

AN INTERVIEW WITH NEIL SALKIND

Interviewer: Jewell Willhite

Oral History Project

Endacott Society

University of Kansas

NEIL SALKIND

B.A., Psychology, University of Maryland, 1969

M.A., Human Development, University of Maryland, 1972

Ph.D., Human Development, University of Maryland, 1973

Service at the University of Kansas

First came to the University of Kansas in 1973

Assistant professor of Education Psychology and Research, 1973-1977

Associate professor of Education Psychology and Research, 1977-1983

Professor of Education Psychology and Research, 1983-2008

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Q: I am speaking with Neil Salkind, who retired in 2008 as professor of Education and Psychology Research at the University of Kansas. We are in Lawrence, Kansas, on April 7, 2009. Where were you born and in what year?

A: Newark, New Jersey, 1947.

Q: What were your parents' names?

A: Harry Salkind and Irene Salkind. Her maiden name was Greenwald.

Q: What was their educational background?

A: My father finished the third grade. I believe my mother graduated high school, but I'm not sure.

Q: What was your father's occupation?

A: Basically factories, basically line work. My mother was a homemaker.

Q: Did you have brothers and sisters?

A: I have a sister who graduated high school but didn't finish college. She started college but didn't finish.

Q: Did you grow up in the town where you were born?

A: Yes.

Q: Where did you go to elementary school?

A: Maple Avenue Elementary School on Maple Avenue in Newark, New Jersey.

Q: Were you involved in groups, such as Boy Scouts or things like that?

A: A little bit of Boy Scouts, but when I grew up in Newark, there weren't organized activities. Everybody created their own activities. So everybody did things together, but it wasn't organized like it is today.

Q: Where did you go to junior high and high school?

A: Maple Avenue, because junior high was K through eight. High School was Wequahic, the name of an Indian tribe.

Q: Were you involved in extracurricular activities in high school?

A: Some athletics.

Q: Football?

A: Swimming. Some track and field a little bit and some community work, but basically not a lot of clubs. Basically, just having fun with friends.

Q: Do you remember influential teachers from those days?

A: I can remember some names: Mr. Adler, a Mrs. Polenti in high school, Mrs. Burnbaum, I believe her name was.

Q: What did these people teach?

A: History, math. I can't remember the other math teacher's name. Spanish.

Q: Did you have honors in high school?

A: Do you mean did I get honors?

Q: Yes.

A: No, but there were honors. I didn't get them.

Q: Did you have jobs while you were going to school?

A: I never didn't work. I always worked.

Q: What sort of things did you do?

A: Life guard, delivering papers, running errands. Always working, always something.

Q: When did you graduate from high school?

A: 1964.

Q: Was it always assumed that you would go to college?

A: I think it probably was. I don't know.

Q: Even though your parents didn't have advanced education, they must have felt it was important.

A: Oh, they felt education was very important. They were very well read and very smart, but the economic circumstances prevented them from going anywhere.

Q: Did you go directly to your undergraduate education after high school?

A: Yes, I graduated and went directly to the University of Maryland.

Q: Did you choose that school because it was close?

A: A swimming scholarship.

Q: Oh, you got a swimming scholarship.

A: Otherwise I don't think I would have chosen it.

Q: What was your major?

A: Psychology.

Q: How did you happen to choose psychology?

A: I got a "B."

Q: Oh, you took it in high school.

A: No, no. My major when I started was premed. But that didn't work out because I never studied. Along with those other courses I took psychology. I got a "B" and I found it interesting. So I switched to that and I did very well in that area.

Q: Did you have influential teachers as an undergraduate?

A: Yes. Bruce Fretz. He was a professor in the psychology department. He was very influential. He was my advisor.

Q: Where were you living at this time?

A: In college in the dormitory. Then in an apartment with some other swimmers.

Q: Were you a swimmer all through college?

A: Yes.

Q: When did you graduate as an undergraduate?

A: 1969. I was ill for a semester and so I had to take a semester off. Then because of my stunning grades early on, I had to take another semester. So I graduated in 1969.

Q: That was the time when a lot was going on here in Kansas.

A: Oh, yes.

Q: Riots and everything. Was that going on at the University of Maryland too?

A: Yes, very definitely.

Q: What sort of things were happening there?

A: The same things as here, buildings being burned, the National Guard on campus, marches, riots.

Q: Really?

A: Well, College Park was right next to Washington, D.C. So whatever happened in Washington was happening all over that area. So it was a tumultuous time, very interesting. Watergate was terrific, the whole thing. It was a very interesting time to be a student down there.

Q: Were you involved in any of that?

A: Just in some of the protests, but not otherwise. I worked for political candidates but I didn't do much beyond that.

Q: Were you protesting the war?

A: Yes, the war in Vietnam.

Q: Did you ever serve in the military?

A: No, I got drafted, but I flunked my physical.

Q: Was that while you were in college? But they were deferring college students then, weren't they?

A: On my honeymoon I got drafted. I got the letter while I was on my honeymoon. My mother called to tell us. I went for my physical but I didn't pass. So I didn't go.

Q: When did you get married?

A: June 13, 1968.

Q: Oh, while you were still in school.

A: Yes, I had one year left. My wife was finished and she was teaching.

Q: So she was an education major. What is her name?

A: Leni.

Q: Then you graduated in 1969. What did you do after that?

A: I went to graduate school. I started graduate school right away.

Q: The same school?

A: Yes. The following fall, I believe. I must have, because I finished my Ph.D. in 1973.

Q: So you went to the same school.

A: Yes, but it was a much different program. I was an undergraduate in psychology. I was a graduate student in what they call The Institute for Child Study, which was human development in the School of Education, a very interesting interdisciplinary program.

Q: When you were a master's student did you write a thesis?

A: Yes.

Q: What was it about?

A: Spatial development in children, how children use space. My dissertation was on the same thing. I am trying to remember what the difference was. I can't remember.

Q: Were you employed at this time?

A: By the Montgomery County School System. I drove a school bus. I worked as a life guard. And I taught, of course, at the university.

Q: That's what I was wondering. Is that when you started to teach?

A: Yes. I was a teaching assistant.

Q: What did you teach?

A: Educational Psychology.

Q: So when did you get your masters?

A: 1971.

Q: Then you went directly on for your doctorate.

A: I got that in 1973.

Q: Was that in Human Development also?

A: Yes.

Q: When you went on for an advanced degree, did you intend then to teach in a college?

A: Yes. That was my goal, a teaching position.

Q: Since you started out not doing too well in school, how did you decide to become a college professor?

A: Well, I married the right woman. That was enough of an incentive. And I started getting all “As” because I wasn’t living with a bunch of reckless swimmers, who I still enjoy and see and am very close friends with a couple of them. But nonetheless, it was difficult to study under those circumstances.

Q: Well, with any kind of athletics, it takes so much time, the practice, meets, etc.

A: Yes, but you know, you deal with it. You should do it. I didn’t do what I should have done.

Q: After you got your Ph.D. in 1973, then what did you do?

A: While I was getting my Ph.D. I sent out 300 typed letters for jobs. I have them all. I have the rejections. I got interviews from about five or six places.

Q: You must have sent them all over the country.

A: I did, yes. Who cared where we went? My wife didn’t want to go to the Midwest. I got a rejection from Kansas. Then about two weeks later I got a letter saying, “We have an opening. Are you interested?” I said sure. I came out for an interview and got the job.

Q: So you came to KU in 1973.

A: In August of 1973.

Q: What department were you in?

A: It was called Educational Psychology and Research then. It is the same department now, just a different name.

Q: Is that within the School of Education, I suppose.

- A: Yes. And I had a joint appointment with what was called Human Development and Family Life back then. So I taught in both places.
- Q: What sort of courses did you teach?
- A: Mostly child development, research methods, statistics and Child Observation and Study, it was called. Lifespan development.
- Q: Is that where you observe the children through one of those glasses where they can't see you?
- A: They teach the methods how to do it. That is one way of doing it. But you teach about case studies and how to observe behavior and the way that works. But mostly it was research methods and child development and theories of development, lifespan development.
- Q: What were your research interests here?
- A: My research interests when I first got here were children's cognitive development, how they think about the world. I did that for about seven years, (unclear) I got tenure. Then I went on sabbatical at the University of North Carolina. And I started doing research in child and family policy. I did that for quite a while.
- Q: Does that mean what the government has to say about children and families?
- A: With any kind of policy related to children and families, what kind of impact that policy had, how to evaluate the policy, that kind of work. I did that for about 20 years. Then I stopped. I mean I stopped two or three years ago, but I wanted to finish up my own students. I was on that phased retirement program, so I knew I was stopping in two or three years.
- Q: Did you ever have administrative responsibilities?

A: Fortunately, not, other than grant administration. I got some grants and I had to administer those. I never pursued the chairmanship or anything like that. I was asked to do it but I didn't think it was for me. Too much fun, you know?

Q: I suppose you wrote articles.

A: Lots.

Q: Did you ever write any books?

A: Yes, I have actually written over 100 books.

Q: Really? How on earth did you find time to write 100 books?

A: I just worked really hard and fast. This is over 20 years.

Q: Yes, but still...

A: Well, some of them are small. Some of them are not intended for scholars. Some of them are very pragmatic and applied. Some of them were more scholarly. Some of them were textbooks. So a little bit of everything.

Q: That's an awfully lot.

A: Yes, but I just did it. And I probably have 100 presentations and probably 50 or 60 scholarly articles.

Q: And these were about children.

A: All the articles and presentations were. Some of the books were about technology, statistics, research methods, various encyclopedias I edited, a wide variety of things, which is what I enjoy doing, mostly.

Q: I forgot to ask you. Do you have children?

A: I have two terrific children. One is a 33-year-old young woman and an almost 25-year-old young man.

Q: Did either of your children go to KU?

A: No. They both went to Ivy League schools in the East, which is why I wrote 100 books, so I could afford to send them.

Q: I suppose you were on committees at various times.

A: All kind of committees.

Q: Any you particularly remember?

A: I remember them all as being relatively inefficient and useless and some a lot of fun. But whatever we got done could have gotten done alone.

Q: Has your department changed through the years?

A: Well, we did go from the Department of Educational and Psychology to the Department of Psychology and Research in Education, where we merged with the Counseling Psychology Department in the School of Education. That was a big change and that was a change for the better. That occurred probably 10 years ago. Other than that, we've remained pretty stable with a similar goal teaching similar material. Our areas of interest are pretty well defined and it has always been a very good, supportive department.

Q: Do you have more professors or more students in your department now than you had?

A: We have fewer professors because people have retired and they have not been replaced. I think we have about the same number of students, maybe a little bit less.

Q: I assume you have a number of graduate students in this area.

A: Oh, yes. Mostly, they are very good students.

Q: Have you had honors at KU?

A: I got a couple of teaching awards. No service awards, which is just fine.

Q: Have you had outstanding former students that you remember?

A: Oh, yes. Some of my students have done very well. I have one student who is the chairman of the Educational Psychology Department at Baylor and some other students who have done well. I was on a lot of committees and a lot of those students have done well. I was on more committees. I had a relatively small number of students, probably five or six doctoral students at any one time. Some of them have gone on to do well.

Q: I suppose you belong to professional organizations.

A: The Society for Research and Child Development, the American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association. And the Association for Irreproducible Results, which is kind of a spoof. They give out the Ignoble Prize.

Q: What is that association?

A: Well, they just have a lot of fun making fun of academics. And it is a big organization. I was on the board and I am a consulting editor for the journal. It's just very silly and a lot of fun. And some other organizations along the way, American Association for the Advancement of Science, you know, all these associations that generally psychologists belong to.

Q: Have you held offices in any others of these?

A: I was editor of the journal for the Child Development Society for 13 years and I've acted as a reviewer and done all the things that other people do.

Q: I don't suppose you've had time to be involved in community activities.

A: Oh, yes, extensively.

Q: What sort of things did you do?

A: Well, gee, CASA.

Q: Oh, yes.

A: Citizens Review Board.

Q: What does that do?

A: That board makes suggestions to judges before sentencing takes place, after the child has been adjudicated, not in court but in some kind of a setting. We tell the judge what we think the sentence should be for the child.

Q: And CASA makes some kind of recommendations too.

A: CASA is where you act as a court appointed special advocate. That's where you act as an advocate for a child in need.

Q: Did you do that with children?

A: Yes, I did that for a year. I've done CRV for probably five years. [LINK](#), Audio Reader, Women's Transitional Care, Health Care Access.

Q: What did you do for those organizations?

A: I was president of the board at Women's Transitional Care, and I have been on the board. I am now president of the board at Health Care Access. Family Promise, which is a program for homeless families.

Q: Yes, I've heard of that.

A: I just did my last wash today for them. Wash and dry. I do the linens.

Q: So the organization is up and running now.

A: Oh, quite successfully.

Q: This is through your church, I suppose. As I understand churches are involved.

A: Through the Lawrence Jewish Community Center. And maybe 10 other things.

Q: That's amazing, that you find time to do all that.

A: Well, I feel it is an obligation that everybody has, to provide that help if you can. So I do that. I don't say no when it is a good reason and a good cause. And other things I can't remember.

Q: The community certainly needs those things, especially things like Health Care Access and Family Promise. What do you plan to do in retirement?

A: Work.

Q: For volunteer organizations?

A: I'll continue that but I continue my own writing and I also work for a literary agency in New York as a literary agent where I help authors get published.

Q: These are scholarly publications, I suppose.

A: No, trade. Some scholarly, some textbooks, but mostly trade.

Q: By trade to you mean fiction?

A: Yes, fiction, general nonfiction.

Q: Really. Do you read their books and make suggestions?

A: I read their proposals and read their books. If it's something I think will work, which of course is a great trick. The great magic is to know. Then I send it on to editors who work with them. It's very difficult, especially in this day and age where money is very tight. Editors just have to be very cautious.

Q: What is your assessment of KU, your department, past, present, hopes for the future, that kind of thing?

A: My department has done very well. We have had a great deal of success. We have very bright people, very good students. And I think we will continue to be successful. Of course, we have lost people we have not been able to rehire in that position.

Q: Is that because of the economy?

A: Right. That's going to hurt us. I know that I have come from a very good department that was very supportive of me, who has done very well. On the School level, we have never really had up to now a dean who has really had a vision. I think this new fellow, two or three years ago, really does have a vision for what we could do.

Q: What is his name?

A: Rick Ginsberg. I hope he will be a little bit more structured as to setting high standards for others. Because I think, I know, we have some faculty in some departments who are not very scholarly. We don't need that. We need better and we can do better. So they have students who aren't very scholarly. I know this because I teach survey courses or taught survey courses. I was always very disappointed in the quality of the students in other departments, some departments, not all. So I think the School has done well and will continue to do well. And I think the university is a fine place. I think it is easy for students to get lost because it is so big. I think that sometimes the university loses sight of important things, such as the community in which they live, in which the university resides. I think they could do more for the community. I think it would be pretty easy for them to do that. But that does not seem to be as important as I think it is.

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

A: About?

Q: Anything.

A: I think the university, the only major complaint I would have against the university is that they never do very much for their faculty. In other words, there is no faculty club, there's no effort to bring faculty together. They don't make the kind of effort that other

universities successfully do, which would increase, which would, you know, make everything a little bit more positive, a little bit better. I think it would make the faculty a better group of people to work with, make them an even better faculty. But, you know, they don't seem to think those things are important. And the other thing, of course, is that I am kind of philosophically opposed to the emphasis on athletics.

Q: Me too.

A: Even though it isn't the same money, it is at the expense of other things. I think there is a little bit of arrogance that goes on. This isn't the place for it. But other than that, the university has been wonderful. I know the university has been wonderful to me and my family and I'm very appreciative of what they've done.

Q: Okay. Thank you very much.

A: My pleasure. Thank you.