

AN INTERVIEW WITH JILL KLEINBERG

Interviewer: Jewell Willhite

Oral History Project

Endacott Society

University of Kansas

JILL KLEINBERG

B.A., History and East Asian Studies, University of Kansas, 1967

M.A., Japanese Studies and Anthropology, University of Michigan, 1969

Ph.D., Anthropology, University of Michigan, 1979

Service at the University of Kansas

First employed at the University of Kansas in 1988

Assistant professor of Business, 1988-

Associate professor of Business, -2006

AN INTERVIEW WITH Jill Kleinberg

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Q: I am speaking with Jill Kleinberg, who retired in 2006 as Associate Professor of Business at the University of Kansas. We are in Lawrence, Kansas, on November 28, 2006.

Where were you born and in what year?

A: I was born in Chicago, Illinois, in 1945.

Q: What were your parents' names?

A: My mother is Jane Crawford Kleinberg and my father, Jacob Kleinberg.

Q: What was their educational background?

A: My father had a Ph.D. in inorganic chemistry and my mother's degree was in English literature, I believe.

Q: What were their occupations?

A: My father was a professor at KU for many years, probably 40 or more. My mother was a potter.

Q: Did you have brothers and sisters?

A: An older sister, Judith.

Q: Did you grow up in Chicago?

A: No, we grew up in Lawrence. We came here in 1946. I was about a year old.

Q: What do you remember about Lawrence as a child. It must have been very different than it is now.

A: I had the feeling, when I look back on it, that I knew almost everyone in town when I was growing up. Of course that wasn't true, but it was so much more so than would be true today.

Q: What elementary school did you go to?

A: First Pinkney and then Cordley.

Q: Were you in organizations such as Girls Scouts or things like that?

A: Only briefly. I got more interested in school sports.

Q: Where did you go to Junior High?

A: Central Junior High it was at the time.

Q: And you were playing sports then. What sports did you play?

A: Basketball. I didn't do baseball or softball. I did gymnastics and track. We always had the coach who was the boys' gymnastics coach. He didn't give as much attention to the girls, of course.

Q: I didn't realize they had gymnastics as a school sport.

A: It wasn't. It was an informal club. The girls didn't compete. The boys competed.

Q: Then you went to Lawrence High School, which was the only one here at that time.

A: I was just there recently and learned that they have three principals, not just one principal. It is done alphabetically by last name, which principal you are going to be associated with. It was quite shocking.

Q: It must have been a much smaller school.

A: I don't remember the number of students in my graduating class.

Q: Did you take business courses in high school?

A: No, I do not have a business background.

Q: Did you play sports in high school?

A: The usual. We had girls intramural basketball and again some track and gymnastics. I was in something called Leaders Club, a sports-related group.

Q: Did you have influential teachers in high school?

A: Yes, one in particular was Howard Milinger. His area was social studies. I had several classes with him, but the one that was most influential was the one he offered under the title of "The Modernization of China and Japan." He was taking the same course, I think, at KU. He was getting his Ph.D. at KU while he was teaching. I think he was just giving us in class what he was doing at KU. It got me interested in that area, East Asia. He suggested that I start either Chinese or Japanese when I graduated from high school. The summer after I graduated from high school I started Japanese.

Q: At KU?

A: Yes. It was a 10-week intensive program in the summer. We lived in a dorm and everything was Japanese, all the speaking.

Q: Japanese is so very different from American English. I would think it would be very hard to learn.

A: The most difficult part of Japanese is the writing.

Q: They have characters like the Chinese don't they?

A: They are derived from Chinese characters. Some of them are still very similar to the Chinese characters, but they were modified historically. China has also begun to engage in modification. Of course they are not being modified in the same direction.

Q: Did you have jobs while you were in school?

A: I do remember one summer job. I think it might have been called the Hawklet, which was a little concession area in Summerfield Hall, of all places. That's the only job that I had that I recall. My sister and I were not encouraged to have jobs. We were encouraged to concentrate on our studies. And we also had horses.

Q: Did you live in the country, or just rent space for them?

A: We rented pasture and farm space. So there were plenty of things to do. It was different in those days. I think kids worked only if they had to, if they had a real need. Now, when I think of my students, it seems like even if there isn't such a need the students choose to work, I think, to support their cars.

Q: When did you graduate from high school?

A: 1963.

Q: Did you have honors?

A: Yes. I don't remember what they were. I was always in the top level for academic performance. I was a cheerleader. I don't know if that is an honor.

Q: They you went on to KU. I suppose it was always assumed you would go to college.

A: My parents encouraged me to go elsewhere, thinking I needed to get other experience. They had in mind a small school, such as Grinnell or something like that. But I didn't feel interested at the time. After my freshman year I felt very interested in going elsewhere, not because I didn't like KU. I just felt it was time to go away from home. So what we decided was that the money that I might use to go to another school I would use to spend a junior year in Japan.

Q: What was your major at KU?

A: History and East Asian Studies, a double major.

Q: Had you been outside the country at this time?

A: My first trip to Japan was even before that. It think it was after my freshman year of college. I went on a two-month trip with the Experiment in International living to Japan.

Q: Did you live with a family?

A: I had a home stay with a family for one month and then one month of traveling throughout the two main islands, Kyushu and Honshu. We didn't go to Hokkaido.

Q: What did you think of Japan?

A: At the time I felt it was quite exotic. What do I mean by exotic? It was in its early stages of really taking off in economic development, but still in the early stages in that postwar period. It was quite obvious that there was a difference in the standard of living between Japan and the United States. Things we expected were normal, like having a car, were very special things in Japan at that time. And of course then the new food and trying to use the little bit of Japanese that I knew. Also, at that time the Japanese were very deferential to Americans. That is sort of a heady experience for a young person. That has changed. You no longer find that deference when you travel in Japan.

Q: So they thought Americans were important people?

A: There still is a glamor. The young people look to the United States, our music, our fashions, to an extent, and think it is glamorous and want to acquire some of it, recontextualize it, of course. At that time Americans were considered to be strong and, of course, rich. We were considered to be glamorous, I think, as long as we were white-skinned Americans.

Q: You were studying East Asian studies. Did you have influential teachers in college?

A: I don't think of anyone in particular. I do not recall that I had a mentor when I was an undergraduate. The East Asian studies program was much smaller, of course, than the whole history program. There were a lot of activities that gave a sense of cohesion to that program. So when I think of the professors who were part of that, it is sort of in general, thinking of them as being extremely supportive of the students.

Q: What sort of activities? Things outside the classroom experience?

A: Yes. We had parties.

Q: With Japanese food and things like that?

A: Yes, that and also the graduate students let some of the undergraduates hang out with them. So I would go to graduate student parties. It was a time to talk about the academic interests and career interests.

Q: Then you continued at KU.

A: I did graduate from KU. I did study abroad my junior year.

Q: Was that a whole school year?

A: Yes.

Q: Where in Japan were you?

A: I was in Tokyo at International Christian University.

Q: Were the classes in Japanese?

A: The classes were in English. It is a school that has a mission of producing bilingual students. So if you graduated from there you would have had classes in both English and Japanese. But the ones I took that junior year were in English. Half of my time was devoted to Japanese language.

Q: So as far as credits go, was it the same as if you were here?

A: Everything transferred.

Q: Were you involved in extracurricular activities in college?

A: No.

Q: Most people don't have time.

A: Well, I did join a sorority, but I became a nonparticipant.

Q: What sorority were you in?

A: Pi Beta Phi.

Q: Did you have honors as an undergraduate?

A: I was Phi Beta Kappa.

Q: When did you graduate from KU?

A: 1967.

Q: This was just before things began to be very difficult in Lawrence. Were you gone then at that time?

A: I went to the University of Michigan and got to experience it there. It was even more intensive than in Lawrence.

Q: Why did you choose the University of Michigan?

A: I went there in the master's program for Japanese Studies. There program was just excellent. That's why I chose Michigan.

Q: Were they having a lot of problems with Vietnam War demonstrations?

A: In 1967 there was activity on campus but it was not disruptive activity.

Q: That would come a year or two later, I suppose. Were you still there then?

A: Yes.

Q: What do you remember about that?

A: After I got my master's in Japanese Studies I entered the Ph.D. program in Anthropology at Michigan. I have this memory of certain of my teachers out protesting in the streets along with the students and being chased by the police. Wild times.

Q: When did you get your master's?

A: 1969.

Q: Then you went directly on for your Ph.D.

A: I also got a master's in Anthropology. You know, I'd never had an Anthro course before then, so I was starting at the beginning.

Q: Was that studying the anthropology of the Far East or Japan?

A: General anthropology, learning the whole discipline. But then when you do your doctoral research, you tend to focus on some geographical area. And for me it was Japan.

Q: Were you teaching as a Ph.D. student?

A: No, they didn't have that. I was fortunate enough to have fellowships throughout. The India Field National Defense Foreign Language Fellowship, which I think still exists but under some other name. That was the main one I had.

Q: Did you have influential teachers as a graduate student?

A: Again, I wouldn't say there was one particular person. I'm just thinking both in Japanese Studies and in East Asian Studies in general and in Anthropology they were such outstanding people. The Japan specialist, I suppose, was influential in Anthropology. But he was an old style anthropologist. The intellectual excitement came from some who were somewhat newer to the department.

Q: Did you write a thesis for your master's?

A: Yes.

Q: What was it about?

A: It was about the social organization of—the term is *be*. I started out thinking I would be an archeologist. So this was looking at Japan in the sort of prehistorical time. There was no written history at the time. But it was the beginning of the formation of the state

society in Japan. So the elite had these organizations that were kind of like guilds. People with certain crafts were organized. That was what I was studying.

Q: I would think that if there wasn't a written record this would be a little hard to study.

A: Well, there are Chinese accounts. Much of what is known about it comes from the archeological evidence.

Q: Did you go to Japan while you were doing this?

A: Yes, but not specifically for that research. I think every year I went to Japan for travel. One summer I was affiliated with Okayama University and went with a group of Japanese students who were interviewing people out in a rural area of Okayama Prefecture. Household organization, I guess.

Q: Then when you were a Ph.D. student, what did you do your dissertation on?

A: I'd always been interested in the social organization of work, which is why I'd done that master's thesis on these guild-like organizations. They weren't really guilds, but it was something like that. Then I also was very interested in folk art and ceramics in particular. My mother had already started doing pottery. Even before that I was really thrilled by Korean and Japanese and, to a lesser extent, Chinese ceramics. So I chose to do my research in a village in the mountains of Japan where most of the households specialized in pottery making. There was at that time what was called the folk craft boom. So they were trying to revitalize an old ceramic tradition to hook into the folk craft market. I was seeing them at that point where they were making a transition from being very poor and having hardly any income—there wasn't enough farm land for people—and suddenly having a little bit of money. But also some of the potters were making names for themselves, becoming famous. It turned out to be a kinship study. It was household-

based production. What I learned was that traditional kinship patterns were intensified in order to take advantage of these new market opportunities. So you draw on kinship ties because you don't have to pay your kin so much. You can promise a second son, "We are going to divide the workshop at some time and set you up in your own workshop if you give us 20 years of labor, you and your wife and your children." That was a wonderful year. It was a hard year, but in retrospect it was probably the best year of my life.

Q: You lived in this village with these potters and talked to them about their work and what they were doing. Then when did you get your Ph.D.?

A: I didn't get it as early as I might have done. I came back and was having a good time living in New York City. In 1979 was when I finished.

Q: So you moved back from Japan.

A: I spent a couple of years in Japan for that research.

Q: Then instead of going back to Michigan you went to New York City. Was there a reason?

A: A boyfriend. So I was doing various things in New York. I taught at a couple of schools, Baruch College mainly.

Q: What were you teaching?

A: I was teaching anthropology. But doing that, teaching, I didn't get my dissertation done. But finally in 1979 I did complete my dissertation.

Q: How long were you in New York?

A: I was in New York for four and a half years. About a year after that I was in Cambridge, Massachusetts, with a job that really got me started on my primary research later. I was

working as a social science editor for an English Language Encyclopedia of Japan, which is now an established encyclopedia. But it was the first one of that size of its kind. The work was being done on the Harvard campus. The man in charge was Japanese, a faculty member at Harvard. So we had a bi-national project team. It got me interested in cross-cultural differences in how people approach work.

Q: Is the Japanese approach very different from ours?

A: Very. So my future began to revolve around that.

Q: What are some of the differences?

A: Let me give you just one example of the kinds of things that happened. I felt that my job, as I understood it, was to choose certain topics that should be in the encyclopedia if we were going to cover the social sciences. Everything was focused on Japan. So then I would think, for a major article, “Who’s the best person to write this article?” And I would look around at Europe, Japan, and the United States and see who seemed to be the lead academician in this area at the moment. So I would make my selections and give those to the Japanese boss. Other Americans were doing the same thing in their own areas. Our suggestions very often were not taken because it became a matter of, “Well, we can’t ask that person because he is too young.” So now we are going to go back to this old person whose research in these days not so interesting. In his own time it was, but not now. But because of the status of this person we have to ask him.

Q: Is that because older persons are more revered in Japan?

A: It’s not that simple. It’s that this was an established name, the person with the prestige. And to some extent, this makes sense. But, you know, to choose a younger scholar who in five years or 10 years is going to have that same level of prestige also makes sense. So

it was differences in status. The basis on which you make decisions is very different in Japanese organizations and American organizations.

Q: American organizations would be more practical oriented, perhaps. So you worked at Cambridge doing this encyclopedia. Then what did you do?

A: Then I finished my dissertation and decided I wanted to try a teaching job. In those years—it is probably still the same—it is very difficult to find a good job in anthropology at a university. There weren't many jobs available. But I was offered a job as a visiting assistant professor at UCA replacing their Japan specialist, who was on leave for that time. I did this for two years. That's where I got seriously started with my research on comparing Japanese and American concepts of work. I began studying the Japanese companies that were there in Southern California.

Q: Where these branches of Japanese companies?

A: Subsidiaries.

Q: So they were beginning to do things in the United States.

A: Yes. At that time in the early 1980s a lot of attention was given to Japanese organizations. American companies thought maybe there was something to learn because Japan was being so successful globally.

Q: I remember reading things about that. People were admiring the way the Japanese did things and thought there was something to be learned there.

A: And of course we came up with a very idealized notion of what the Japanese were doing, their organizational behavior. But I was mainly interested in, "What are the concepts of work that the Japanese bring to the workplace and Americans on the other hand bring to

the workplace, and what happens when Japanese and Americans work together within a company?”

Q: I suppose the bosses of these California companies would be Japanese and the workers would be American.

A: All of the key positions in the companies that I studied were in Japanese hands. There were some Americans in management, but they tended to be middle level management.

Q: What were some of the concepts that were different?

A: Well, one thing was that Americans tended to expect a job description and to expect that their work would fairly closely follow that job description, and that they would be evaluated on the basis of how well they did those things that were laid out in the job description. Well, in Japanese companies there is a much more organic way of accomplishing work. You don't divide up work so distinctly. It's more a matter of, we are working together to accomplish this task. You don't have ownership of certain tasks. In Japanese organizations, especially a middle level manager is expected to be involved in the development of his—and I'm saying “his” because there are not many women in management, especially at that time—subordinates. So, again, it is not the focus on “my own job.” But part of my job is seeing that other people do their job well and that they learn how to be a good organization person, whereas the Americans focus more narrowly on “this is my territory.” The Japanese manager doesn't expect to have the authority to make the kinds of decisions that American managers expect to make. The Japanese manager would go through a process of very, very wide consultation and sharing of information. So they would often get upset at the Americans because the Americans

wouldn't share the information, the expected sharing of information, and would go off and do things without even telling the boss they were doing it.

Q: How long were you in California?

A: I ended up being nine years in California.

Q: But you originally went for two years?

A: Two years as a visiting assistant professor at UCLA. Then I proposed my research with the Japanese companies and was funded initially by the Graduate School of Management, the management school at UCLA. The Graduate School of Management is what they called it. I don't know if they had an undergraduate business program. I was only involved with graduate students.

Q: Were you teaching graduate students?

A: Well, I did some teaching. As my research developed, I was asked to develop a course on Japan, on Japanese organizational behavior, and also what came to be my course on comparative and cross-cultural management, a more general course. So I did that teaching at UCLA on a part-time basis. I did research and also did business consulting. I was also going back and forth to Japan. I spent another year and a half in Japan.

Q: Doing research on companies?

A: Doing research. I did research with companies in the Los Angeles area and also in Japan.

Q: And you did that for nine years. Have you been married?

A: No.

Q: When did you leave California?

A: I came to KU from Los Angeles. That was in 1988 for the job in the School of Business as assistant professor. I was offered the job because at the time the School of Business

was trying to expand its international offerings and international perspective. The person who was dean at the time and more particularly the associate dean at the time, David Schullenberger, were very interested in the kind of research I had done, my emphasis on culture. They felt that it was something that would be useful for a Business School. I must say it is not a widely felt sentiment in business schools.

Q: Oh, really?

A: The understanding is not deep. The treatment of culture in business schools across the country tends to be rather superficial, compared to the way an anthropologist would approach it.

Q: Business is becoming more international all the time. So I would think you would need to know about the way other countries do business.

A: And there are now any number of textbooks on cross-cultural management, but when I look at them I still see that my approach as an anthropologist is very different. I'm not satisfied to say, "The French do this, the Germans do this." Nothing is that simplistic. So my approach is more holistic to understand business practices in the context of the larger society, the larger culture.

Q: What courses did you teach here?

A: I taught a lot of organizational behavior, which is at the undergraduate level and is one of the core courses for our degree in business. But then for the most part I taught the one I called Comparative and Cross-Cultural Management. I taught Cross-Cultural Negotiation. I taught Doing Business in Japan and Business Culture and Society in East Asia. At the Ph.D. level I offered a seminar in Organizational Ethnography and then the last four years that I was at KU with colleagues we developed an MBA course, an eight-

week course. The students only did this one course. It was Global Research Integrative Project. I did the culture part of it. We would choose an industry and a country. The students would research that industry within that country context and would have a two-week visit to that country talking with people in the industry, visiting companies.

Q: That would be very interesting.

A: It was fantastic.

Q: Did you mostly go to Japan or did you also go to other places?

A: This course never went to Japan. It went twice to Germany, once to Brazil and once to China. I forgot another course. I became more interested in China, of course, as China became more important to the United States. I got some grants, one to do some research in China and then just to do some traveling.

Q: Is that hard to do in a Communist country?

A: Not now. Of course it would have been 15 years ago.

Q: So is it now fairly open to things like that?

A: There's a lot of that going on. Many schools even have campuses in China. They are trying to get joint programs with some Chinese university. So the last year that I taught I offered a course on China in Transition. I should say that for all those elective courses, the ones I mentioned, I always cross-listed them with East Asian Languages and Cultures to try to get a mix of students.

Q: I suppose quite a few students from there took your courses. So you speak Japanese and Chinese.

A: I don't speak Chinese. When I did my research I had to depend on a research assistant.

Q: Did you ever have sabbaticals?

A: I didn't take one. I took a year off when my mother was ill.

Q: Have you had publications? Any books?

A: Not a book, just journal articles and chapters in books on the topic of two areas. One is the Japanese and American concepts of work and what happens when Japanese and Americans work together. Then there was another set of articles on conceptualizing culture in international comparative and cross-cultural management.

Q: Have you been on university committees? Any you particularly remember?

A: I was a number of times on the advisory board for the Center for East Asian Studies. I did University governance two different times and was on the Faculty Executive Committee. I did that for one or two years. I was on the committee that developed the GAP, which is our global awareness program. Are you familiar with that?

Q: No, I'm not.

A: It is a university program. I think it has been going maybe three years. It is like a menu of options. If students fulfill a certain number of these options in different categories, they can have on their transcript that they are certified to have fulfilled the requirements of this program. It means they know something about international, the global world.

Q: That would be a good thing for business students to have.

A: It is not just for business students. It is university wide. Business students, of course, can also participate in it, but it was a university-wide committee. For a while I was on our committee for our Master's in International Studies program, which is a university thing.

Q: Have you been involved in professional organizations?

A: Yes, the National Academy of Management and also the Association for Japanese Business Studies.

Q: Have you held offices in these?

A: I never wanted to hold an office.

Q: Have you been involved in community activities?

A: Yes. For going on six years I have been a CASA volunteer. Do you know of that program?

Q: I think so. You are the friend of a child who has a court case and you provide information to the judge about it.

Q: That's a large part of it. CASA stands for Court Appointed Special Advocate for Children. The role of the CASA is to see that everything that has been mandated by the court is actually being done and being done in a timely manner. But what it means is that you are communicating with all of these different individuals and agencies that have some involvement in that child's life. You can become a friend of the child. In my case that's the way I would approach it.

Q: Just seeing that things go as well as possible, because these would be difficult cases.

A: Heartbreaking cases.

Q: When they are separated from their families and the court trying to decide what to do with them.

A: Probably in most of the cases the parental rights have been terminated. So the children are in foster care or a group home.

Q: What do you plan to do in retirement?

A: Much of what I've already been doing. I will continue with the CASA work. About a year ago I went through the training for the extension Master Gardener program. That's a community service organization.

Q: Oh, yes. I know people who have done that. Do you have a big garden of your own?

A: It is a little overwhelming. I have five and a half acres of land. I'm not gardening all of it, but I'm gardening a lot of it.

Q: You live out in the country, I suppose.

A: Just northwest of Lawrence, barely outside the town. Let's see, what other activities. I do yoga quite regularly. I'm still working with my last Ph.D. student. I've been very involved with her research. She came to KU from Japan to work with me. She will finish this academic year, finally. For a few years I will be working with her to get some publications out. That's a pretty full life. I've got a puppy.

Q: Oh, yes. You mentioned that. I assume you have had dogs before.

A: Not since I was a child. I've had cats.

Q: Well, you have space for it since you live in the country. Most country people have dogs, I think. What is your assessment of the business school, or KU itself, past, present, hopes for the future, that kind of thing?

A: I can only talk about this from the areas of my own involvement. When I think of KU, past and present, and, I think, also the future, one of KU's strengths has been the emphasis that it has placed on international studies and programs, study abroad of students. We have the area studies centers, the Center for East Asian Studies, Latin American Studies, Russian and Eastern European Studies, Africa—I forget what the complete name of that center is. Even when I was an undergraduate here, these were strong centers, and they have continued to be. The university as a whole has, I think, always considered this to be important, more so than perhaps some of our peer universities. That has been a pleasure. Much of my work while I was in the School of

Business was interdisciplinary. I wasn't just involved with the School of Business. In fact, when I came in I was told, "We would like to have more contact with other parts of the university. We'd like the School of Business to have more contact." I have to say that the present dean probably doesn't understand that concept and will not do much to promote it. Some of what we gained will probably be lost.

Q: Is there anything else you'd like to add?

A: Well, I think we, as a university, do extremely well with very limited resources. It happens because there are enough people who simply are dedicated, not only to their research, but to the development of students. I also think the university will have to work hard to maintain that because there are so many pressures now, the pressure to publish frequently in particular journals or it doesn't count for anything. That pressure is so intense. It is only getting more and more intense, which means that there will not be, in terms of promotion, the rewards will not come from involvement with students. They will come from focusing on your own little bit of turf. It will be a different sort of university if that way of thinking takes over. It's a very difficult balance. It's market forces versus what you know makes a good university.

Q: Thank you very much.