

Joanna Blake

- Born 1938 in Salem, Massachusetts
- B.A. in French (1960) Wellesley College, High School Teaching Certificate (1963) University of California at Berkeley, Ph.D. in Developmental Psychology (1972) City University of New York

Major Employment:

- York University – 1971-2004, Professor Emerita, Department of Psychology

Major Areas of Work:

- Pre-linguistic development and language complexity; memory capacity

SRCD Affiliation:

- Editorial board of Child Development from 1981 to 1987



SRCD ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

Joanna Blake

Interviewed by Kang Lee
At The Institute of Child Study, University of Toronto
November 12, 2008

Blake: This is an interview for the SRCD archives. Kang Lee, the interviewer, Joanna Blake, the interviewee. The date is November 14th 2008. The interviewer is affiliated with the Institute of Child Study at the University of Toronto, and the interviewee is affiliated with the Department of Psychology at York University.

Lee: Okay. So please state your own name and affiliation.

Blake: Joanna Blake, York University, Department of Psychology.

Lee: Okay. And the interviewer is Professor Kang Lee, Director for Institute of Child Study, University of Toronto. And we know each other. And today is November 12th 2008. The location is the Institute of Child Study, University of Toronto. All right. Would you like to describe your family background, along with any childhood and adolescent experiences as they may be of interest to your listeners etc?

Blake: I was born in Salem, Massachusetts, City of the Witches, during a depressed period of its history. That was in 1938. I was third of four girls. My father was a lawyer and the town solicitor. My mother was a big reader, but didn't get to go to college. I went to very traditional public schools. I started working at 15 in the summers babysitting and other menial jobs.

Lee: So what early adult experiences were important to your intellectual development?

Blake: I went to Wellesley College, majored in French literature and spent my third year in Paris. But I was always interested in psychology. I taught French in high school for two years and then worked in educational research.

Lee: So what are the origins of your interest in child development? What individuals were important to your intellectual development? Who were your research mentors and your significant colleagues?

Blake: I think the first thing that interested me in child development was reading Eric Erikson, who's not related to my work now. My research mentors were Frank Palmer, who admitted me along with three other literature majors to the first class in graduate developmental psychology at the City University of New York. At the time this was located on 42nd Street near Times Square. My later mentors were Harry Beilin and Peter Carey. Harry Beilin, of

course, was a very traditional Piagetian and Peter Carey worked in information processing. None of these people is alive now.

Lee: Okay. So what were your primary interests in child development at the beginning of your career, how did they evolve, and what continues to be most important?

Blake: I started out doing research in information processing while continuing my dissertation. Most of this involved tachistoscopic experiments with preschoolers. When my son was born in 1974 I became intrigued with pre-linguistic development, especially babbling and how it evolves into language. This was a sharp turn, although I had had an earlier background in language. It also changed my methodology from experimental to primarily observational. Finally, it resuscitated an interest from graduate school influenced by Peter Marler in primates and evolution. Combining my two interests has been work on language complexity and memory capacity.

Lee: Okay. So please reflect upon the strengths and the weaknesses of your research and theoretical contributions, and the impact of your work and its current status.

Blake: Well, I think that the strengths of my research have been empirical and not so much theoretical. I have been basically a Piagetian since my graduate student days, but not rigidly so. I like doing naturalistic observation, but this has lessened the impact of my work. Recently I have focused on the development of gestures and that work has been more favorably received.

Lee: So what published or unpublished manuscripts best represent your thinking about child development, and which of your studies seem the most important and which contributions the most wrong-headed?

Blake: My most significant publication is my book, *Routes to Child Language: Evolutionary and Developmental Precursors* published in 2000. This book reviews my studies of babbling across several different languages and seems to me the most significant. However, others probably think that my attempts to find semantic patterns in babbling are wrong-headed.

Lee: So please reflect on your experiences with the research funding agencies over the years and comment on your participation in shaping research funding policy, implementation, and securing support for your own work.

Blake: For the first seven years of my career at York I was supported by the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada. My research then was experimental. When I switched to prelinguistic development, I applied to the Social and Humanities Research Council of Canada, but achieved only list A, which means qualified for funding, but not funded. I did receive funding over the years from the Faculty of Arts at York University, however. I have regularly reviewed the applications of other researchers to SSHRC. As a consequence of not receiving major funding, my sample sizes have always been quite small.

Lee: Okay. So in which institutions did you work and dates and capacities?

Blake: I came to York in September of 1971 and have been there until my mandatory retirement in 2004. Mandatory retirement is now illegal. I spent one year as a visiting professor at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, 1975-1976. In 1984 I received a fellowship from the Fondation Fyssenin Paris and spent one year in Paris at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, Blvd. Raspail..

Lee: Okay. Describe your experiences as a teacher of child development research and/or training of research workers.

Blake: I have taught undergraduate courses in developmental psychology, advanced research in psychology (a fourth year thesis course), an advanced developmental seminar, and psycholinguistics, including language acquisition. On the graduate level I have taught language development, cognitive development and research methods in developmental psychology. I have supervised many MAs and PhDs, eight MAs and nine PhD students. When I came to York, it was a teaching university and research was not encouraged. Then it switched emphases, but the teaching load was still heavy until recently.

Lee: So when did you join SRCD and what were your earliest contacts with the Society? Also describe the first annual/biennial meeting you attended.

Blake: The first biennial meeting I attended was at Clark University in 1969. This may have been the first one. I'm not sure. Our graduate developmental class was taken there. It was a very small informal meeting. I joined SRCD in the early '70s.

Lee: Describe the history of your participation in the Society, publications of the Society, and other nongovernance aspects of the work of the Society as well.

Blake: Over the years I have attended most of the meetings, in 1975, 1981 and from 1983 to 2001. I was a member of the editorial board of *Child Development* from 1981 to 1987.

Lee: So what do you think are the most important changes to occur in SRCD and its activities over the years you have been associated with it?

Blake: SRCD has tried over the years to expand its international membership, although it is still an American-dominated Society. It has also in its meetings and publication gradually emphasized social themes to the detriment of cognitive ones. The meetings, of course, have become huge, such that many of us working in infancy go to the smaller meetings on infant studies instead.

Lee: So now please tell us something about your personal interests and your family, especially the ways in which they may have had a bearing on your scientific interests and contributions.

Blake: As stated above, my children greatly influenced my increasing interest in language acquisition. They are currently influencing my interest in literacy since one of them is teaching this in a high school.

End of Interview