

**Interview with Erika Busse-Cardenas**

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**Macalester College**

**St Paul, Minnesota (Interviewee)**

**Houston, Tx (Interviewer)**

**Conducted Via Zoom**

[00:00] BJ: The first question, what is your name and can you share some demographic information like race and gender? Also where are you from?

EB: I am Erika Busse and I work in the Sociology Department, I use she/her/ella pronouns, I am originally from Peru and I have been at Macalester for the past four years.

[00:30] BJ: What is your position at Macalester college? Is that currently where you are?

EB: I am an assistant professor in the Sociology Department and yes this is my current job.

[00:44] BJ: How did you first hear about covid?

EB: I was on sabbatical during the year 2019-2020 and I was planning on going to Belgium for a conference and also to do field work. Everything around me started canceling, and I was coming to campus so I also saw students talking about the pandemic. I heard it started in China, or that's

what we all thought back then. Then I learned from colleagues talking about it but as something that was very remote and that was at the end of January or February [2020]. It was in March when everything, even my trip back to Peru to visit my family, was canceled because things were turning. As chaotic as I'm saying it, that's how I felt the first time when I heard about covid and I realized it was here pretty close to me.

[01:55] BJ: How was your community before covid and how did covid impact your community?

EB: It depends on how you define community. I'm mostly with my family and working most of the time as an assistant professor that I don't have any free time whatsoever. College was cancelled, before that I was able to go to school every day, to drop off my son, to pick him up from school after work. My son's school was cancelled, my husband's jobs turned remote like everything else and so was my son so all of a sudden we were all at home with the impossibility to go anywhere. I'm not saying to go to a restaurant or other places; it's like not even being able to travel and canceling field work and canceling trips to visit my family. As I said I'm from Peru, and I couldn't even think of going to Peru and my mom who will always say yes come and visit us, she was saying no it's better for you to stay. That was the thing that impacted me the most, when my own mom said it's better for you to stay where you are.

[03:33] BJ: What was the status of covid cases in your community and was the government implementing any rules to help them?

EB: I think that Minnesota was really good. I clearly remember being at the Y picking up my son from his swimming class and I was with my husband, my son, and the foreign exchange student that was living with us who is like a niece to us. We were talking about the schools being canceled. Public Schools were canceled and we had a clear sense that there were measures taking place and it was better for us to be at home. It's all fuzzy of that time, I remember renewing my driver license that day and that was the last thing I ever did in a building. It was packed, and you could feel the anxiety so instead of waiting in the building I went to wait in the car then we just did the whole procedure and left. We went to get food from a grocery store right next door. It was empty and I found myself cleaning using hand sanitizer for everything and anything. I said to myself this is not life. I mean I'm very privileged to be able to keep working at home and to have a grocery store like two blocks away from my house, so everything is walking distance. I don't have to go farther to get food and I can get food. I'm complaining or saying that I couldn't see my friends but I have access to Zoom, or Skype, or Whatsapp so I'm in contact with my family all the time. I mean I will say yes there were measures that Macalester, my husband's job, and my son's school took so everything was coherent and we knew that we had to stay home. We had to come up with a way to rearrange our old house for all of us to be home.

[05:40] BJ: Of course, so how was the pandemic discussed or handled in classes and extracurriculars before the campus closure?

EB: I have no idea because I wasn't in the classroom and I was only talking to my colleagues and friends. Everything was uncertain, and I wasn't participating in anything, when you're on sabbatical you don't teach. I got an office in the library so for me it was going from the parking

lot walking up the stairs to the first floor of the library and hiding there and working non-stop. I had very limited time on campus because I was dropping off my son at eight and picking him up at three so I didn't have much time to engage in anything. I don't know exactly what Mac did because I tried to be far removed from the discussion, from anything just because I was on sabbatical.

[06:47] BJ: As a professor, what was your daily routine like? How was it affected by covid restrictions?

EB: Well during my sabbatical all the field work that I had planned was cancelled. I had to change my house, as I said earlier, to come up with new ways or spaces for us to work. One thing that I always said before covid was I cannot work at home and all of a sudden I was facing the idea that I had to work from home and not only myself but also my husband and my son. At first it was a system like okay now my son has to be at school online so we have to find a desk or a space for him to be able to attend classes. I wasn't teaching so I didn't need a space for anything; I was working on my own stuff, on my own research. I think that was helpful for me because my husband and I were able to focus on my son and my husband's space and we had the whole summer for me to come up with a space. It took me a month or a couple of months to get into the new routine because I had to solve material conditions to make it possible for all of us to be home. We always cook here, so cooking everyday or cooking everyday three times a day it's not any different from what we normally used to do. Being home we luckily have enough space to close the doors and not see each other 24 hours. I have heard others say it is tough running into other people at home all the time. In terms of my personal life, it changed the whole dynamic at

home. My work life was affected but as I said after a month or month-and-a-half new opportunities came up. Instead of doing field work and traveling to the places I wanted to travel to get to know people face-to-face it shifted to online work. I've been able to participate doing participant observation or interviews, like you're doing right now, with people in Peru or people in Philadelphia or with people in Belgium or in Tijuana. It's not the same and I'm not saying it's the same, but new opportunities came up and I always try to look at the bright side.

[10:50] BJ: That's really good especially with the way times are right now

EB: You do what you can [laughs].

[11:11] BJ: Yeah, so what was it like transitioning from teaching in person to teaching online?

EB: Horrible. You being in one of my classes you have seen how I've struggled, I mean with your class I used more the iPad and the whiteboard. I'm so used to having a wiper right next to me and markers so if you were to see me in class you would see all my clothes with stains from all the markers. I like using four or five different colors and writing on the board as we talk to map out the conversation. Doing this online I can't even do this because the iPad that I use in your class only has one color that I can use at a time. It takes time to change the colors, and that will take me longer than it would take me if I were in a classroom. The way I usually teach is more like seminar based instead of lecturing and I have found myself lecturing more than I'm used to. Even when we do smaller group conversations, this idea of getting into the break room on Zoom is not as natural as it was when you were in the classroom. You don't get to walk

around the classroom and hear what the students are saying or have conversations with all the students and the faculty. I'm always standing and writing on the board but then I take a seat and we have a conversation. I had to learn not only to learn to use the technology but how to use Zoom and how it works, how students can raise their hands, how to connect my iPad and everything, especially how to deliver the content that I want.

[13:50] BJ: What are some things that worked online, were there any that didn't, if so how did you adjust these things?

EB: What worked, I don't know I mean I've heard some of my colleagues say oh now we know the names of all the students because all the names are on the screen but I'm a person that remembers all the names the very first day or second day. Therefore, that's not anything that has helped me in any way. I like seeing the students. I like to see how they react and using Zoom students may choose not to turn on their camera so you don't get to see them. That's hard for me because I cannot read the student, I cannot see how they're processing the material or how they are thinking about a comment someone made in class. That has been very hard so maybe that's why I have found myself lecturing more than having discussions. Something that has worked a lot, I think from my perspective, is coming up with a common document for students to write down their lessons learned from the discussion. At the end students can download the whole document from every single time and take it with them; that's something that is a collective process of what you learn from each session. In some classes I have been more conscious about doing that at the end of every single class, with others at the end of the week, and with others every now and then depending on the material and difficulty of the class. Another thing that I

think has worked, that everyone has supported, is to do class notes at the end of class. Finally this module I figured out how everybody could have access to them instead of it just being an activity that students will do for me to look at it but more so for everyone to be able to access the class notes and download them if they missed any class. That it was something that has worked as well. I think using all these tools, like google docs, everything that is online that everyone has access to at the same time has helped to get the material out there for everyone. It's more up to the student to access it or not. That's something that I wouldn't do in the classroom because I don't even like when students bring their own laptops because they will start surfing the internet and not paying attention or even listening to phones whereas this time I had to change the whole philosophy I have.

[17:06] BJ: Are there any challenges that you still face during teaching online?

EB: Of course, I'm still adjusting to understanding all the technology. Even though I'm lecturing more, I have to wait on the PowerPoint and not move my mouse or anything otherwise all the slides will move and I won't be able to follow my train of thought. I mean yes there are a lot of things that I'm still learning. I have to relearn how to make students participate in class. Also come up with a new way for all students to participate in the conversation instead of it just being professor to student or student to professor. I've seen it done so it's possible. I have seen other colleagues, I have observed them in class so it is possible, I just need to learn how to do it too.

[18:11] BJ: How was the process of navigating zoom or other technologies that were unfamiliar to you.

EB: Using the technology itself like communicating over Zoom or Skype or Whatsapp or any other application is not foreign to me because I study migration. The way migrants connect to their families is by using the same technology right. I am in contact with my family that's spread out in five different countries or four different countries so using the technology itself to communicate is nothing new. What is new is how to teach, how to do this thing of sharing and learning and how to develop analytical skills through a screen. I'm still learning how to do my job in this new context and it's a process, I'm still in a learning process. I mean I'm always learning and I spent most of the last summer learning how to use it because I had no idea. For example, with you, I had my computer shut down twice, and I was like why is this happening does it have to do with Zoom or is it my laptop or was it me doing something wrong. I am still learning.

[20:02] BJ: Okay changing the topic here, what were your impressions of the media coverage of the pandemic, both currently and before it arrived in the United States?

EB: As a migration scholar, I read, I mean I have my family in five different countries so I got information from all these different places. I had an exchange student from Germany so I had all the information from Germany, from Belgium, from Peru, and from here. One of the things that surprised me is how, maybe because of who was in office back then, how we were blaming a particular country instead of doing anything here. That was surprising because I come from a country that took the measures even though other countries were reluctant to do, like locking down, closing the borders, and restricting mobility. At the same time in the US, there was nothing like that until later but it was more like Macalester or my husband's job or my son's



school that decided to close up or shift into remote before the state did. For the media coverage it's hard for me to differentiate what was the coverage here in the states as opposed to all the other pieces of information I received. I'm always reading like the BBC world and learning from my own family. I had way more information that a regular person would've had during that time. What did surprise me here was blaming China for the problem instead of doing anything here.

[22:40] BJ: Yeah I agree with that. How do you think covid played a role in the 2020 election?

EB: I mean it was hard for people to go out and vote right. I live like 3 blocks from a voting place and I was surprised. I walked my dog that morning, and I went to the place and there was a long line and people were there and doing what they were supposed to be doing right. It was well-organized, at least here in the Twin Cities in Minneapolis where I live. I also know the opportunity to mail your vote, at least in Minnesota because in other states it was more difficult, was helpful. That's in terms of the individual's behavior. In terms of politics I guess... I mean... I don't know I'm not into that because that's a very conscientious topic and I avoid those kinds of things. It played a big role in terms of minimizing the problem, I'm not saying that's not something that we should be concerned about or the other side that was like well we need to be more assertive and do something right National at the federal level so we can solve this problem.

[24:17] BJ: Ok last question, what were your thoughts about covid in the beginning and have they changed?

EB: It's hard for me to grasp the idea of a pandemic, a global pandemic so I had no idea what it was. I think something that helped me, as I said, was to have my family all over. It's the same in Germany, the same in Belgium, same in Peru, and the same here, the same in Mexico or in Uruguay and in other places so everybody was in the same boat. I know what it's like to be in a situation where you cannot leave your house and you have to change your family dynamic. I grew up in Peru during a Civil War and that was horrible. I didn't think I was going to live through something similar. I mean this is not the same as being scared that a bomb will go off, but being careful about going out and hanging out with other people because you never know if they have covid or are asymptomatic or whatever right. I think that I learned pretty quickly that I had to change my ways of doing things and that will stay with me for awhile. I still walk my dog down the street and I switch sidewalks if I see people coming my way. Now all of these practices have become my routine, so I don't know if they will change in the future or stay the same.

[26:53BJ: Those are all the questions I had, is there anything you'd like to add?

EB: I think covid has tested us and is still testing us in how we do things and what we want to do with our own lives. Hopefully it will make us think about what we have done to create this. I hope this gives us an opportunity to think about what it's like to be in a pandemic or have a pandemic and what has been our role in creating it.

BJ: Thank you for your time and for letting me interview you.

[End of Interview, 27:17]