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Oral Interview of Amy Blackstone by Unknown Interviewer for the Feminist Oral History Project (Part #1)

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Oral interviews for the Feminist Oral History Project.

Interviewer: N/A (Interviewer)

Interviewee: Amy Blackstone (AB)

Date: N/A

Recording number: MF223-BlackstoneA-T1a

Length of recording: 17:02

[Transcript begins]

Interviewer: So, all I really read actually was, I think last summer, maybe you got a woman in the curriculum grant that had something to do with workplace. Yeah, but it seemed like it was more younger?

AB: Let me let me see if I can remember what it was. I think it was 06 that I got the Grant. Then we'll just look that up but.

Interviewer: Yeah, because the ones I am doing right now it is 07.

AB: OK, yeah it was for... well, to continue work that I've been doing for a while on sexual harassment of younger workers, but also to extend that study to include sort of the broader life course so into old age, and then also to start working on a longer-range project that I still have in mind to do with a collaborator in Minnesota. That would be a comparative and international comparative project, so yes, I did get in with that and there were multiple pieces, most of it centered well, all of it centered on sexual harassment and the bulk of the work that I did was focused on younger workers like you said. But the idea was to start building my own knowledge about the experiences of older workers, so that ultimately, I could study older workers.

Interviewer: It seems like. Uhm, maybe the older worker

sort of the experience that they have with that with harassment isn't really out there. You know it's not what you think about when you think about sexual harassment, really, you know. So, what made you interested? Did it come off of other research or?

AB: Yes. Uhm, in part, yeah, I mean I did with this grant that I just got from the NSF. I extended it to include all forms of workplace harassment and one reason for that. My own interest really is in sexual harassment, but one reason I extended it to include other forms is that I was finding it kind of a hard sell to convince people that sexual harassment might be something that older workers experience, which just sort of exemplifies all of the cultural stereotypes about what we have, about what sexual harassment is, where we think it's about someone being attracted to somebody and about someone asking someone out on a date, and we forget that it's about power. So, I mean that was one reason that I extended this study. Another was that the reading that I was doing, really, if there was any literature on harassment of older workers, it really wasn't about sexual harassment, so I needed to build, you know, from what had already been done. So I was in part motivated to do it because there's really so little work on this population and focus on people 62 and older, and not only in the sexual harassment literature, but just the workplace experiences in general of this age group and one reason is probably that you know there haven't been that many workers or as many workers in that age group until now, and we're seeing increasing numbers of people working later in life, in part because there's more people are living longer, but also because people are finding, especially in the state of Maine, they have to work for financial reasons, so I mean so there were a lot of things that played into my interest in older workers. You know the one that it hadn't been studied all that much to that. I'd been studying younger workers and I thought, you know, I wanted to know how age played a role for people who were much older than their colleagues in the workplace, just as I had done in the study of young workers, we, I and my collaborators, found that age was, you know, played a pretty significant role in shaping those workers experiences, and my guess is that that will be true for people who are older too.

Interviewer: So at this point, you've done the grant proposal and then and, which seems like a whole different thing than actually getting into doing the work itself, yeah.

AB: Yeah, definitely so right now the grant officially started September 1st of this year, so I'm now in the process of trying to make happen what I said I could do. And you're absolutely right, it's one thing to imagine it happening is to talk about it and then it's an entirely different animal to actually make it happen. Thankfully I have, part of the funding included funding for graduate research assistant and an undergrad research assistant, and so I'm working with two assistants that are great and that makes you know, a huge difference and also partnering with an organization in Bangor, the Able

program, which is a national program, but they have an office in Bangor that does a number of things, one of which is to help older workers find employment. So, I spoke with them before I applied for a grant, they were excited about the project and agreed to sort of work with me to help find a sample of older workers and since the grant came through, my graduate research assistant has been placed with them for about half of his time for this year to sort of establish a relationship with this organization. That's going to help me get my sample and then also weed through some of their records to identify older workers in the state of Maine that I can survey.

Interviewer: Yeah, in the short, and what else did I read? The short University of Maine one? It says you're going to do 800 workers?

AB: Yeah, that's what I'm shooting for, yeah?

Interviewer: Yeah, what are you gonna do? Interviews or questionnaire? Have you even gone that far?

AB: Yeah, well I haven't started that yet, but I know what I'll be doing. I'll be doing a written survey, that they'll get in the mail and then mail back to me and originally when I wrote this proposal for the National Science Foundation, I had written in time and funding to do the survey and then do follow up one on one interviews with a subset of survey respondents, and on and on all I see that was the part of the project that most excited me. I'm mostly a qualitative researcher, and so interviews really are my forte and I've done a lot of survey research. I can do it, but it's not what really drives me. It's not what I feel passionate about in sociology, but the granting organization felt that the interview component of the project wasn't as well developed as the survey project, so they're funding the survey and they decided not to fund that second component. So it's not something that I've have totally given up on, but I'd have to write another proposal to a different agency to get the funding to do it 'cause it would involve travel around the state and paid for their time.

Interviewer: It almost seems like that's where you're going to get them. You know the stories or that you have...

AB: Exactly, and I partly did that too because it mimics what I did with my collaborator Kosygin in Minnesota with the younger worker study, we did a survey of about 1000 workers, but then I did interviews with 33 of those people, and so the survey helped us find out you know what are the actual behaviors that people have experienced in the workplace X and X percent of people have experienced inappropriate touching, as many have been around have experienced joking that they found offensive. There's many have experienced sexual assaults, so the survey is good at giving us

that, those sort of broad patterns, but what the interviews did was like you said, tell us you know what the story is behind somebody checking, Yes, I've been inappropriately touched in the workplace 'cause there's all kinds of possibilities about what that could mean and what that how that process worked for each person, so yeah, it's kind of sad to not be thinking planning for that component, but like I said I haven't given up on it.

Interviewer: Well, this is this just the first part here. It's a really interesting topic I think, especially in Maine, where like you said more people are working or the whole economy. It's all going to come in, you know, yeah. Let's see what else do I have? It said in here that you hope to find out how stature at work affects harassment experiences. Do you have any sort of hypothesis?

AB: Yeah, I do have some hypotheses. I'm actually going to just pull them up so that I... It's one thing to write them down another to recall them.

Interviewer: Oh yeah, I totally understand, I don't mean to put you on the spot.

AB: Oh no, no you're not. You're not, but it would be, I think it would make more sense if I had them in front of me. Ofcourse I can't find them, so let's guess.

Interviewer: If you want like later, if you find it, you could just email it something that will be fine.

AB: OK, I mean basically an idea that I have based on you know other work on harassment in the workplace is that if people are in positions where they don't have very much autonomy. Where they can't direct their own life day-to-day in the workplace, that they might be more vulnerable to harassment because they're relying on somebody else. They have to rely on somebody else to sort of direct them in the workplace, and people who come to work, do their own thing, leave their job, may be less vulnerable to actually, I mean the possibility for harassment might be not as much for those folks, so that's one thing that I had in mind. I also, Yeah, so it was that autonomy piece that I was hypothesizing about I was also thinking that people relationships outside of work could impact, not their likelihood to be harassed, but the another component of the survey is asking people about how they responded to harassment. So did you report it? Did you stay in the job? Did you leave the job? If you did report it, did you report it to a boss? Did you report it to a lawyer? and one hypothesis I have is that the more connected a person is to their community through friendship, networks and family connections, the more likely they might be to perceive what's happening to them as harassment because they have somebody to talk with about it and then more likely to actually do something about the harassment. So folks who are isolated who don't have the social

support that I think it takes to speak up about being harassed might be less likely to actually report it and do something about it. I think that the press release there says something about power? I can't remember how they phrased it. This was sort of like summary of my hypothesis, but another component that I'm looking at in terms of power is economic power so I'm hoping to gather some information about people's financial vulnerability and I'm also hypothesizing that, you know, the more vulnerable people are financially, the less likely they are to do something about harassment because they may need to stay in their jobs. But there's some literature in sociology that suggests that those folks may also be more likely to be harassed. Because if we look at the perspective of the people who are perpetrating harassment, they're likely to be looking for people who are, you know, most vulnerable who aren't going to do anything about it, so the folks who are more financially insecure, it might be for lack of a better way of putting it, more desirable targets to the perpetrator. So, I have some hypotheses about that as well.

Interviewer: So, what's the time frame for it?

AB: Two years. So yeah, so it's gonna, it's a long process. Even getting a clean sample. A clean list of at least 800 people who are 62 and older who've done have held paid positions and turning 62 have given us this entire semester to do that. So, the goal is by the end of the semester to have a nice clean sample and then to have this survey. I have a draft of the survey that I'm still sort of thinking it to have that ready to go by the end of the semester so that we can mail it out, end of this semester or early next semester. So, and then it's going to take probably another semester to actually start getting them back in, and then it takes a while to actually input the data into a computer analysis package so it's a long process.

Interviewer: So, does that mean your research assistant will be doing a lot of work?

AB: Yes I've done it myself.

Interviewer: Yeah, and if you're here as a professor, you have your own things. I mean, it must be hard to say but then you would have to be doing mailings or something. You know it's nice to have the other people. Also, since you've done it before, so is this the first real big grant that you've gotten on your own?

AB: Yeah, it really is, yeah.

Interviewer: You've worked with the professors in Minnesota?

AB: Minnesota, Yeah for this project, that's definitely true. This wasn't my dissertation, but I was a research assistant when I was a grad student in Minnesota for Chris, who was not my collaborator. So, definitely, Uhm, it's been fun for me to kind of move from research assistant to collaborator and then to having this is a grant that I've done totally on my own and I will certainly most definitely be consulting with Chris as I proceed, but this is sort of, you know, my own piece of this project that we started together when I was working for him 10 years ago. Yeah, that's kind of fun.

Interviewer: Probably nice to see the progression?

AB: Yeah, it really is. It really is.

Interviewer: Yeah, and where do you hope you're you know you're finding what do you hope to do with it when you're when you're done and gonna...?

AB: Well, the Big Dream is that they actually will have some relevance for people besides me. I mean the obvious answer for sociologists is that I'm going to publish the findings in writing a scholarly journal, and I'll share them at conference results or conference. I'll share the results of conferences, but I would like this work to have meaning for people beyond myself and whoever else is going to be writing papers with me and I hope, I mean, I think that it will I think especially in the state of Maine, where we see the numbers of older workers increasing and the state just aging more generally I think it's important to, you know, to pay attention to what people in this age of their work experience can, you know, better form workplace policies to make workplace a friendly place for them and just to honor the experiences of a group that I think has been probably understudied.

Interviewer: It's awesome, thanks. You know I'm the graduate assistant downstairs, and I think I'll be here for four years for my for my whole program. So I look forward to like maybe it'll probably have me write an article every semester.

AB: Awesome, OK, so what are you getting your degree in?

Interviewer: Social work for my masters.

AB: Oh OK, do you know Michael Costello?

Interviewer: Yeah, he's in my class.

AB: He's my RA.

Interviewer: Is he? That's awesome. You know we're all, you know, youngish and well, I'm already retired and I got into this... The program I'm pretty happy with all the policy stuff I'm really interested in, like health care policy and kind of the policy that with all the social welfare stuff... Oh great, well good, great thank you. Awesome, thanks and thanks for meeting with me.

[End of transcript]