a way never pushing me. That was much better he was always there and always happy when I was doing a good piece of work and he was very, very meticulous himself and my children and my husband were my joy and I think I was helped in my work because I was happy. I have been a very, very happy woman. Of course sometimes I have had difficulties just going on in my career and I haven't had the career I suppose maybe I would have had without a husband and without children but I would have been very unhappy but maybe more successful. One thing that I did discover because people were always asking me, "Well have you taken direct observation of your children?" After all I had four in seven years and I never did and I found out that really those who make direct observation, at least the pioneers they were all men! You have very little time to take notes when you are changing diapers and feeding the baby and getting them their bottles.

Lassonde: Well you seem to have achieved something on all sides as a mother, a grandmother and also as a researcher you seem to have accomplished so much.