

Raewyn Connell Interview Transcription

00:29

LS:

Hello and welcome to the Gender Institute Launch Event Series, where we're grateful to have Raewyn Connell here for our first event. Thank you for joining us in this interview.

The interview will be shared with members of the Royal Holloway community who are interested in learning more about gender research and careers in gender research as they work with and about the Gender Institute.

00:57

LS:

You mentioned thinking about the ways in which your research is received and interacts over the course of several decades. And I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about what you see as the relationship between activism and research?

01:16

RC:

I've been involved in a number of projects on gender and sexuality. I've always thought of that as both a contribution to that collective process of the development of knowledge around a certain set of problems and for that purpose I was published in academic journals, scientific journals, of one kind or another. But I've also thought of it as a contribution to practice and that is a – I guess – it's a two-way street. So, the questions that are important to research are likely, in the social sciences, generally, are likely to be those that are thrown up by social struggles, particularly by activism. So, as I was saying, my first ever publication on gender actually came out of the impact of the Women's Liberation Movement and its agenda for changing the concerns and the topics of social science. In the research in schools, the connection with activism is very clear. There is a political process of challenging inequalities in education, gender inequalities, class inequalities, race inequalities and so forth. And out of those movements have a need for knowledge, to understand the situation you're facing, to get ideas about constructive ways of dealing with that situation changing inequalities in the whole educational field. Well, research is one of the ways that that knowledge can be accumulated – not the only way – because also, you know, activism generates its own knowledge, 'activist wisdom' as it's called in a very nice book on the subject. But research is also a resource and can be a very important resource, especially when you're engaged in policy struggles and trying to get resources, for instance, for anti-sex work in schools or for development of new curricula, or for anti-violence programs and so on and so forth. So, I've also tried to do research in a way, and to write about research, in a way that gave tools to struggles, to people engaged in struggles for social justice of various kinds: gender justice, racial justice, and class justice. And that's involved several kinds of tasks. One is engaging with the groups of people who could use the data, who could use the information that researchers are producing. So, for instance, the research on education – key group, a key audience for that group, a key group of people who can make practical use of that knowledge is teachers in schools and universities. So, I spent significant time, and my colleagues in that research, have spent a lot of time engaging with teachers, teachers' organisations, going to teachers' conferences, going to schools, running workshops,

publishing in teachers' magazines and so on and so forth, to convey the research and the ideas and for practice that might come out of it. Perhaps the most dramatic example of that that I think of was in the 1980s, during the early impact of the HIV/AIDS pandemic where the first group of people in Australia to be significantly impacted were the gay men in the gay community in Sydney, which was at the time the best known, probably the largest gay community in the country. My colleagues and I, at the place where I had the Chair of Sociology were approached by a group of people from the gay community who had begun prevention work in the community with education programs. We were approached to set up a research project that would serve the collective education project that the gay community itself was undertaking, and we got to do that, set up a research team, got funding from the government and that became the first large-scale social research on HIV/AIDS in Australia. And it grew and eventually became the base of a national centre that continued that research over the decades that followed. And in that project, as we designed the research in dialogue with the community educators and activists of the community, we set up, as the results began to come out of the computers, we set up a system where the results, as soon as we had them, were fed into and workshopped with the community educators who engaged in prevention education. And thus, set up a kind of feedback between the people actually doing the work on the ground and the researchers processing findings. Now, we also published the findings in professional journals and eventually in book, and in due course in many settings, and some of that became international so it was fairly international research and activism and the thing spread. But the key to the whole thing was the initial, really organic, relationship between activism and research which was possible to set up at the time. Now, that required a benign government, which you can't always rely on. In fact, Australia was very, very fortunate in the 1980s in having a national health minister who got it quickly and funded this kind of work on an adequate scale. Now that was certainly not the case in the United States, and it took a while for that to happen in Britain, too, but there we were. So, that is a somewhat unusual case, I think, of how a really close type relationship between activism and research. But something like that is what I hoped for, over time, for instance, in work on gender-based violence and for later research and education, yeah.

9:22

LS:

It's very interesting and exciting to think about the possibilities. I wanted to ask what you're working on now, and kind of what's inspiring you these days?

9:35

RC:

Well, that's a difficult question to answer because I'm just in a transitional moment. I've been in self-isolation because I'm very vulnerable to Covid-19, I've been in self-isolation for most of the last year, and therefore, I'm not working collectively as I would always hope to do. But, let me show you a couple of things. In 2019, just before the pandemic arrived, we published this book, [holds up book], *Knowledge and Global Power*, which is from a project, a volume, a great deal of interviewing and a bit of organisational ethnography which is based in Australia, South Africa and Brazil and was looking at the creation of new fields of knowledge. It came out of the research and debates about global inequalities and the production of knowledge, about the impact of colonialism and imperialism on modern

knowledge systems and the work that I had done in previous years about what I call 'Southern Theory', that is, the kinds of knowledge about societies, especially in the social sciences, that come out of colonial or post-colonial contexts. In that we were exploring the idea that in new fields of knowledge the global relationships between the global north and the wealthy knowledge institutions of the global north, like the universities, the research institutes and so forth and the global periphery, that relationship might be different in new fields of knowledge. And one of those new fields of knowledge that we were exploring, in fact, was gender studies. Another is HIV/AIDS research and a third is climate change. So, we have some interesting results. It's not revolutionary but it is interesting about the possibilities that knowledge workers in the global periphery have for negotiating different relationships with the global metropole and the most prestigious and well-resourced knowledge institutions. The same year, actually, I published another book, [picks up new book], this is a sole-authored one, *The Good University*, which comes out of social struggle, alright. It was actually triggered by a strike at the University of Sydney some seven years ago, which I was involved in where the workforce were angry about the attempts by management to roll back conditions of employment and even the wages. So, there was a long industrial struggle and that brought to a focus my thinking about impact of neoliberalism on the universities, the rising power of management, the new forms of control, the casualisation, the precarious labour that was becoming characteristic of universities and so on. So that made me think about, you know, my whole experience of universities and intellectual life. And there was of course, and there is some excellent critical literature out there about the neoliberal universities and so forth, really some very good work. But there wasn't too much that pointed very clearly to what one might do, what alternatives there might be, so my work, it tries to do both of those, analyse the university system, the nature of intellectual work, but also explore the history of alternative and radical universities and knowledge projects so that we get some positive ideas about potential alternatives for the future. Over the last couple of years, much of it now online for the last year, I've been doing talks about that, those kinds of issues, about the global knowledge issues, decolonising curriculum, decolonising gender studies, feminist thought in a global perspective and so on. That's what I've been doing in a somewhat chaotic fashion as one tries to find new ways of working in the context of the pandemic. What I'm inspired by is the extraordinary creativity that people have been, in universities, have shown in responding to the pandemic. The social struggles outside the university world, too, in increasingly difficult circumstances that have continued on. And the, I guess, the intellectual issues that I've been grappling with and trying to make some progress with, and how far remains to be seen, but, about living with those kinds of issues, with linking what we know about the global economy of knowledge, its inequalities, and its mutual dependencies, with the issues about gender and power, about the gendered divisions of labour, the different constructions of gender in different parts of the globe, the impact of global economic relations on knowledge work, all of those kinds of things are still exciting me and I hope to talk about those, in fact, in my main presentation, exactly that. So, what you'll be getting is exactly what I've been working on and what I feel most steamed up about right now.

17:38

LS:

Excellent. The project of decolonising universities has been going better or worse than some places in some ways. Particularly, some places they use it as virtue signalling, some places

that are consolidating power. If students and staff are looking to hold their universities accountable for decolonisation, do you have a hint or two about how to best strategise to do that?

18:11

RC:

I mean, of course, different situations need different strategic and tactical responses, so I, certainly not, don't claim that I have any kind of formula for this, but I do have a feeling, you know, which is a general feeling about politics, that what we most need is to begin to construct alternatives, actually. So that confrontation in some situations is necessary, as when you go on strike or when a demonstration is necessary to open an issue up. But the more we can actually get new programs going, even on a small scale, get new curricula being developed and tried out, new forms of relationship between teachers and taught, between researchers and researched. The more we can do in practice to begin to create alternatives, I think, the stronger the struggle becomes and the easier it is to give people examples and models and starting points. So, what most is happening in these struggles is in fact the beginnings of, you know, new curricula, new pedagogies, and the – which is perhaps less dramatic than some of the other forms of struggles, but is I think a really important thing to move on.

20:20

LS:

That makes sense. Like I mentioned before, I think that a lot of scholars and a lot of students have been really inspired by your work and sometimes I like to ask people, whose work they were inspired by early in their career? Who they look up to academically? Because it's always a really interesting answer, so let me try and ask you, are there people who have inspired your work over the years? People, scholars, whose work you found particularly, kind of, inspirational or interesting or ground-breaking?

21:06

RC:

Well, there are of course the dead white men. So, as an undergraduate I came in contact with Freud's work and became fascinated especially with Freud's case histories. The metaphysical wafflings I'm not too keen on. But the way he engaged in cases and began to unpack patterns of femininity and masculinity, I did find, you know, exciting and have remained a bit of an inspiration over time. Piaget, likewise, I met in undergraduate psychology, and who remained for a good while a model of theoretical adventurousness, is that the right word? I'm not sure. But anyway, **boldness** perhaps, for all that I've, you know, I've come to abandon his way of thinking about the development of humans, that stayed with me a bit. Lévi-Strauss, whom I met, I was almost a graduate or in my post-doc year. I got very excited about Lévi-Strauss, less excited now I guess, but again the kind of 'adventurousness' in intellectual terms, kind of, grand willingness to tackle anything was a bit of a thrill. And Sartre, a further combination of philosophy and activism. A bit of a pill, a bit of a male chauvinist, I think. A pain in the neck in many ways, but also did quite exciting work. His less-known, later, social philosophy actually was a starting point for me, the work on masculinity, strange to tell. So, those were sort of father figures, and you'll notice they were father figures, of the early stages and as I got going more in new directions, Simone de Beauvoir of

course, in something of the same territory as Jean-Paul. Particularly, I think, I was excited by the parts of *The Second Sex* that sketch out pathways of life for different groups of women. It's in the middle part of the book, and it's the less-quoted part of the book, by and large. But to me it was the most social part of the book, and the one that sort of gave clues to the historicity of the construction of gender. That was really exciting. Some of the feminist ethnographers of the 1970s, when women's studies was opening up and feminist anthropology was one of the driving forces, I think. That was important.

And then as I began to develop the 'Southern Theory' work, some of the people like Ashis Nandy, in India, an important public intellectual in India who wrote a brilliant book about colonial masculinities, which was never cited in the global north but blew me away when I first found it. People like Raúl Prebisch from Argentina, economist who produced a kind of framework for southern thought about the global economy. Celso Furtado in Brazil who's part of the same intellectual milieu and, I think, more practically oriented to the social struggles surrounding economic policy. Yeah, I could go on about it. Ali Shariati in Iran who combined Shi'ite Islam with kind of anti-colonial Marxism. Extraordinary inventive thinker who died quite, quite young. Heleieth Saffioti in Brazil, who developed a really sophisticated socialist feminist analysis before women's liberation classics were published in the global north. So, yeah. Not a, you know, single inspirational figure, there's a whole lot of people in the kind of intellectual ferment that I've bubbled with for a long time. I think of intellectual work, you know, although we have league tables and Nobel prizes and all of that kind of stuff, it's basically co-operative. It's basically collective. And we're engaged in a collective process of producing knowledge, and that's nowhere more true than feminist thought. Where we gain, it's through efforts of significant numbers of people working hard on linked problems. And that 'collective intellectual' if you like, is my main inspiration.

28:02

LS:

Very cool. OK, so the question we're gonna ask in all of these interviews, just because it seems pretty popular among students, is, other than your own is there a recent book that you advise students read about the issues that you've been working on?

28:22

RC:

Yeah – Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*. Mbembe is a really fascinating African intellectual, currently working in South Africa. Wrote a brilliant book called *On the Post-Colony*, 20 or 30 years ago and has now pulled together his philosophical work in a critique of the, you know, classics of European philosophy and the way they have handled questions about race and imperialism. That's a text, I think. It's not an easy text, I give fair warning. It's written in the Francophone style of philosophical work which is not an easy task for people. I mean, there is an English translation now for people brought up in the Anglophone world. But it's really worth it. That would be one thing that I would recommend.

Thinking about the work on masculinities, it's not a book but a set of articles by Kopano Ratele in South Africa, who's a psychologist who's done extraordinarily interesting work on construction of masculinities in African contexts and I will be mentioning him in my talk, too. He has really interesting thoughts on the conventional politics of change in masculinities

and moving towards gender equity. So those would be things I would urge people to look at and learn from.

30:27

LS:

OK, one last question. A lot of students now see themselves as consumers of knowledge but can't really imagine being producers of knowledge. Not a lot of them are talking about 'oh I'm gonna go to grad school and get a Ph.D. and become an academic.' As somebody who has contributed so much to the production of knowledge, particularly critical knowledge, I'm wondering if you, over your career, how you've convinced people that they are producers of knowledge?

31:00

RC:

Yeah, I do have pretty strong views about this. So, when we set up a sociology program at Macquarie University, where I was chair of department, and we had to design a new program we set up gender and sexuality as one of three main streams in the program and we had to decide a foundation course, an introduction to sociology course to suit. And what we did in the introductory course, in first year sociology, was firstly introduce the students to real research publications, not just a textbook. In fact, we didn't use a textbook. But we used actual writings by researchers, choosing ones that were relatively accessible to beginners to show them what it was like from the start. And also, in the introductory course, we gave them a research project to do. So that they had to, and it might be a small and simple research project, like interviewing an older member of your family about the gender division of labour in the household where they grew up or something like that and comparing it with their own experience. But getting them actually into the process of producing knowledge from the very first year of study, I think was crucial. And that then became more elaborate in later years of study when we had people doing research in teams and so forth and then eventually writing a thesis with honours at the end of the degree. And then later on I was in an education school and we set up, we were redesigning a course on, you know, the social foundations of education. We did the same thing, that is we built in a research project as part of the student's foundational work in the area of knowledge so that they had to sweat through the process of collecting information, thinking about it, relating it to the archive of knowledge that already existed and making a report on it. And those are the basic tasks in research, as I show in Chapter One of *The Good University*. And they can be done by students from their very first year. They won't be producing publishable work from the very start, but they will be producing knowledge and that, I think, I mean it does, some people find it difficult, that's understandable, especially if they've been, you know, taught to regard themselves simply as consumers of knowledge. But, yeah many of them get it and get excited by it so it's good pedagogy, I think, as well as good, you know, democratic politics of knowledge because what we want ultimately, my view of a democratic society, is among other things a society of knowledge producers. Everyone can do it. Everyone does, in fact, produce knowledge but usually it doesn't get published or certified or made available to many others. So, yeah that's my feeling and I'm very happy you raised this question because it's a very strong feeling of mine and a very important part of my teaching career was to try and convey it to people that they can do it! You can think for yourself. You can produce knowledge for yourself and yourselves in the plural.

35:14

LS:

That's a very important message, I think, and I think if I asked another question, I would ruin it, so I'll stop there. But I really appreciate you taking the time for the interview and we all look forward to your talk next week.