MARILYN FLYNN, PH.D.
Interviewed by Monika White, Ph.D.
At the USC School of Social Work
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WHITE: We're here today at the USC School of Social Work to interview Dean Marilyn Flynn for the California Social Welfare Archives.

First of all, I wanted to ask you whether you have been the subject of other interviews on your work and what you've done.

FLYNN: In the past?

WHITE: Yes.

FLYNN: Yes, I have, actually.

WHITE: Where was that?

FLYNN: Mostly it was during the period of time that I was at the University of Illinois in Urbana up until 1985. I was involved in establishing a number of programs, which were the first of their kind, and I was also in a position, several times, to be the first woman to do something. They tended to be "first woman" kinds of things. The opportunities, now, I can say very happily, are much less.

WHITE: Fewer, yes. Well, let me ask you are those interviews we could get a hold of? Are they transcribed?

FLYNN: Yes, but I don't know if I have them. I would have to look at home. If they're not transcribed – I have one that was written up, and I could go and see if I still have it.

WHITE: We'd love to have it in your file, because we transcribe these and we keep files in the library, so that would be terrific and also, if you run into any other interviews about yourself.

Now, let me ask you what circumstances led you to social work as a profession or into your involvement in social welfare?

FLYNN: My mother was a graduate of the School of Social Services Administration at the University of Chicago, and my father was also – well, he was a sociologist at the University of Chicago and a director of public welfare during the Depression years.

WHITE: You didn't have a chance. (laughter)

FLYNN: Well, I did, actually, because I was determined that the one thing I would never do is to become a social worker. I knew from the time that I was five years old that I wanted a Ph.D. I didn't know it what, but I knew I wanted a Ph.D. So I went into – first, I had a double major in history and sociology, and then I went into Russian Area Studies to get my Ph.D. I found out, as I was working in graduate school that, at that time, there were very, very few opportunities for women historians in the Russian Area Studies Departments, which would have been the only career path that I was thinking of at that time. So, I went home and asked my father what kind of occupation I should consider, because I was feeling very unsure. He said, "Well, there are only three things you can do. You can be a nurse, you can be a teacher, or you can be a social worker." I thought I didn't like blood, and I thought teaching, maybe, but I didn't know what I could teach, so I thought, "Maybe I'll be a social worker." But, I had no idea what that meant. I went to work for the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services the year that

the statewide licensing laws were approved – the first day-care licensing laws were approved for the first time, so they gave me half a state to do – the part that wasn't Cook County: one person. At the same time, I read all the volumes I could get my hands on of the psycho-analytic study of the child, thinking maybe that's what social workers did. So, that was my experience. I did statewide day-care licensing for one year, and I read about 12 volumes of the psycho-analytic study of the child, and I went into social work. But, both of my parents – my father was involved – he studied, he invented, developed the neighborhood theory of crime with Clifford Shaw at the University of Chicago. So, I knew that sociologists thought about delinquency in crime, but I didn't know if social workers did. My mother was always very quiet about what she did. She was one of the first women executives in the area of social work, but she never told me or never said much about it to my father. I didn't know what she did, either.

WHITE: Interesting. When you said you went into your Ph.D. studies in Russian Area Studies, what did you imagine you were going to do with that?

FLYNN: I was going to eat black bread and think dark thoughts by the candlelight and drink vodka in some little village. (laughter) Actually, that was a fascinating period, to study Russia, and I really – my interests were really, truly intellectual. I didn't have thoughts about doing things; I had thoughts about thinking things. So, I imagined I would teach in a university.

WHITE: Very interesting. Now, can you run down for me, briefly, the positions in social work or related areas, that you held, or the kind of activities that you've been involved with around health, welfare programs, policy – just a little rundown.

FLYNN: I always tell people I've had five careers, so I can tell you in pieces and parts of each one, aspects of my work always related to the design and development of programs for aging, for unemployed, and, to a lesser extent, probably to mentally distraught or emotionally disturbed people would be the last category.

I've always been more interested in trying to create new organizations. I think that's something important; new forms of service activity. I, for example, started a program called "Telecare" in Illinois, which was the first crisis line for seniors and information and referral service for seniors in the State, and one of the first of its kind in the country. I started the first labor-based unemployment program for CEDA-eligible workers. It was quite remarkable that we had, at that time, manpower legislation in which almost every population participated except labor. And that was supported by United Way and was an idea, but it disappeared, unfortunately, when the CEDA funding disappeared. I created the first – well, it was really a computer-based employment program for middle-aged and aging workers. The idea was that it could be – this was for displaced workers, for people in their 50's, late 40's, 50's, early 60's were trying to enter the labor force for whatever reason. That was funded by the Administration on Aging and was a national demonstration, and we did it in several cities.

Those are examples of the kinds of things – then I did a lot of – my second career was organizational consulting. I did a lot of that for many years and even thought of going into business, did go into business, and then decided I liked being in the university better. I specialized for a long time in nursing home consultation, but only in certain kinds of nursing homes that were on their last legs, that were having significant difficulties in delivering patient care and organization service. Some people called me a

hired gun, because every time I got hired, something happened. But, it was really because, at that point, the whole structure for aging services – and this is still true for nursing homes to some extent – the least qualified, the least experienced, the least competent kinds of administrators were often drawn to this sort of work. It wasn't surprising that things were not as they should have been for the patients.

WHITE: That's definitely still true in too many cases, though not all. There's been an influx of better qualified….

FLYNN: Better qualified, but still, it's a place where people can find refuge, unfortunately. Then I became a consultant for United Way of America, and I worked with them on program planning and accountability and this general question of how could local United Ways do social planning. It's an ironic kind of job because United Way started out as instruments for social planning, but then they one by one abandoned their councils and had to hire consultants to come back and show them how to do community building and community planning. I did quite a bit of that, and then I did a lot of consultation for United Way organizations, themselves, that were struggling to be more accountable. In that capacity, I worked a lot with agency boards and other groups. I also was a consultant for the Area Agencies on Aging as they developed. That was, again, more around organizational planning, organizational structure, accountability, evaluation, that sort of thing. So that was my second career.

My third career - these were often all parallel – my third career was in the university. In that capacity, I started – well, I had been teaching all my life. I had never not been at a university, so that career is still ongoing.

The fourth career is actually as a kind – I think of it as a separate career because it's very different, and that's development of global relationships and global capacity building. I was part of several international programs associated with, at that time, the European economic community and the studies of social security harmonization among countries in the European economic community. And I also was the first woman to lead a delegation to Siberia after the opening of the, after the iron curtain fell. I took people to the closed city of Omst (sp?), where we – the purpose there – I did the same thing in Hungary – the purpose really was to try to help local government officials in former Communist countries understand how local policy is developed, and to feel confident that they could develop local policy. They had always been in these conditions so long, where policy was always made from the center. So, I got to use my Russian Studies, finally. Then, most recently, the last decade or so, I've been working in Korea and have had extensive relationships with Korean government. There, the objective has been more in creating not only educational exchange programs, but in Korea, during Kim De Jung's regime in the so-called Sunshine Policy, which is the creation of relationship with North Korea and South Korea and how to contribute to that ???????. Now that is all in abeyance at the moment. Now I'm starting on China. But that part is sort of permanently….

Then the fifth thing that I did – actually, I did social work. I think I get to count that. I worked at the VA Hospital with psychiatrically disturbed men, I was a school social worker, I worked at a mental health center as a therapist, and, of course, my career – although it was only one year long – as a statewide licensing person, qualifies me as a having been in child welfare.

WHITE: Yes, I think it counts. Here's a question for you: which of these did you find most gratifying, personally or professionally, or both?

FLYNN: I should have mentioned teaching and research, because I conducted the largest study ever done – at risk children and youth in Detroit, Wayne County, as a basis for social planning and as a result of that, a county inter-agency service coordination unit was established, which is ongoing. You could say that's part of a program-designing development, and that's more of a county ????.

WHITE: It sounds like you've done a lot of things that would be gratifying.

FLYNN: Obviously, I loved being in a university. Sometimes, I likened – once I was trying to explain to people the difference between consulting activity and teaching activity, and I said, "Well, when you're consulting, you're out in the – it's like being in the jungle and there are snakes dropping off trees and vines curling around your feet, and you're hacking your way. It's tremendously exciting, especially if you get through the jungle and you see the light and you're preoccupied every moment with the immediacy of your experience and the challenges. But if you compare that to the academic life, you have an opportunity for reflection and for – you don't have the excitement, but you have a chance for insight and you have a change to capture something very deep about life." Finally, when I was trying to weigh and measure what did I want to do, because I'd been very, very successful in consulting, very, very quickly, I thought I understood why people like to be out there with the snakes and the curling vines and the machetes, and I can see that absolutely. But the thing that I found most satisfying is the insight and the chance to understand a few things and the rare moments for reflection.

WHITE: It's kind of a sanction. It's sanction to think.

FLYNN: Yes, it's sanction to think. And I think that I like the – the clinical experience that I had, I liked very much, but I always had such keen sense of systems implications, of individual people's situation. I never felt as if this was sufficient to me. I know some people find that the relationship that they develop is kind of an end in itself and a meaningful end in itself. It never was for me, and I always felt it was more important to…..

WHITE: I always ?????, and I really understand that. But it kind of leads into part of this question about what you find gratifying in the University and, to some extent, the clinical experience. What kind of obstacles have you encountered in the area, and what strategies have you……

FLYNN: I didn't mention that after I got my Master's in Social Work, I got a Ph.D. in Economics.

WHITE: Actually, I should back up and let you give me some timeline.

FLYNN: I got my Ph.D. in 1976 in Economics from the University of Illinois. At that point, I felt very keenly that if I had to choose between studying markets and understanding economic courses as opposed to understanding how these courses ultimately impinged on people, I was, after all, most interested in how people fared. I have always been operating in domains that were dominated by men, numerically and sometimes intellectually. I don't think that men – you can't say that men are obstacles; that's not true. But it is, it just is harder, to advance in intellectual agenda, especially at the time that I was trying to do this – I was usually, often, the only woman in the room. Sometimes I was conscious of that and sometimes I was not, but I think gender was a factor, if you're breaking out of the traditional social work roles. A second obstacle that I

encountered was that I didn't have the mentoring in research and computers. I was desperate to learn about computers and I was desperate to things. I could always do it in a formal way; I could always take a class. The number of associations I had with people who were actually intensively engaged in the applications of research and technology were relatively few. So, this created a problem in terms of trying to develop my ideas. Third, I had a sort of lifetime fear of success. I was my own worst enemy. Sometimes I find myself wishing I could live to be 150 years old, because now I'm just about ready to do what I would like to do. I understand enough about myself and understand enough about how to work on things. But, unfortunately, we're not quite there.

WHITE: Do you think that you have come up with some strategies or insights to overcome some of the gender factor? Can you talk about that a little bit?

FLYNN: Yes. The mistake that I made, initially, in groups that I felt insecure – I'm mentioning gender, but sometimes I felt insecure for other reasons – was to try doubly hard how smart or how effective I could be. That meant that I would talk too much, or I would interrupt people, or I would try to make myself seen instead of gradually coming to understand that, in fact, you don't have to – to be in control of the situation to be in control of the situation. You can sit back and measure your own responses. Yes, you can talk when you need to, but other people should have a full opportunity. There should be a learning and exchange that goes on, rather than a competition or a sense of vying for dominance. As soon as I got into that mode, I think I became a better group member, and I stopped being so uncomfortable about whether people did or didn't listen to me. I just made sure that I had a chance to talk, and when I had a full idea, and when I thought it through, I made sure I certainly brought it up. So I just stopped gradually being bothered

by discounting behavior or dismissive behavior or people who didn't pay attention to me, or all these things that seemed so very important when I started my career. It still gets to me once in a while. When I am in a conversation, and I am not in contact with anybody. They're all in eye contact with each other and not with me, every once in a while, it still bothers me, but not much. I did discover a great truth which is, no matter what the differences are that seem to get in people's way when they first start to work with each other, if you do your job, and you're good at it, people don't care what you are. They don't care how old you are, they don't care what race you are, they don't care – well, I don't know about that, but they don't care what gender you are. Everybody actually needs a good and willing hand, so that, in the long run, takes you farther than anything. (both talked together – could not pick up here) social change, society changed. It's very different now than it was even 20 years ago in some way.

WHITE: How about the research and the technology, which, I know, you have a great interest in to this day. How did you get through the fact that there was no one really to teach you or help you?

FLYNN: In some things, I have never done what I would have liked to have done, so I tried to build research centers where other people could do these things. I have always been in love with discovery. I have always been in love with trying to put the highest uses of people's finds to the best causes. This is one thing I love about USC. We have very smart people who are doing very good research on welfare problems and on problems of aging and problems of depression and the fundamental human needs. I moved out of doing my own research and moved into facilitating the research of very good people. I think that's probably how I dealt with it.

WHITE: Surround yourself with great people. Have you been involved, and if so, what kind of social movements or activities have you been involved in that really seemed important, but didn't work out?

FLYNN: Oh, dear, that's a different question.

WHITE: Kind of a different approach. Didn't achieve the goal.

FLYNN: That's a very interesting question. Okay, well, I was the vice president of one of the first academic units in the country for faculty at the University of Illinois. A blind poet was the president. Talk about the blind leading the blind (laughter) – we were quite a group, and we were going to be the first research institution in the country to organize faculty. We decided that in order to have sufficient clout, instead of affiliating with one of these little weak and small-minded service unions, we'd go out for the big guys, because if we ever wanted to go on strike then we'd have some real muscle. So we invited the Teamsters to come organize us, and they came from New York, too. I still remember them coming in the door, and they were completely stereotypic, weighing in at like 200 pounds and saying, "We're (or where) – sorry, can't understand the imitation of what was said – sorry, because you both had a good laugh over it)." They started out with psychology, to talk to them about becoming union members. Well, without spinning the tale too long, the union lasted, actually, for about four, five years, and then finally fizzled out. But that was part of a broad – it was one reflection of this broad movement in academia to establish more equal relationships between students and faculty, between faculty and administrators to equalize and make more human and humane the interactions among people at universities.

WHITE: Can you think of what you learned from that or what might guide somebody else?

FLYNN: In that particular instance there was probably a fundamental culture conflict between the political – what it takes to have a union and the political clout that it takes and the genteel traditions, the monastic traditions of academia. This is a case where the social movement fizzled out because culturally, there was no real soil in which it could grow.

WHITE: Well, it lasted for four or five years, so some strain must have……

FLYNN: There are issues and unions are useful in any large organizations where communication has broken down. I believe that what captured people's idea: it opened up the possibility for communication, for some sense of power. That was a good failed effort that had some useful outcomes. It certainly caught people's attention and there was a little bit less of the old master. There's a lot of demagoguery in universities at that time. This reduced it a little bit.

WHITE: It seems I'm hearing a theme in your interests, as you went along, in opening communications and finding ways for people to have an opportunity to give their views and being open to that and patient with that.

FLYNN: It's really more in trying to create Chilean(?) conditions where people can express their needs and be heard. Probably over and over and over.

WHITE: I can hear that. What is your perspective on what measures the profession, the social work professional can actually conduct or undertake to affect programs and policies that would be more or less effective. What can we, as professionals, do? It don't

know if that's a clear question. It's really about how we can affect programs and policies that we pursue.

FLYNN: One thing I've been very worried about – I'm worried about it in the social work profession – I see the universities as having an enormous impact and also as being kind of the progenitors of this problem. If you look at schools of social work across the country, on most campuses, they tend to be small and isolated. The way in which we attempt to socialize students is by helping – yes, we try to give students a sense of pride. Sometimes we give them this false sense of, "You have values, you have ethics. Other people don't." It's kind of an extreme way of socializing and conditioning people so that they can withstand all the buffeting they're going to take when they get out in the big world. I understand the need for that, because we deal as professionals with very, very hard situations. We don't get a lot of social reinforcement, and we often don't get much compensation, so people need that sense of almost missionary zeal and pride in their status. But it is also a devastating fact on our ability to work with other disciplines and professions. It leaves us with this kind of lemming-like instinct where we're always running over the cliff instead of latching on to knowledge and other groups, other people that we need to survive. To have power in policy is not to go and say, "You have to appreciate social work. You have to appreciate us as social workers. Why is it that you don't believe in social work policy?" That's one approach we often take, historically. But I really think the best way for us to advance social policy agenda and to advance social well being is in the large, interdisciplinary, inter-professional endeavors where we have a voice, we have a distinctive voice. People always know when there's a social worker present because there's always a question that asked that wouldn't have been

otherwise asked. It isn't because we have ethics and values and they don't, or that we have certain understanding that they will never have. It's just that we think about certain problems all the time and they are less likely to. We think about it in a context that other people are less likely to.

WHITE: What can we do about that? It's a national, a universal…..

FLYNN: It is a universal – well, I am trying to work on it right now. I'm part of – there's a very small group of people who are leaders in social work, who are meeting in Washington – in fact, I'm going this week. We're starting a new strategic plan for the Council on Social Work Education that will try to fundamentally change the way we are organized and governed as schools of social work. We will try to start working on accreditation in other areas in ways that will help schools of social work move into the 21st Century. That, in turn, will help the profession move. As our new graduates go out, I hope they will begin to go out with this more global view, more interdisciplinary view, but still with the pride and the sense of who we are. That's why the Hall of Distinction is so important. That's why I supported it. This is not to say that we don't have a distinctive voice. That's what history does for us: it gives us a distinctive voice. I really worry about the proliferation of schools and voices in the profession that are rather focused on very, very narrow and very small vision of the profession.

WHITE: I really find that so true in areas of my work in aging, in care management. We're actually losing social workers; we're losing care management, which is an ideal work for a social worker.

FLYNN: It's perfect.

WHITE: It's not good enough or something. It's not clinical enough or……

FLYNN: What they should – if we could pick it up, if we had care management, and what if we ever tied up with people and learned more about insurance and learned more about certain technical areas, we could create and have a specialty in social work where people would still have their eyes on the oppressed and those who are at the greatest disadvantage. They'd have this technical capacity to help organize and influence the work of these institutions.

Well, that's really what I worry about all the time. I'm president of a group called *The St. Louis Group,* which is – now you're asking about national things that might have failed. I don't know if this one failed or not –

WHITE: Well, measures social workers can take to affect outcomes.

FLYNN: I'm thinking about your earlier question…..

WHITE: About movements….

FLYNN: Yes. There was a group about seven years ago, organized, usually, by the Dean of Columbia, which included about eight of us from the private schools of social work – the best seven or eight private schools of social work – the idea being that we now all had very different research agendas than most other schools of social work, and that we should have a separate accrediting body, a separate set of – we should constitute ourselves as a group that would protect the quality of education of social work from the proliferating programs all around us. We soon realized it was not a problem of private schools but rather a problem of research infrastructure. So, we brought in Michigan and brought in many of the large public schools: the AAU University Schools of Social Work. Thirty-three of us met in St. Louis and formed ourselves as *The St. Louis Group,* with the same objective, which was to form our own accrediting body to create a new

movement in the field of social work as a whole that would reflect a brand – well it is a brand new research position in our field. The clinical research, a research agenda that actually results in social change, but, nonetheless, it creates enormous problems for deans, and it's a new challenge for us.

Then there was terrific pressure to expand this group to all research-extensive institutions so sixty universities now have been invited to join. The group is now different. I'm president of it and trying to keep the same sense of connection that we had as a much smaller and more elite group. I'm not sure where this is going, but what's very interesting about it is it reflects fundamental change in the field of social work as a whole. The need for new leadership, the need to redefine the standards by which we judge quality in social work education, as well as the question you asked me, which is how do we judge the outcomes. So, this is a movement that I'm not sure where it's going. It may go nowhere, it may merge with this new strategic planning process, it may continue on its own.

WHITE: This fits into the next question, which is pretty much the last major question. What significant changes have you noticed or observed between now and when you first came into the work?

FLYNN: Well, of course, the complexity of the structures that we deal with. Most of them, initially, were much more neighborhood-oriented, they were more local. The second is the complexity of the human problems that people are presenting, that they're kind of incalcitrents (?sp?). The challenge we face, the intervening with these people, partly as a result of the drugs in the 80s, I think profoundly changed the whole landscape and the whole form of social work practice. Everything that was part of traditional social

work practice such as home visits - all these things changed with drugs and it's never been the same since the drug culture.

The third thing is really the scale of problems. It's not just the complexity, but some problems that we're dealing with are global as well as local. Trying to even conceptualize an intervention and where you start in the process and how you organize a response. These seem to be the most – I think we have more sophistication as a profession, a more empirical evidence at our disposal. We certainly have – we're one of the ten hottest professions at the moment. I don't think that has to be a first.

WHITE: (mumble, mumble)

FLYNN: Hmm. (laughter)

WHITE: (mumble) hottest thing (mumble) Let me ask you if you have papers, items, anything you've written, anything about you or from you that would be appropriate to put in the file in the Archives, that you'd like to put there. It's a permanent thing. We really do get people who use the Archives, so we encourage information about you, in addition to the transcript of this interview: other things you might like for someone to see.

FLYNN: Let me think about that and see if I can get some things together.

WHITE: It will be a couple of months before this will be transcribed. They line up, as you know.

FLYNN: I know.

WHITE: It's not a rush, but I don't want you to forget. I might ask you again.

FLYNN: Okay, all right. Thank you, Monika.

WHITE: Thank you.