

Articles

Family, history and activism: An interview with Elizabeth H. Pleck

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Elizabeth H. Pleck is one of the foremost historians of gender and family history in the United States. She studied at Brandeis University in Massachusetts where in 1973 she graduated with a PhD in the History of American Civilization. Subsequently, she held teaching and research positions at the University of Michigan and Wellesley College, before moving to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in the 1990s. She held a dual appointment there, becoming Professor in the Department of Human and Community Development in 2000 and Professor of History in 2001. Professor Pleck has won numerous awards for her innovative and outstanding teaching, and has been a visiting lecturer at several universities. Her career as a researcher has been equally distinguished. Since 1979 she has published six monographs with important presses and co-edited a further six books, including a textbook on women's history. Many of her more than two dozen journal articles and book chapters have been reprinted and anthologised. A hallmark of her career has been linking activism, teaching and writing. Not only has she served as a consultant on numerous projects and initiatives aimed at establishing greater awareness of gender and family issues, but she has also actively endeavoured to take the insights from academic history to a broader public. Many of her publications were co-authored with others, including such distinguished historians as Nancy F. Cott and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, but also with colleagues from other disciplines. A pioneer of many new topics in the field of gender and family history, Professor Pleck is particularly keen to reach wider audiences. For this reason she agreed to be interviewed for *Gender Questions* while a Fulbright Visiting Professor in the Department of Historical Studies at the University of Johannesburg in 2014. At the end of the interview Professor Pleck provides a short annotated bibliography for readers interested in exploring some of the new developments in the field of gender and family history.

*Gerald Groenewald (GG), Elizabeth Pleck (EP)

GG: Over the past four decades, you've been closely involved in the establishment and growth of gender and family history as a discipline in the United States (US). You've also taught a wide range of courses in this field at various universities in America and abroad. Given that you were a student in the 1960s and in graduate school in the early 1970s, would you

tell us how your interest and involvement in this field started? Clearly, the rise of women's studies at American colleges in the 1970s was linked to second-wave feminism. But your early work (I am thinking of your first book, *Black migration and poverty: Boston, 1870–1900*) was in African-American history, and I am wondering how your experience of (and involvement in) both the women's and the civil rights movements influenced your work then, and subsequently.

EP: I was active in the civil rights movement during college. In 1965 I was part of a group of students from New England area colleges who went to South Carolina to register black voters who had previously been barred from exercising their right to vote. I continued to do civil rights work in the Boston area while in college. As a history major I was looking for a research topic that fit with my interest in civil rights. My undergraduate honours thesis about blacks in Boston became my dissertation topic and then the subject of my first book.

Meanwhile, in graduate school I belonged to a women's consciousness-raising group and was active in the women's movement. Our consciousness-raising group invited other women who wanted to attend our sessions, and they went on to create their own groups. I taught US women's history at an alternative school in an abandoned building that served as a women's centre. Again, I hoped to connect my activism with my love of history. I was one of five women who joined together to write a critique of sexism in American historical writing; that was my first published article in women's history (Gordon *et al.* 1972). I am often combining activist interest and history, often looking for ways to combine analyses of race and gender.

GG: Before the 1970s the study of women and the family in the past was a fringe activity in academe. But since then the field has mushroomed, with numerous sub-fields ranging from the history of women, marriage and childhood, to masculinities, sexuality and parenthood. Could you reflect a bit on your own experience of the development of gender and family history in the 1980s and 1990s from the original women's studies, as first established in the 1970s?

EP: My most significant role in the 1980s was in working on a series of radio programmes on US family history and on integrating women's history into history survey courses. In other words, I was involved in 'mainstreaming', in reaching a larger student or public audience for the new scholarship in women's and family history.

I do not easily fit into the women versus gender camps that developed in the 1980s. I belonged in the gender camp because of my work with my husband about the history of masculinity (Pleck and Pleck 1980, 1997). I also fit within that camp because my legal research in *Domestic tyranny* showed how legal definitions and categories shaped definitions of experience much more than experience shaped categories (Pleck 1987). I was quite uncomfortable with the idea that there was one kind of feminist theory, and that

so much of that theory ran counter to my own emphasis on the importance of material factors in history. In addition, my training was in the new social history, and especially family history – to me it was important that history should consist of readable stories about the lives of ordinary people. By the 1980s qualitative methods that emphasised close reading of a few documents became the favoured method, and data analysis based on statistical information was less favoured; eventually, I would try to do work that was both/and, social, cultural and legal history.

GG: I am interested in your work on ‘mainstreaming’ women and family history in the 1980s. Could you tell us a bit more about this? How successful was it? It strikes me how often you have worked with other people – scholars and activists – in both your research and your outreach work. Is this something that is important to you? I am also interested in hearing how much gender and family history was included in general survey-type courses for undergraduates.

EP: I learn a lot from working with other people and often I find that my partners have different and complementary skills. When working with others is good, it is wonderful; when personalities clash, there’s a lot of suffering.

US and world history textbooks now include a lot more material about individual women’s contributions to history and about the nature of gender. That is a clear benefit of all the mainstreaming work I and others were involved in in the 1980s. My conversations with teaching assistants suggest that many history professors rarely discuss gender, except perhaps for a token lecture. My undergraduate students tell me that they rarely heard anything about the activities of women in their high school classes.

In the 1980s I was part of a group of five people, including two radio producers, who created a family history course broadcast on public radio stations. Called ‘Legacies: Family history in sound’, it consisted of 18 half-hour radio programmes and a textbook we wrote (Pleck and Rothman 1986). Our programmes were aired on many radio stations, but the audience was nonetheless limited. I learned my lesson. Radio producers love the world of sound, but most of the public want their sound with pictures. Actually, sound with pictures is not sufficient, either. My students tell me that documentaries consisting of long segments of ‘talking heads’ are boring. A film that raises important questions about history but has no narrator or talking head expert is a requirement for the documentaries I show in my classes.

GG: The 1990s and 2000s saw the rise of third-wave feminism and the queer movement, which challenged many perceived categories and were sharply critical of some of the practices of earlier women and gender historians. How did these developments impact on your own research and teaching of gender and family history? And how have they altered the way in which this field is practised and taught in the US?

EP: Questioning how gender is defined and what social groups are excluded by common definitions, seeing the body as not simply biological but shaped by culture, has shaken the foundations of women's studies and gender history. Eventually those topics found their way into readings I assigned and into my lecture topics. The way the field is practised in the US is that there are now course specialities – usually called 'the history of body' or 'the history of sexualities' – devoted to these approaches. In my own teaching I combine some of these approaches into courses in which my framework still derives from social history.

GG: Perhaps one of the reasons for the rapid growth of gender and family history is its personal nature – we can all identify with the role of children, siblings, spouses, partners or parents. The study of this field bears out well the mantra of second-wave feminists: the personal is always political. To what an extent have your personal circumstances influenced your work? I was struck by your reflection on your own history as a cohabiting student in the 1960s, and your mother's reaction to this, in your latest book, *Not just roommates: Cohabitation after the sexual revolution* and also how the death of your father indirectly inspired the writing of *Celebrating the family*.

EP: Historical research and writing takes a long time and is often solitary. It would have been impossible for me to keep doing it without having some kind of personal attachment and gaining some kind of personal insight from my work. Some historians write personal memoirs; I do not want to engage in deep introspection about my childhood, which I would say was mildly unhappy. It's fine with me to make some kind of brief personal statement in the introduction to my work and then quickly adopt the neutral narrative voice. I also think personal attachment should be taken in small doses – it needs to be combined with nuance, paying attention to evidence that does not fit one's inclinations, and being able to see the world from another point of view.

GG: In the 1990s and early 2000s you did much work on cultural history, especially on ritual and consumerism in the history of family life, culminating in two books: *Celebrating the family: Ritual, consumer culture and ethnicity* and (with Cele Otnes) *Cinderella dreams: The allure of the lavish wedding*. Could you tell us a bit more about these books – what attracted you to these topics at the time?

EP: I had written a book about the history of social policy concerning domestic violence (Pleck 1987). The logical next step would have been to write a history of social policy having to do with rape. I began research on that topic – a political and legal history of rape in the US – but I found the topic depressing. Why not find something cheerier to think about? The cultural turn for me meant less sociology, more anthropology; less rational behaviour, more symbolic ways of making meaning. I wanted to continue my interest in family

history, but I needed to understand that ritualised life cycle and calendric celebrations help flesh out the ideals of the family. I began looking at a number of such occasions in US history, and found a general arc from the 19th century celebration of domestic ideals to the 1960s, when I saw the appearance of a more multicultural, more ironic attitude toward family ritual. I met a colleague in the advertising department at the University of Illinois who was equally fascinated with the bling and splash of contemporary weddings. We sought to explain the appeal of such weddings around the globe, especially since the 1980s, in cultural terms – in terms of the appeal of magic, romance, memory and luxury.

GG: On this theme of the personal nature of gender and family history: this is, of course, why it is so very inspiring and exciting to teach this material to young people and to see how their minds open when they realise how gender and family roles are contingent constructions. What has your experience been of teaching gender and family history to American students over the years?

EP: Enrolments in my lecture course in women's history began to fall in the last decade (and that's been true for most other women's historians in the US). Students, including women students, perceived feminism as out of date, no longer relevant to their lives, and something mainly of interest to lesbians. The very fact that such a lecture course had to include the growth and strength of anti-feminism, and an acknowledgement of how much women were fighting with women about gender, rendered it a less appealing narrative for undergraduates. In teaching women's history I find myself refuting the stereotype of my students that feminism in the 1970s was only concerned with elite women. I also need to explain to them the anti-beauty, anti-fashion attitudes of feminists in the 1970s, since most of my students do not understand such attitudes. I never taught a large course aimed at undergraduates in family history, in part because I could not have generated the large student enrolment needed to teach such a class. Instead, I taught smaller courses for undergraduates on family history, always with an assignment that students would interview members of their own family. A course called 'the history of sexuality' may have exactly the same material and theoretical commitment to contingent constructions as gender or family history, but it will have larger enrolments because the fight for same-sex marriage is in the news (and appears to my students as the dominant civil rights issue of their time).

GG: What were the reactions of your students to your family history courses, and the requirement to interview family members? Did you perceive a change in how students reacted to this topic as the political right's obsession with 'the family' and 'family values' increased from the 1980s onwards? If so, I wonder whether students in different parts of the US reacted differently to this.

EP: Most students want to interview a family member. They see the assignment as a chance to ask the questions they never asked about their family's history. But because of the high level of geographic mobility in American society – of grandparents who are living in another country or another part of the US – they often end up interviewing their mother or father, rather than a grandparent. I can't say if there are huge regional differences in attitudes toward writing family history. I would say that other characteristics, such as family migration from another country, are more significant than region of residence.

For my students, 'family values' is a nebulous abstraction. They know the phrase has something to do with American politics, but they do not see the term as having anything to do with them or their family. Many are the children of divorce, but they would see their parents' divorce in matter-of-fact terms, not as something that speaks to the fate of the nation or national decline. Students avoid touchy subjects when interviewing parents or grandparents. Very few family secrets are revealed. As a result, the family stories the students collect tend to be ones emphasising personal or family triumph over suffering or obstacles encountered.

GG: American academe became highly politicised in the era of civil rights and Vietnam, and an activist approach characterises much of your work. In general, considering the enormous amount of knowledge about American family history that academics have generated over the past few decades, what has been the impact on wider society? Do you see insights from this work filtering through? Has it had any influence on government policies and the like?

EP: Family scholars from history and the social sciences have banded together in organisations to write op-eds, appear on television shows, consult with non-governmental organisations, serve as members of government panels, and write friend-of-the-court legal briefs. Of all these domains, I would say that legal briefs have had the widest influence on law and public policy. George Chauncey's (2004) legal brief about the history of discrimination against gays in a case that ended up decriminalising sodomy was quoted by US Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy; no Supreme Court justice referenced our legal brief on behalf of same-sex marriage. My own sense is that in other areas (for example, cuts in welfare provision) scholars attached to conservative think tanks have had far more influence on government policies than academics like myself. For the most part, my version of family history is that 'the family' has become quite diverse, and that government should accept the existence of many forms of relationships. Other scholars and writers insist that the family is in decline and that government should adopt measures to promote legal marriage. Quite frankly, I would say that the latter position is currently the most popular and influential one.

GG: This may be a somewhat unfair question, but since you've just returned from a stint of teaching family history to students at the University of Johannesburg, I would like to

ask you about your experience of this, and how it compares to your past experience of teaching such courses to Americans. In a country which is obsessed with race and its role in its history, did you find that students here reacted differently to your material on the links between the personal and the political than their American counterparts usually do?

EP: In my family history class at the University of Johannesburg I emphasised that race and its role in history are central to family history, and that race is a social construction defined and regulated through sexuality and family relations. I showed a film about an interracial married couple in Virginia whose lawsuit led to the overturning of anti-miscegenation laws in the US (*The Loving Story*). The students clearly understood that they were learning about the personal becoming political (and actually winning as well).

GG: You have done much work on the history of issues such as rape and family violence, culminating in your book, *Domestic tyranny: The making of social policy against family violence*. South Africa is a country devastated by a very high incidence of sexual violence – it has been called ‘the rape capital of the world’. Since your work on this topic particularly focuses on changing social policy, I wonder if you could offer any ‘lessons’ to South Africans in this regard? Part of the solution (as is generally agreed by those who worry about the issue here) is to change people’s perceptions of gender roles – and in this way, I guess, the teaching of gender and family history can have a real impact, albeit on a very small part of the population.

EP: My historical work was much more about the prosecution and punishment of domestic violence during various periods of US history than about prevention. My work might best be classified in the tradition of the ‘complexities’ of reform – domestic violence never disappears, but goes through cycles of interest and disinterest and when it does reappear, is never understood the same way it was previously. I further found that the most effective forms of prosecution and punishment of domestic violence involved problematic collaborations between advocates of victims and advocates of law and order. The one lesson that does come through in my research is that any system of law will always require some kind of independent victim advocates.

GG: The field of gender and family history has achieved much over the past three to four decades, and you have been part of this achievement through your teaching and research. I wonder if you could, in conclusion, say something about what you think the future of these topics is? I am particularly interested in this, since gender and especially family history is relatively little taught at South African universities, and I would appreciate some advice on how we can convince both our colleagues and students that these topics are not only worthy of investigation, but are in fact necessary.

EP: It would be nice to live in a world where one could simply say that the humanities offer insight into and contemplation of beauty, truth and the meaning of life – the happiness it can bring and the tragedies one suffers. But I think ‘relevance’ is the more appealing argument, and, specifically, the history of sub-Saharan Africa and South Africa. Gender and family history answers such questions as: Why is South Africa the rape capital of the world? Why was there such intense feeling among my students in Johannesburg when we discussed *lobola*? In studying the history of other places and peoples, one can gain an equally important understanding, for example, of the kinds of panics sex-related epidemics in the past caused, or the ways many societies and cultures have dealt with children who had lost one or both parents.

My own prediction is that family history will flourish, but not as its own speciality. Scholars who are doing this kind of work may not even think of themselves as family historians. Nonetheless, family history (by another name) will be found in the new split-offs from gender history, such as history of sexuality and history of the body, in certain specialities such as medical or legal history, and in the macro histories of global or environmental history. In terms of the public role of family historians, there will invariably be a need for scholars to address public anxiety about changes in the family.

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