Psychology's Feminist Voices Oral History Project
Interview with Meg-John Barker

Interviewed by Lois Donnelly over Zoom™
February 28, 2022

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Conducted over the Zoom online platform
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Lois: I'm Lois Donnelly, I'm interviewing Dr. Meg-John Barker on the 28th February 2022 over Zoom, and we are discussing their life and career in the context of feminism and its history within psychology. So, first of all then, could you tell me just a little bit about yourself, you know maybe in terms of the trajectory of your career and the kind of topics of your work?

MJ: Yeah, absolutely. Well, I started off with a psych degree, and I wasn't at all planning to become an academic. I really didn't know what to do, so I ended up doing a PhD. I really wanted to be a therapist from quite early on, but I was very young for that, so I did a little bit of therapy training, and I was going to continue it, so I was looking for a job to fund it, and actually got a job at Cheltenham & Gloucester College of Higher Education, as it was back then, after my PhD, and then really enjoyed teaching psychology there. So, I sort of was this sort of reluctant academic who kept finding my way back into academia (laughing), and then stayed with that. I just really enjoyed the pastoral side of the teaching. And then I got switched onto research once I sort of discovered sexuality activism and realised that you could research those kinds of topics. So, at that point, I guess in my late 20s, I started studying the things that I am more known for now, which is sexuality and gender and relationships, as very much an activist academic. And then kind of continued that for sort of, I guess until just a few years ago when I quit and become self-employed. So, now I am a full-time writer, and I write like self-help style books and also graphic novels which are about gender, sexuality, relationships, mental health, those kinds of topics for a general audience, which has always been a kind of real sort of love of mine to kind of get these kind of ideas of feminism and psychology out to a general audience.

Lois: Yeah, absolutely. That's so interesting. So, what kind of first, when you started on that kind of psychology journey then, what like first kind of attracted you to discipline?

MJ: Yeah, I think I have always been sort of on a journey of self-discovery really. You know, they always say that is a classic, that people do a psychology degree because they want to understand themselves, and you know it really was that for me. I had been thinking about medicine, but it was when I went around the medical schools I was just interested in the behavioural bits, you know so I made the snap decision to go for psychology because that is where I was really interested. But kind of like many psychology undergraduates, somewhat disappointed by what I actually ended up learning about (laughing). But I kind of continued that journey really of like, yeah there was a lot of suffering in my background, and really trying to make sense of that, and going via psychology, and then more towards sociology, and as I said sort of different kinds of activism. Then I trained in existential therapy, so that was trying to bring in the psychotherapy, but also the philosophy of that. I have also studied Buddhism for some time. So, it has always been an attempt to like study different kinds of knowledge that really focus on human suffering and weave them together, and then my work is about how to sort of synthesize all of that in a way that can be accessible to a general audience and give people the stuff that I have found the most useful myself, I suppose.

Lois: Yeah, absolutely. So, what was your kind of very early research on, because you said you kind of changed it a little bit?

MJ: Yeah, so I did my degree at Nottingham University, which wasn't very critical. I was lucky enough to run across David Clarke who was one of my PhD supervisors, who was a critical psych, but I didn't really get into critical psychology at that point. So, it was a mixed methods qualitative / quantitative PhD that I did about loneliness, and you know emotions have stayed a very key thing for me, but I wouldn't say, it is certainly not how I would study loneliness now, you know. So, it is really since then, it is after that, because I ended up really luckily at that first teaching job at Cheltenham & Gloucester, Dai Jones and Jonathan Elcock who ran that department, were real critical psychologists with a real interest in the history of psychology, so that is where I got like, "Okay, there is this other way of seeing things," which resonated much more with me.

[0:05:00]

Lois: Yeah, could you unpack that a little bit in terms of like what you think maybe has changed in your work since then?

MJ: Yeah. I mean, honestly when I started that PhD it was just this kind of idea of psychology, of like you can ask questions about people and get answers, you know in this kind of transparent kind of way really. Like, you ask people if they are lonely, and they can tell you. You know, there was no sort of, yeah it wasn't very phenomenological for example, it certainly wasn't very constructionist. It was when I came across those kinds of understandings that it really shifted things and I was much more about getting in deep at the lived experience, and also about the narratives that were available and how they impact people's ways of seeing the world and understanding themselves. So yeah, I wasn't really exposed to those ideas enough until that first teaching position.

Lois: So, that is more what kind of piqued your interest?

MJ: Yeah, I think. Yeah, I just didn't resonate with that sort of scientific empiricist kind of way. You know, I bought it until I was exposed to something different, but it just didn't really work for me in terms of my own experience. So, once I hit across feminist psychology, but also social constructionism, and narrative psychology, and phenomenological psychology, those made a lot more sense to me in terms of resonating with my way of understanding the world.

Lois: Yeah, absolutely. That makes sense. So, as you say, at what point then along that journey did you start thinking about feminism, and how did that come into it?

MJ: Yeah, well again probably quite different from a lot people's experiences, and maybe what people might assume about me, because you know I am known to be this queer feminist now, but I was very normative, and again personally that came from having learnt that I had to fit in in order to get any kind of belonging or acceptance. So, when I hit my degree, I was very much sort of gender normative, heteronormative, and you know feminism, yeah I honestly thought back then we had reached gender equality, like what is this all about? Somebody bought me Simone de Beauvoir when I was 18 and I never even read it (laughing). So, you know I was that psychology undergrad you know, and still through my PhD, and it was only, you know I am so grateful to Jonathan Elcock, because basically there was a psychology of gender course back then at Cheltenham & Gloucester when I started, and Jonathan wasn't comfortable running it alone, and wanted a co-tutor. I don't actual know where Jonathan's gender is now, mine is different to what it was then, but there was an idea that having two people of different genders running that course would have been a good idea (laughing) and so Jonathan encouraged me to teach that, and so you know suddenly I had to teach feminist psychology. So, I am just reading it, you know over the summer, like going in in September to teach it, and it was like absolutely mind-blowing, you know just learning all about gender and how it works, and suddenly I'm a very newby feminist going like, "Woah," like I'm suddenly seeing the world really differently. So, that would have been right after my PhD, so early 20s, and I didn't really look back from that. After that it was feminist psychology and feminism much more broadly that really influenced me, and then increasingly queer thinking as well.

Lois: Yeah, that's so interesting, because I suppose that is fairly late on in the journey perhaps in terms of the PhD?

MJ: Yeah, and I feel like it is helpful for me in a lot of ways with my work that I had that very normative period, so I really have a sense of how painful normativity can be, I think. You know, some people who have always been radical, or feminist, or queer, or all those things, it may be hard to know what it is actually like to live in those quite normative worlds and relationships and ways of being. And I feel like you know, a lot of my work is driven to say, you know normativity is bad for everyone, and I think that comes from that kind of lived experience. And also, if I am talking to people who are just again not radical, not political, if I'm training a therapist for example, or talking to everyday folk with my books, again hopefully I have a bit more of that sense of how to be heard by that audience even when you are saying those kinds of things, and how difficult it can be to hear when you are so much in those cultures and systems, and are quite threatened maybe by anything that is questioning of them.

[0:09:53

Lois: Yeah, that's such an interesting point. I kind of know how that feels a little bit, yeah. That is so interesting. So, that is really how kind of your work and feminism came together a little bit, and so yeah is that kind of when your feminist identity kind of grew at the same time then, do you think, kind of alongside your work?

MJ: Yeah. So, I was at Cheltenham & Gloucester for a bit, which now I think is classed as a university, and then at Worcester, and it was through that time that I became more and more identified as a feminist. It was sort of towards the end of that time, so my later 20s, that I became much more involved in activist communities, and that was particularly the bisexual community, polyamorous, you know non-monogamous community, and kink community, and it was when I hit those scenes I was actually off and going in and doing workshops around feminism and bisexuality, or feminism and kink. So, at that point that was a really strong identity, and it was very much about bringing those worlds together, like how can we do polyamory in a feminist way? Or what are the intersections between feminism and bisexuality?

Lois: Yeah, that's so interesting, and I suppose as you are talking about kind of work developing, as well as kind of your experience of that more normative stuff as well, how do you think your work was kind of … what was the reaction of maybe like the other people in your workplaces and so on, to that kind of work?

MJ: Really different, depending on where I was at, because I moved around a lot. I then went to London, but I worked in completely different places in London, and then eventually fetched up at the Open University. I think psychology departments are just so different, so that experience I had in Cheltenham was really unusual. You know, I hadn't realised how unusual it was to have a department that was so critical, you know that was what they were teaching in psych when I went, was the history of psychology, and all the racism of IQ testing, and you know sort of problems with, you know. And then of course you go to a lot of other places, and actually most departments I think in the UK are largely quantitative. Often you are the only qualitative, the only social constructionist, and it is wild because you have to do like social constructionism 101 or explain why feminism is legitimate at the start of every slideshow, like if you are doing a presentation about your research to the rest of the department. Different places had a really different vibe, and really different in terms of pressure. You know, I was so lucky to start at two really little colleges, you know neither of them were actually universities when I was there, and you were just so free to just be interdisciplinary. I was teaching media studies at Worcester alongside a historian and a sociologist. They were just such great places to support whatever I was doing, and let me do my slightly strange kind of work. And then when I ended up at the bigger London institutions there was much more like pressure to be, it was the RAE [Research assessment exercise] back then, you know to be REF-able [Research Excellence Framework] or whatever, and you know to get funding and things, and it just felt like by then my research did feel kind of weird and outsidery, although again there were some great critical psychologists and applied psychologists at those places too, but it was a bit more minority and a bit more mainstream psych. And then again, once I was at OU, different ballgame again because it was obviously really feminist psychologist kind of background in that department, so I just think it so

depends, and people perhaps wouldn't know that, so it is really wise for junior academics to be aware of those kind of differences and maybe go to places that are explicitly critical, otherwise you do end up having a bit of a hard time.

Lois: Yeah, I totally agree with that. I think that is a really good point. Yeah, and so kind of on your journey then did you have any mentors within all that? I think you mentioned your supervisor and stuff, but yeah anyone key that you…?

MJ: Yeah. It was a tough one, it was quite a sadness for me because, yeah not until quite late in the day really. Like colleagues, absolutely, like some of the ones I have mentioned. But I think, you know gender really played into it because I do think a lot of the older male staff did used to focus on male students, you know partly because of sexism, partly because of you know it being tricky, you know gender dynamics or whatever. So, there was a real feeling like it was hard to get mentors. And then the kind of things that I was studying, you know a lot of the feminist psychologists at that point who were older and who studied sexualities and relationships were kind of lesbian feminist psychologists who sometimes weren't so great around bisexuality, around kink, polyamory. So, you know it was quite hard, and sad as well because I think if I had gone a bit more outside of my disciplines, you know if I had gone more into sociology, of course there was you know loads of stuff going on. That was partly why I ended up at South Bank University actually, because Jeffrey Weeks was there and there was a lot more going on. But again, that was a lot in sociology, and there is these departmental divisions that are so sad because you know it really is quite hard to teach, if you are in a bigger institution, across disciplines, you know that just wasn't happening. If you were in psychology, you were teaching psychology and researching with fellow psychologists, and I think the REF still makes it quite difficult to do interdisciplinary work which was always a bugbear of mine because I was like if I am going to understand gender and sexuality, I need to know about the history, the sociology, the psychology, the biology, you know the stuff in English lit, the stuff in philosophy, it needs to be an interdisciplinary study and I am being quite stuck in psychology. So, it really wasn't until I came to London around the age of 30, and that's when I joined what is now the Psychology of Sexualities Section, but it was called the Lesbian and Gay Section back then (laughing). Yeah, back then it was Peter Hegarty was the Chair, then there was Liz Peel and Victoria Clarke on the committee, and then Darren Langdridge. They were all really important to me, but Darren was the one who was into kink and non-monogamous research as well, so we ended up writing a couple of books together, and I think he is probably the person that I learnt the most from in terms of like learning how to edit books, learning how to write academic papers, that kind of thing, which was all a bit alien to me. And Liz and Victoria very gently guided me through a process of writing a chapter for one of their books that I wrote a kind of polemic and then they were like, "Could you write it as a kind of researched psychology chapter instead?" So, those guys were really important, but really the first I'd say mentor in that classic way was Ros Gill, and that was even mid 30s I think, where I feel like you now Ros is someone I have learnt so much from personally and professionally, who brings a kind of feminist ethics of care into everything she does, and who was interdisciplinary and intersectional. You know, yeah Ros was my main mentor I think, in terms of feminist psychology.

[0:17:45]

Lois: Yeah, as you say that is quite late into the journey, I suppose. So, still having mentors throughout that?

MJ: Yeah. Nowadays as well, I would say a lot of the people I learnt the most from are people who are junior to me. You know, I was thinking, "Who do I really learn most from in terms of process and content?" And it is mostly like trans-feminist researchers like Ben Vincent, Ruth Pearce, Stephanie Davis, H Howitt, who are all like pretty junior. You know, some of them were just still doing PhD's or just out of them, so again there is something about questioning the mentor/mentee, you know sort of the elder/ junior. You know, I really like to be learning from the people who have come before, but also the people who are coming after who often have the much more radical ideas or are familiar with theories that I haven't been, and introduced me to those.

Lois: Yeah, that's so interesting. Yeah, it's interesting that relationship, and I think it is really nice when it can be kind of both ways almost. Yeah, definitely. Okay, so I suppose in the same vein then, do you kind of play a role as a mentor yourself, and kind of how important do you feel that is?

MJ: It is really important to me. Yeah, so I am actually a writing mentor now. Like, because I am a fulltime writer, the self-employed work I do, I do the odd bit of training and sort of talks, but the main thing I do is mentoring people with their writing, and that's now very rarely academics. I am up for mentoring the odd academic who is trying to get their stuff out to a more general audience, or do like zines and creative stuff, but mostly it is therapists and activists that I am working with. But I have always really enjoyed my relationships with PhD students along the way, so yeah I think mentorships are a pretty big thing for me. I would always want to be doing it in one way or another.

[0:20:02]

Lois: Yeah, absolutely. And so, I suppose do you feel that mentorship is particularly important in kind of the field that you are in and the work that you do more than others, or…?

MJ: Yeah, I suppose what I really like is being somebody that people can come to, you know who are more junior. You know, I do a lot of much more informal mentorship I suppose, particularly in kind of trans and queer community, but yeah people who are thinking about an academic career, and I have also mentored a couple of people who wanted to get out of an academic career because they know that I have done it (laughing). You know, I have mentored people a bit around their gender journeys, you know during particular big moments for them. You know, therapists… yeah, I just rather like that informal mentoring, or really like now I am a writer, writing endorsements for people's books, you know and helping them get them out there. Or networking people, I love. You know, when someone comes to me and says, "Can you do this?" and it's like, "Well, I can't, but, oh my God, have I got the perfect person for you". You know, so that kind of role, you know that you might think of mentorship or being an older, a networker, yeah that really appeals. It really feels like such a valuable part of what I do and brings me a lot of joy.

Lois: Absolutely, that is so important. Yeah, so I suppose we touched a bit on kind of your work and your journey. I was wondering if you had kind of a particular accomplishment or something that you are really proud of that you would like to talk about?

MJ: Yeah, I think I have picked two things for this that are a decade apart, and they are two books, but they are a bit more than just books in a way. So, ten years ago I published 'Rewriting the Rules' which was my first self-help style book, although I called it an anti-self-help book because it is very much a social constructionist kind of take on you know, this is why the cultural norms around relationships are so bad for us, and this is how we might relate differently to relationships. And then I have just finished a book called '*Trauma: A Graphic Guide to Mental Health*[1]' which is going to be one of my comic books illustrated by Jules Scheele on madness and mental health. The first one, Rewriting the Rules, it took me ten years to write that, and I was studying relationships from every different angle and you know living them myself very much, trying lots of different relationship styles and having a lot of pain as well as some pleasure mixed in, and so it was a really hard personal journey, you know the relationships had been super painful for me in all sorts of ways and I really wanted to write a book that helped people to navigate them differently and help them to understand how the cultural norms are really restrictive and often make our relationships very painful because of the kind of expectations and pressures we put on them. And then the *Trauma: A Graphic Guide to Mental Health* similarly, it is more of the journey that I am proud of, you know because I went self-employed three years ago, and an awful lot of really tough stuff has happened in my life, I have been through a real kind of, what would probably be labelled as, PTSD in the last two or three years, and I have read, you know I already was pretty immersed in mental health, but I have read a lot of trauma literatures and the sort of embodiment literatures, and this book is like me weaving together like everything I know of all these different places about mental health, but also really through my own lived experience of what has actually worked for me in terms of understandings and practices. So, it feels like the courageous journey, you know really in both cases was me being up for looking at this quite really painful and complicated stuff, and then the fact it is has got this outcome that could connect with others and could be helpful to them on their journeys, that is what I find like deeply meaningful. You know, it should be enough that you have come through these things yourself, it is

[1] At the time of recording, this book was going to be called '*Mad: A Graphic Guide*'. The publishing of the book has been delayed due to editor illness.

enough, you know to do that, but it does mean a lot that I can say to myself, "Well, yes it was really painful, but actually now this person is having a slightly easier time of it," or they have managed to access these really helpful ideas or practices a bit easier than I had it. I guess that is really always been what is most immersed in me like, "This is so fucking hard. Could I make it slightly easier for the next person coming along?"

Lois: Absolutely. That is so lovely, and yeah just kind of passing on, again kind of around that mentorship kind of thing isn't it, about passing along knowledge and experience for the next person. Yeah, that's really interesting. Yeah lovely, and so I suppose as you were kind of talking about that you had exited academia now, how did you find that process, and has that changed your perspective on psychology and feminism at all?

[0:25:27]

MJ: Oh, good question, yeah. I think … I mean, I have seen a lot about academia that I think is you know pretty toxic, and it has been easier to see it since leaving, and I have also noticed how some of those systems really operated through me and how long it took to detox from them in a way. The way I was treating myself as a self-employed person for the first year was similar to how I used to be treated and treat myself. You know, it is not specific to academia, a lot of that is just about any organisation under capitalism. Some of it is you know about academia, like it has really opened my eyes to, yeah just assumptions behind research and what kind of knowledge are valued, and what kind of practices are done, and what we think of as ethics, like with ethics committees and stuff that are often really about legally covering people's backs, but they are not really about what I think of as ethics or feminist ethics of care, you know?

Lois: Yeah, absolutely.

MJ: And then, the big thing is the last few years, you know trans people like me have been living through this really really vexed time, you know particularly in feminism, but also everywhere, around how trans people are viewed and treated, so that necessarily has an impact on my relationship with feminism. You know, I am absolutely a feminist and I am in a feminism that has these really difficult rifts, which I have kind of always been familiar with, because obviously studying things like kink and bi, you know, sort of coming in after the sex wars, but they were still very much in place, and finding myself positioned on that sex positive side of a polarisation which is actually not, you know I was often all about questioning that binary of those kind of polarisations, and you know still am. But it becomes very binary and very polarised as we have seen with the trans stuff. So yeah, I have a complicated relationship with both academia and feminism yeah, and psychology specifically (laughing).

Lois: Yeah, that's very interesting, and I suppose you know just acknowledging those differences within feminism itself as well is important?

MJ: Yeah.

Lois: Brilliant, okay so I have asked you that question already. So, yeah you mentioned kind of that you were really interested in psychotherapy and that you had kind of maybe changed tack a little bit towards that during your kind of journey. How do you think your feminism kind of influenced that side of your work?

MJ: Yeah, big time. Yeah, again you come across these tensions because the psychotherapy world is just not very feminist or very queer, so that has been a huge part of my sort of activism and engagement in the last decade, has been about bringing psychotherapy together with you know queerness and intersectional feminism. But I did train existentially in existential psychotherapy, so I found my way to Simone de Beauvoir after all those years, having got it for my 18th birthday and not read it.

Lois: Blowing the dust off (laughing).

MJ: Yeah, it was like, “Woah, what’s this book?” Because yeah, because the existential psychotherapy training was largely you know white man based, and I was like, “But there is a woman, let’s read her,” and I found her amazing actually. I still think Simone de Beauvoir has so much to tell us, so I did my sort of dissertation or whatever for that MA around Simone de Beauvoir. Yeah, like I say, really a lot of the work since then has been about trying to bring gender, and sexuality, and race, and disability, and all of the intersections into therapy trainings, you know as more than an add-on. You know, some of them don’t cover those things at all, some of them cover them in you know half day extras. It is again, we need to like decolonise the curriculum, we need to think about the knowledges that are being taught as very similar to the psychology world in that way.

[0:29:55]

Lois: Okay, yes. Yeah, and as you were talking there about kind of your activism then, I feel like that is a really important part of your work during academia and also outside of academia. So, can you tell me a bit more about that and kind of what kind of activism you get involved with?

MJ: Yeah, so as I say like those early days around the ages of the late 20s / early 30s it was, yeah the bisexual activism, and that is really where it was kind of really overlapping with kink and BDSM, and with non-monogamism, polyamory, so all of those ... and it was sort of, the way I was looking at it was, these are these ways of doing sexuality, gender, and relationships differently that seem to be really onto something. And again, always for me asking like what can we learn from the margins? What is happening here that everyone could learn from? And sort of a fresh station which I still have, that you know there is a sense that LGBT stuff is aimed at an LGBT audience, or you know polyamory stuff is aimed at polyamorous … and I am like, “No, it is about how the whole way of doing sexuality, gender, and relationships is really messed up in this culture, and let’s look to the people who are doing it differently”. Not that everyone should be kinky, or polyamorous, or bisexual, but that these ask the right questions, you know that kind of everyone could be usefully asking. And then yeah, the activism, I guess once I was in that Psychology of Sexuality Section I did a lot of activism via them which was about coming up with guidelines around gender and sexual relationship diversity for psychologists who are practitioners, and later I wrote some similar resource for the BACP, which is the Counselling and Psychotherapy Organisation, and doing a lot of training to improve awareness and good practice for therapists. Yeah, nowadays I guess I am much more like intersectional feminism kind of informed, so I just kind of see all of the movements really as completely interconnected and we have to be, sort of, doing activism for like abolition and transformative justice, and climate justice, and disability justice, economic justice, and decolonising, and questioning around borders and property. You know, it feels to me that those are absolutely interconnected, and again we can't really do one without doing all of them, although some of us are going to obviously focus more on this bit or that bit. So, I think yeah, that is broadly my field, you know trying to bring all that together in my writing and where I can. You know, trying to do that kind of activism, and you know involve myself in it.

Lois: Yeah, that is so interesting. And I suppose, do you feel like it is important, that kind of academia in itself is more involved with activism perhaps than it is?

MJ: Yeah, it’s an interesting one, isn’t it? It is not for everyone. You know, sometimes I think we need different people to have different focuses. You know, I was thinking about Judith Butler, you know we need Judith Butler in the world. You know, those ideas around gender are most helpful, or some of the most helpful ones we’ve got. It is not so true these days, because Judith Butler is doing much more kind of activism, but back in the day when it was like really theoretical books, it was like … yeah, we need people doing really theoretical books, but then we need people who are then translating those you know maybe for students, and then you need people like me who are able to make the comic book version. You know, you need the people who are doing much more activism like out on the streets in terms of protests based on some of these ideas. So, kind of like, I don’t think people should have to be all things, so I don’t think like every academic should have to be public facing, for example I think that is really problematic that everyone is expected to be on social media and doing all of this if it is not their bag, just leave them alone (laughing). Similarly, like it may be more about forming other people who then do the more grassroots activism. But I do think you know, academics should be very aware of the impact of what they are doing, and I think there is a lot to be thought about in terms of studying the other of whatever kind. And I think that some of these trans

conversations recently have only just touched the tip of the iceberg of that, but you know academia was entrenched in kind of colonialists and eugenics kind of projects early days, and we still have that flavour of you know people studying difference and pathologizing it, and coming up with all kinds of theories you know that aren't about the lived experience of the people concerned. So yeah, I would like to see a lot more thought about that in academia.

[0:35:05]

Lois: Yeah, that's a really interesting point. And how have you found the kind of more public facing part of your work then?

MJ: That wasn't on the question list (laughing).

Lois: No, well we don't have to touch on it if you don't want to (laughing).

MJ: I'm happy to, I've talked about it quite a lot. Yes, it has not been entirely comfortable, let's put it that way (laughing). Yeah, one of my earliest experiences, you know once I started doing this kind of research on bisexuality, and polyamory, and kink, was I went to a BPS conference, and I was running the psychology sexualities kind of thread I guess of that huge kind of BPS conference, and some of the journalists there got wind of my stuff on polyamory, and I had no idea that they would be that interested, so I just went naively in and talked to like these 20 journalists about my paper, you know thinking it would be like at the end of the newspaper, a little cut-out about the conference, tiny little bit about my research. And instead it was like page two and three of The Sun and The Times, big picture of me, like headlines about my personal life. Yeah, it is funny in retrospect, but it was really, really hard, really traumatising in fact. And so, yeah that is why I am like, I am really passionate about being public in the sense of you know writing for a public audience. You know, I have done podcasts, you know I have got a website and things like that, but I am also really aware of how painful it is and how so many feminist academic's stuff gets taken in really problematic ways by the media, and then often their institutions blame them. You know, so they have got a double trauma of like their being misrepresented all over the place because journalists in the main do not care, they only care about a story and they are going to weave it into the story they want to tell, and they are not going to tell the real research, and then sometimes very junior feminist academics are then really unsupported by their institutions because often institutions don't really care about them as a person, they just care about their reputation. So, that is a whole area that just needs a lot of work, I think.

Lois: Yeah, there is quite like a big tension there, I think. Yeah, okay that's really interesting, thank you. So, we'll move on to kind of talk a bit more about POWES [Psychology of Women and Equalities Section of the British Psychological Society] then. What has kind of been your involvement with POWES?

MJ: Yeah, I mean I could have got involved a lot earlier actually, but as I say who I found when I got to London was the Psychology of Sexualities Section, and I kind of stayed there. So, I think maybe we had some joint stuff, perhaps even at that conference that I was just talking about, I think there were some joint things going on. There was always a sense that we were quite aligned, I think. You know, there certainly wasn't that sense of like there was a rift or anything, you know there was a lot of lesbian feminist stuff going on in the Psychology of Sexualities Section and there was certainly a sense of welcome, you know from POWES. I can't even remember who it was back then, but yeah there was overlap right. For me, I didn't really find my way towards it until I started at the Open University which was in about 2009, and I guess that department, the psychology department there had you know this real history of people like Margaret Wetherell, and Wendy Hollway, and Wendy Stainton Rogers, and people who had worked there. So, you know POWES still had a lot of … there were groups of us who would go to POWES, I think first or second year I was there, like you know Rose Capdevila and people like that, Gail Lewis, Lisa Lazard, you know like said, "Come along to POWES," and so I did.

Lois: Lovely. So, did that become kind of the common conference that you would go to?

MJ: Yeah, that was my regular conference, I guess. Even up until the pandemic, I think I went most years. Yeah, it just felt kinder than any other conference I have ever been to. You know, you felt just

really welcomed, you know really at home. Yeah, I think it was just the feel of it. You know, the content was great, you know obviously learning often really interesting papers, but it was the vibe, you know. I think something about staying together at, what's it called?

[0:40:01]

Lois: Cumberland Lodge?

MJ: Cumberland Lodge, yeah. That just lovely atmosphere, and there would always be like a comedian one night, and an 80s discos. The night I DJ'd the 80s disco I realised I had found my true calling in life. And I have not got to do it since, but I am the best 80s DJ you can possibly imagine. Like, someone had brought a playlist of all 80s music, but they were just playing it through, and it wasn't working, like no-one was on the dancefloor, and I was like, "Let me get up. Since they are all dancing to this song, I know exactly the song to play next". I just have a very, very good knowledge of 80s music and what will follow nicely (laughing). So yeah, I just want to come back so I can do that again to be honest.

Lois: Yeah, that's something to put on the CV (laughing).

MJ: It was one of the high points of my life. Yeah, just amazing people. I think for me as well, because I have got a northern background and a mixed class background, like coming across you know working class and northern feminist psychologists like Bridgette Rickett, you know was just really important to me. it was like finding a way to kind of bring those things together about myself which I hadn't really come across so much elsewhere. So yeah, it was really good for me to make that contact with POWES, and you know it is a lot of the POWES people who have stayed in touch since, you know and found ways to bring me in to do other stuff. Yeah, and feminist academics in general actually, the feminist sociologists and feminist psychologists who have really invited me back into academia, to bring some of the stuff I do now, like zine-making workshops, and self-care workshops and stuff. That meant the world to me, you know that I am not just like gone from that world, but people are still inviting me back and wanting to hear the things I have been doing since.

Lois: Yeah, definitely. I suppose it is that idea of like, yeah people outside of academia are also doing really important work that needs to be kind of shared as well at the same time.

MJ: Yeah.

Lois: Yeah, so in terms of, do you think you are involved with any other feminist organisations that are kind of comparable to POWES in any way?

MJ: Well, I suppose a really interesting one I was thinking about is there is a really quite new organisation called the Feminist Gender Equality Network, that has been set up. Sally Hines is one of the people behind it, and it is sort of explicitly kind of trans-inclusive and intersectional network for countering sexism and gender-based injustice. It is worth looking at their website for the whole list of things that they do. And that is quite an interesting comparison point for POWES I think, but it differs obviously that it is cross-sector, so it is not even just academics, and it is interdisciplinary, and of course POWES can't really do those things. But I think the way it is very explicitly intersectional and also centring of diverse genders, you know those things I think POWES is constantly thinking about, "How can we be intersectional, and how can we get a sense of diverse genders?" And those are, you know, tricky issues in any feminist organisation at the moment, but that would be the one I would point to that I think is doing it pretty well.

Lois: Yeah, that's interesting. Do you have any kind of opinion on how POWES is doing on those kind of issues?

MJ: I haven't been so involved you know since the pandemic really, and since leaving academia, so I really don't want to speak to how it is these days, but I think it is that … I'd say it is that, what POWES does so well is that kindness, and supportiveness, and cooperation, and you are really in a kind of collective care kind of environment. While I was involved, I think what was done less well, but then I am not sure anywhere is doing it very well, is having the more difficult conversations about

who does come here, are we making a venue, is the organisational team diverse, are we making a space in which everyone feels comfortable? And if we are not, can we have those conversations, and how can we have those conversations in a way that is both kind and gets things done? And it is really, really hard, you know it is really, really hard to have those conversations. But I think you know I would say those are happening sometimes but are also not happening always when they needed to.

[0:44:46]

Lois: Yeah, that makes sense. Okay, and do you think, I suppose you have touched on it a little bit in terms of maybe meeting Bridgette Rickett and thinking more about class and stuff. So, do you think POWES has kind of impacted on your work?

MJ: Oh hugely, yeah. Absolutely so many of the things I have learnt about have been through there. Yeah, and I do think, I think both actually, POWES interestingly, and the Psychology of Sexualities Section have done pretty well on class. You know, not so well on race, but class, it has been really nice to see so many working-class academics. And yeah, I have learnt a lot from people who are exploring those intersections of gender, sexualities, and class, you know it is in their work and it is also coming from their kind of lived experience as well.

Lois: Yeah, that's important having those … I think, yeah POWES maybe is a place where those conversations of kind of lived experience, are happening?

MJ: Yeah, definitely. Yeah, again that's a good thing about it, you know that it is not just a theory, like people are usually researching stuff they are passionate about, and it does relate to their lived experience as well, and there is no kind of thinking, no kind of psychology objectivity of you know how we should be doing that. It is sort of seen as a positive.

Lois: Yeah absolutely, which is different to some kind of more mainstream psychology sections or stuff like that.

MJ: Yeah.

Lois: So, do you think that POWES has kind of developed over the years in any way that you have seen?

MJ: Yeah, well I suppose the addition of the E was something that was part of some of those conversations, and I saw that coming. I was sort of disappointed because I think really my issue was why can we not join together the Psychology of Sexuality and the Gender Psychology, as I see it, Section It feels strange to me, and it feels strange that the T is sort of in Psychology of Sexuality rather than the gender one, and you know for me I just don't see gender and sexuality as really separable. You know, I feel like under that kind of heteronormative matrix that Judith Butler talks about, it is like we are positioned as either male or female, and as attracted to either males or females, and sexuality is seen more about the gender of attraction. So, I just don't see those things as being something that you can usefully tease apart as two different sections. And arguably you can't tease them apart either from race, or class, or disability, or any of the other things. So, maybe what I want is an Intersectional Psychology Section (laughing).

Lois: Yeah.

MJ: So, yeah certainly, I just thought there would be, you know why not bring these two together? They are both very small sections, they don't have a lot of power, but together they maybe could have, and there is so much overlap anyway between the people involved, or at least there was back in my day. So, it was a little bit disappointing to me that POWES went down the just adding the E, rather than becoming yeah, Psychology of Sexuality and Gender was sort of what my vision would have been.

Lois: Yeah, that is something quite different, I suppose. That is really interesting.

[0:48:17]

MJ: Yeah, I can see where the worry about losing something would come from though, because it is such a beautiful, caring, kind ethos you know, and when people who meet every year or twice a year, going on a retreat sometimes, things like that, and it is like you know mixing it up could mean that you lose some of that team. And there is a value to having small really supportive spaces especially for, I know what my experience was like coming in and feeling so welcome and at home there when I haven't felt that in a lot of places over my life, and for younger academics coming in to have that experience. So yeah, you don't want to monkey with things too much as well, I get that.

Lois: Yeah, and I suppose there is a bit of tension between kind of, yeah it being small and welcoming, and as well having power within the kind of institution of BPS [British Psychological Society], there's a bit of a…?

MJ: Yeah.

Lois: But yeah, so this is quite a broad question, but do you think POWES will develop differently in the future, or should it in any way, do you think?

MJ: Yeah, I think just thinking a lot about how to have the more difficult conversations, I suppose. I would really like to see that. I suppose this is more internal, yeah so internal for POWES I think, you know how do we have the difficult conversations and how do we make sure that we are fully intersectional, and how do we do that practically in terms of memberships, and in terms of venues, and in terms of you know maybe diversity of things that we put on and that kind of stuff? I think in terms of outward facing to psychology, you know again I would like to see a lot more focus on questioning things like the REF, questioning peer review, which I think is a very bullying system in a lot of ways, you know not coming from an ethics of care. So, yeah questioning a lot of academic systems, and really questioning which knowledges are valued, you know and how much it is dominated by sort of white male thinkers in psychology, and you know why there is that huge bias in terms of things, and also how research is done and how research is valued. I would really like to think about the process more as well, and maybe this is in terms of the processes for who we communicate with each other, but also how we communicate with students and participants, is that there is so much about the sort of intellectual knowledge and so little about sort of embodied and emotional wisdom. And I have been reading a lot of someone called Beth Berila who is talking about contemplative pedagogy and how, if we are going to teach people or talk to people about really confronting subjects, you know like sexism, like climate change, and like injustice, we need to help them you know on an embodied level, handle it. You know, we don't have the emotional skills. We are not teaching the emotional skills, so you know people can say, "Oh yeah no I get it," or they just get really defensive. But they don't know how to sit with the pain of realising for example that they are a survivor because what they have just read or what they have just been taught has revealed that, or realising they are a perpetrator, or realising they are part of a system of oppression that is really violent, or realising stuff that is going on in the world that they had no idea about. So psych, I think should be a 50/50 balance of teaching intellectual stuff and teaching the embodied practices we need in order to handle that. And you know, if you think about how conferences are structured, or how teaching is done, or how research papers are put across, it does nothing. There is debates about trigger warnings, you know nobody is putting a content note on their paper, you know nobody is having their opportunities to slow down and tune into their body. Like conferences, it is just paper after paper after paper, even really nice ones like POWES. So yeah, I would just love to see a lot more attention go to that, which again so much of that is coming out of intersectional feminism, and there is so much wisdom we could be drawing on, and the sort of therapy world could be helpful there to draw on as well, I would say.

Lois: Yeah, it sounds like really interesting work. Yeah, so I suppose it is more about kind of critiquing the traditional ways of doing things, particularly within academia.

MJ: Yeah. They were invented in a particular context, and we have just stayed with them, or we have tweaked them, and you know that context was one of colonialism, eugenics. You know, it was like, women didn't have the vote. You know, why have we stuck with something that was invented at such a time? You know, I think it requires a lot more than tweaking, you know it really does require

dismantling and starting from scratch with something different. I am not saying that POWES is going to be able to do that (laughing), but at least it could be maybe a bit more vocal in raising some of these, or you know in offering alternatives and offering to train people in those alternatives.

[0:53:23]

Lois: Yeah, absolutely. Yeah, that's really interesting, lovely. So, I suppose moving onto feminism and psychology more broadly, what kind of impact do you think feminists have had on psychology as a discipline?

MJ: I mean, I don't know. It is a while since I have read the psychologist but like what I did, like not enough, still same old kind of conversations happening. But yeah, I mean obviously there has been a huge impact in justice. I guess I see feminist psychologists as so central in critical psychology, you know in terms of creating this alternative psychology, you know, which sees people very much as relational beings in a social context you know that they are massively embedded in, and also that people are embodied, and feminism has been so much about bringing in understandings about embodiment and affectivity, and doing research differently in terms of sort of ethics of care, qualitative research, you know valuing lived experience. So yeah, it is both, isn't it? It is like a huge impact in terms of there is even this alternative whole way of doing things and whole way of thinking about things that largely comes from feminists, and very small impact in terms of you know, this mainstream psychology still going about doing its nonsense and still being the thing that gets reported mostly in the press, sort of basic behavioural kind of stuff often.

Lois: Yeah, absolutely. Yeah, and I suppose, do you have any kind of key ideas for what remains to be accomplished? I suppose we have touched on that in terms of kind of re-doing those traditional systems.

MJ: Yeah, I think so, and I think you know for all of us really, we have got to turn the attention to the massive ones that really impact us. You know climate crisis, you know continued injustice is certainly getting bigger, polarisation, human conflicts, and I think feminist psychology has some really important stuff to say about all of those. Yeah, that is where I would be sort of facing mostly.

Lois: Yeah, that makes sense. So, my last question is, what advice would you give to kind of younger or more junior kind of feminists or activists entering psychology now?

MJ: I have written, 'The system is broken, not you,' (laughing), so if you come into psychology as a feminist or activist of some kind and you experience a great deal of pain and suffering, then please don't individualise it because what has happened is you have realised that there is a really toxic system in place in academia and psychology. Yeah, I think you know Sara Ahmed stuff is so good on this about how easy it is to turn those tensions that you will have in against yourself, and actually yeah, you are not mad, or you are mad, but in the best way, because you are seeing what is broken and what is problematic here, and that it is really wise if you counter-cultivate like communities, like joining POWES or the Psychology of Sexualities Section, or you know more radical psychology networks, whoever you need you know to have a community where you can go and say, "This is happening," and everyone can say, "Yeah, that is a systemic and structural problem," and help you survive it. Also that there is a spectrum of possibilities between being an academic for life as a full time career, and not being, and so thinking about that as a spectrum and whether you can be not purely reliant on academia, but have other strings to your bow, or work across academia and other areas, especially because you know, I suppose being some kind of an insider and outsider could be a more bearable place to be than being completely inside a system that is quite toxic. And also, you can feel a bit more like you have got a safety net as well, that there are other things you could do, you know if for example you did have a tough experience of you know press reporting your stuff, or social media, which is a thing that happens.

Lois: Yeah, and I suppose in that same vein, focusing on the topic that you are passionate about rather than the discipline and the system.

[0:58:29]

MJ: Oh yeah, just following what lights you up. You know, read Audre Lorde - she's all on what really lights you up - there will be encouragement to, you know, just do what counts. You know, what gets the funding, what gets the highest scores on the REF, and I would say from my perspective, there is a real danger in going down those roads. You have got one life you know, and you want to do what really lights you up. And that is going to be what connects with other people the most you know, as much as you can, recognising of course the material realities, it can be very difficult not to try and fit those boxes, but yeah finding your way with it, and again finding sort of microcultures of support who can help you navigate that.

Lois: Yeah, absolutely. Okay, lovely. So, is there anything else you think that we haven't covered that you would like to touch on?

MJ: No, I think that is great, yeah. Do you know, is there going to be another conference now that we are able to do these things? Where is that at?

Lois: Yeah, I think that the registration for it has opened I think now, I think for the POWES, yeah. And it is going to be in person, I believe.

MJ: Wow.

Lois: In person or hybrid, but definitely there is the ability to go in person.

MJ: Ah, that's great.

Lois: So yeah, but I am so looking forward to it.

MJ: Oh, I bet. How lovely.

Lois: Yeah, it will be really good. So, hopefully that will be … and we have got the writing retreats up and running again as well in April.

MJ: Oh, those have been so nice, yeah brilliant.

Lois: Those have been really good. But yeah, I think your graphic novels are really cool.

MJ: Thank you.

Lois: Such an interesting kind of way to talk about your work. That's really great.

MJ: Yeah, I love them.

Lois: Did you find it difficult kind of getting into that?

MJ: Well, it was just luck honestly. I had done a little presentation about queer for the University of Birmingham. I think it was maybe a therapy training, but they just wanted a one-off lecture on what does queer mean? So, I did them this little lecture, and they videoed it and put it on YouTube. I didn't think about it again for about five years or something, and then Icon Books got in touch with me and said they wanted someone to write an introduction, you know, to queer theory for their comic book introducing series, and because they had seen that and thought I talked accessibly about it, did I want to do it? And so it was just so lucky, like if that hadn't been there they would never have even known that that was really my thing. Yeah, and then of course it did incredibly well, far better than most other books that I have published, and again no-one had any idea that it would, and we have been able to do this whole series now. We are on the fourth one, and hopefully there will be more.

[01:01:44]

Lois: Yeah, that's really nice. It's a nice little series, as you say. How lovely. So, I suppose we will just cover some demographics first for the REF Board.

MJ: Yes.

Lois: So, could you state your gender please?

MJ: Yeah, I am non-binary trans.

Lois: Lovely. Place and date of birth?

MJ: Hull, and 23rd June 1974.

Lois: Lovely, and occupation?

MJ: Self-employed writer.
[End of Transcript]