



**Psychology's Feminist Voices Oral History Project
Interview with Rosalind Gill**

*Interviewed by Lois Donnelly over Zoom™
May 12, 2022*

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Psychology's Feminist Voices Oral History Project

Interview with Rosalind Gill

Interviewed by Lois Donnelly

Conducted over the Zoom online platform

May 12, 2022

Lois: I'm Lois Donnelly interviewing Professor Rosalind Gill on 12 May 2022 over Zoom and we're 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, so maybe a little bit in terms of kind of the trajectory of your career and the topics of your work?

Ros Gill: Yes, well firstly thank you so much for inviting me and it's a real pleasure and a privilege to be doing this interview, yeah, it's a real honour. And, yeah, I was born in Manchester in 1963 so I'm very old, I've just turned 59, and one of the sort of defining experiences for me that I think probably led to me getting interested in psychology and sociology was that I moved around a lot. I mean my parents just moved and moved and moved so I was constantly kind of displaced as a young person and two years was the longest that I spent in any school, so that kind of left its mark on me.

And the other thing that really is probably quite significant to my biography and my future work is that I came from a very left-wing family, so my parents were both very sort of active politically and, yeah, we were that kind of family that talked about politics and ideas all the time and that's obviously central to who I am.

So I was very involved in politics as I was growing up and it was the 80s as I sort of came of age so it was the period of Thatcher's Britain and, yeah, it was a period of the miner's strike, there was a lot of activism around, anti-apartheid movement at the time which I was really involved in, and also a lot of sort of anti-nuclear activism, both nuclear weapons and nuclear power. And that kind of was like my gateway into politics really was being heavily involved in the kind of anti-war movement and the anti-nuclear weapons.

And I went to Exeter University to do my first degree and I did a joint degree in sociology and psychology. And then I was very, very lucky when I was there to meet Professor Steve Reicher who was unknown then but has now in the last couple of years become this really important voice during the pandemic, you know, talking and advising the government and writing a lot of opinion pieces. Meeting him was really, really significant because he kind of had this idea that psychology could and should be political and that it shouldn't just be sitting on the sidelines and that we as researchers have a responsibility to use our voices and use our work to make positive social change.

So he was hugely important, he put me in touch with, and very much supported me to go and do a PhD, which I did with Michael Billig in Loughborough. And so I was part of the Discourse and Rhetoric Group and so that was kind of beginning of my career. And then I've been very interdisciplinary in what I've worked on so it's kind of cross-cutting with sociology, cultural studies, media studies, gender and sexuality studies, and obviously can say a lot more about any of those things.

Lois: Yeah, no, that's a great kind of, yeah, introduction. I suppose what is it like to work so interdisciplinary? Yeah, is that kind of quite a difficult thing to manage or... how do you find that?

Ros Gill: Well, it's really weird isn't it because it ends up being the only thing that you know, you know, the thing that you do is the thing that you know so you haven't really got anything to compare it with and I sometimes have had that experience of feeling quite envious of those people that seem to be able to kind of plough a really narrow field and it's a very, very specific topic and they work on it for years and they are the expert on that. Whereas I sort of feel that I'm at the absolute opposite of that, I'm kind of interested in absolutely everything and so, yeah, I'm always taking something from politics, something from cultural studies, something from queer theory, you know, I'm just sort of bringing so many disciplinary kind of perspectives but I like it.

[0:05:27]

Lois: Yeah, that's so interesting, it means that there's always kind of, yeah, something to draw on. Yeah, so what first attracted you then to psychology as a discipline, kind of why did you decide to go in that direction to university or psychology and sociology I suppose?

Ros Gill: I suppose from my kind of background I'd had that experience of always being displaced and never quite fitting in and always feeling like I was on the outside and never quite kind of like I'd just make friends and then move schools yet again and it was a, you know, really, really, profound thing to be just constantly moving all the time. And so I definitely kind of, yeah, had an interest in all those sorts of processes of inclusion and exclusion and how groups work and, yeah, lots of those kinds of things but also the interest in politics.

And I think a big question for me was kind of why is it that things that are sort of not beneficial to the very people that are involved in them continue for so long? And that could be at the level of a relationship, you know, kind of why is it that we stay in relationships that aren't working or, you know, why is it we stay with capitalism which is clearly not working for the vast majority of people in the world and yet you somehow remain trapped in its frameworks? So it's those sorts of questions that really got me interested in ideology.

And I think because I'd been kind of involved in activism I'd had a lot of experience of kind of like leafletting and demonstrating and speaking to people on the street and I encountered this like real resistance to change and I felt like there needs to be a psychological understanding to bring to why it is that people... and when I say people I mean all of us, I'm not trying to sort of push it out onto other people but why we get so stuck in things and find it so hard to change and move to something that could actually be so much better.

Lois: Yeah, yeah, that is very interesting, you're right, yeah. Okay, that's brilliant. So that kind of took you to psychology and sociology and then at which point maybe like in that journey did feminism come into it?

Ros Gill: Well, I think I was sort of... I was very lucky in my last year of school, I went to a Further Education college to do A Levels and I also did an art foundation course and I met two people that were my sociology lecturers then and they just sort of... I mean it was a different era, it was 1979 when I was 16 and they kind of felt like your sociological education should be about taking you on demonstrations and thinking about things that are happening in the world. So one of the very first things I got involved with through one of lecturers there, Lesley Smith, was going on the anti-abortion, well, you know, the pro-choice, the anti-abortion bills so resonance to the moment that we're living in right now, but going on those pro-choice demonstrations, so that was kind of my earliest engagement really with feminism.

And then very much kind of in parallel, so through the work that I was doing with like the campaign for nuclear disarmament, I was going to Greenham and I was kind of at Greenham Common and part of that anti-nuclear movement but also very much in my work I was coming across feminist ideas and, yeah, by the time I started my PhD I was definitely a feminist.

Lois: Yeah, that's really interesting. So did it kind of impact your work going into your PhD and in what ways?

Ros Gill: Yeah, I mean my PhD was about popular radio and it was about sort of radio stations like Radio 1 or commercial radio stations that, you know, most towns have like in London it's Capital Radio and it's kind of a radio that people used to talk about it as kind of like aural wallpaper, you know, it's like wallpaper for your ears, it's like it's there, it's in the background. No-one's really listening, you know, people might have it on when they're driving or it might be on in factories or just if someone's at home cleaning or whatever. But it hadn't really been sort of studied as a medium and I felt as if there were loads and loads of ideological messages that were in that radio kind of talk, that sort of DJ talk in between the songs. And that it was incredibly sexist, it was incredibly racist, it was kind of populist in what we understand today as a sort of, well, post truth populism.

I think all those sorts of ideas were already there in popular radio at that time so the PhD was very much a kind of feminist intervention that looked at that so it kind of critiqued the talk, but it also looked at who's working in radio so like why is it so white? Why is it so male dominated? And I did interviews in various different radio stations¹ and asked about the lack of women and that was really formative because it sort of got me to an understanding of just the thing that was really striking was that everyone I spoke to, the programme controllers were really kind of like keen to present themselves as very pro-women, very feminist, certainly not sexist.

And they kept on saying things like, "Well, there's certainly no sexism here" or "There's absolutely no racism here", doing all those sort of disclaimers and then they'd say, "But, you know, the audience just they want a man" or "Women's voices are wrong for radio" or "Yeah, women -just... they just don't apply, they just don't apply" and they came out with this sort of litany of kind of excuses/reasons. And it made me think about just how flexible sexism is, that sexism doesn't always come in this kind of obvious form. So like here were these guys being super positive about women, "Oh, we'd love to have a women on, that would be great" and stuff and yet actually, the effect of their discourse was to continue justifying not having any women, so, yeah.

[0:13:19]

Lois: Yeah. That's incredibly interesting, absolutely. So that was kind of the beginning of... oh, I suppose as you say, your identity as a feminist almost came out of that really early activism and then more into your work kind of a bit later.

Ros Gill: Yes, definitely.

Lois: How amazing. So, yeah, I suppose kind of switching gears a little bit, from a broad sense did you have kind of any... I think you've touched on maybe a few people but did you have any kind of key mentors throughout your journey and throughout your career I suppose?

Ros Gill: I didn't have any formal mentors at all, I've never had a mentor. Would have loved it. But I do have so many people to whom I am hugely, hugely grateful and I've mentioned a couple of them already but I guess in terms of sort of, yeah, mainly sort of women mentors I'd say Margaret Weatherall was really, really wonderful and supportive and academically brilliant kind of mentor. And she wasn't a mentor but just someone that I knew and was so supportive and read work and just talked with me. And you know when you're a PhD student you just really you just... well, I did anyway, I really kind of like I really wanted to be having those conversations, I didn't want to just go out partying, I really wanted to kind of like be talking and feeling I was doing something that mattered and connecting and having those intellectual conversations that go into the night and stuff. And just to be able to have a few people like that that were also up for that and kind of very kindly, you know, took me seriously enough to sort of involve in things, that was really great.

Intellectually I'd say Stuart Hall was just hugely important and obviously he's not a psychologist, he's a cultural studies person but his work was immensely important, Angela McRobbie and Janice Winship and then more kind of personally, when I went to work after my PhD I got a temporary contract at Loughborough initially and then I got another temporary contract at Brunel University.

¹ Ros would like to acknowledge the help she received in some of the interviews from Susie Reilly, who was an undergraduate student at the time.^[1]^[SEP]

And there I met Ann Phoenix who, you know, became a wonderful friend and also a wonderful sort of mentor informally. And I met M J Barker there as well, also became a friend and we've done so much wonderful work together and Stephanie Taylor and Rose Capdevila and Paul Stenner, yeah.

And then I think through POWES [Psychology of Women and Equalities Section of the British Psychological Society] I met so many inspiring people as well. I met Paula Reavey and Marcia Worrell and Wendy Stainton-Rogers and Nicola Gavey and Sue Jackson from Victoria and New Zealand and Virginia Brown, I met all of these just amazing people so that was something that I really kind of got through going to the Cumberland Lodge conferences.

[0:17:13]

Lois: Yeah. Oh brilliant, yeah, that's good to hear. So, yeah, that's how you crossed paths with them is kind of through POWES and through going to those conferences.

Ros Gill: Yeah.

Lois: Yeah, oh that's great. So I suppose that network, is that network of people kind of important to you and how does that like impact your work?

Ros Gill: I think they're all incredibly important to me and I would also say, I mean, there are lots more people that are also very important to me, but I just want to quickly mention Sarah Riley as well and Adrienne Evans because their work's been incredibly important and they're also friends and, yeah, just really, really supportive and important scholars so, yeah. Definitely I mean it's... oh, I don't want to be too emotional about this but it's like it's the antithesis of growing up because, you know, I didn't belong anywhere, I was constantly just up and moving on and I've sort of missed out on having that thing of having friends from childhood because I just wasn't anywhere long enough to have those friendships.

And I sort of feel like I've been lucky enough to make that in academia with just meeting these just incredible people, really, really incredible and that's been, yeah, a real privilege.²

Lois: Oh, that sounds... yeah, that sounds really important and kind of oh, yeah, has an impact on you and that's really interesting. Yeah, and I suppose the kind of network of people who are like-minded as well and like you can have, as you mentioned before, those conversations with and kind of really talk about things as well, is that important to you?

Ros Gill: So, so important, yeah, yeah like-minded people and the space that POWES offered at Cumberland Lodge is just absolutely incredible, I think that's such a vital space and that's been... you know, my involvement has been so minimal but just being to go to two or three of the conferences there has just been really transformative. And it's just that combination of just like-minded, brilliant, politically engaged, great fun, really friendly, you know, just everything about sitting together for meals and just sitting down next to somebody that you've never met and having those conversations just absolutely wonderful, it's been vital.

Lois: Yeah, yeah, that is such an important kind of space isn't it as you say to be in. And so, yeah, thinking more about POWES then, as you were saying is that kind of all your involvement with POWES was mainly going to the conferences? Have you been involved in any other ways?

Ros Gill: No, I haven't been involved in any other ways, yeah, it's just been the conferences, yeah.

Lois: But that was almost enough for you to kind of create that network and to feel like it was a space that you belonged in?

Ros Gill: Definitely, yeah, yeah.

² Ros has focussed on colleagues from Psychology here, but would like to emphasise that there are many other very significant friends and colleagues that she did not have time to mention.

Lois: That's really nice to hear.

Ros Gill: Yeah, and, no, I also just wanted to say something about Marcia, Marcia Worrell, because we've lost her and that's just such a huge loss and she was such a kind of big personality for creating that sense of community and, yeah, really want to acknowledge, yeah, how important and wonderful she was and what a huge loss she is to our community.

Lois: Absolutely, yeah, I totally agree, yeah, it's a very big loss indeed. Yeah, okay. So are there any kind of other feminist organisations then that you're involved with kind of similar to POWES or anything?

[0:21:47]

Ros Gill: Not exactly, but I would say there's two journals that I'm kind of... well, two or three journals that I feel really close to and one of them is Feminism and Psychology that just feels like again, such an important space. And, yeah, I mean it's just those journals that you kind of look at first like F&P is one of them and Feminist Media Studies for me is another one. And then there's another journal I look at a lot which is European Journal of Cultural Studies and I'd say they're all very much shaped by kind of feminist values and I just know that I'm going to open the pages of that journal and find really interesting work, so I think those journals have also been really vital spaces. I've been kind of on the editorial board of each in different ways over the years.

Lois: Right, yeah, okay. Oh, that's really interesting. So, yeah, how is that as kind of part of your career then being on those kind of editorial boards? How does that kind of impact your work and your career?

Ros Gill: Oh, it's hard to say but I mean it's all those review requests that just keep pinging in to your inbox and it's like, "Oh, no, I'm sure I just did this like yesterday" (laughter). I got one recently where I swear I kind of only gave comments and then it was major revisions and then it was back in my inbox a week later and I was thinking, how do they have the time? Yeah, but, no, it's really good, I mean it's lovely to be involved in that and I think it's just kind of a space to try to be as a feminist and as a kind of feminist orientated journal just to kind of have a different kind of ethics and way of engaging and, yeah, being supportive and maybe signing your reviews, all of those kinds of things I think are really important.

I mean I personally have had like at the beginning of my career I had a horrible rejection that I wrote about in an article, it just said something like 'What's the difference between this piece of work and journalism?' And it was just so kind of cutting and it was just like a one liner and it's like that was the first thing I ever submitted to a journal, it's an American journal, and, you know, we all know it's so hard and it's so hard for people at the start of their careers, it takes such a lot of effort and time in a context where you're already precarious and worried quite often. And then to submit something and get such a kind of cruel response is just brutal and I think it's just so great that a lot of journals now are having a more kind of feminist approach and hopefully trying to not have people having those kinds of experiences.

Lois: Yeah, yeah, that's really interesting. So I suppose that idea of kind of that the more feminist journals are quite different to the mainstream approach and what a lot of people have experienced as you say.

Ros Gill: Yeah, yes. Sometimes you know now a lot of journals they send you kind of like what all three reviewers have said and sometimes... you know, sometimes that's really depressing and you just think... I mean I saw one and it was something like 'put this back in your drawer and don't look at it again for a few years', I mean it was something really, really cutting. But mostly I think you just see... I mean I'm sometimes just absolutely impressed by how much people have written and how supportive and they'll put like hyperlinks to things, 'Oh you might like to look at this' and, you know, they'll actually put the link to the publication in there. I just think gosh, it's really generative and generous to do that.

Lois: Absolutely, yeah, that is really nice, that's the nicest kind of review that you could have I think. Yeah, okay. So I suppose still on the kind of topic of... I want to go back to your work in more detail in a minute but just still on the topic of feminist organisations, you said that you have always really been into kind of activism and stuff, so what is your involvement with feminist activism like and kind of what does that involve?

Ros Gill: Yeah, I mean very little at the moment to be perfectly honest. Over the years it's been extensive, I mean especially when I was younger in kind of as I've already mentioned like the anti-nuclear movement and anti-apartheid and anti-racist politics and I was involved in the Nicaragua Solidarity Campaign back in the 80s, been involved in sort of Stop the War movement and various kind of anti-austerity politics things. To be honest, at the moment I struggle to do anything partly because of the academic workload but also because I'm the sole carer for my mum and she has Alzheimer's so that's taking a huge amount of time.

[0:27:56]

Lois: Yeah.

Ros Gill: But I do, you know, just volunteer at a foodbank and that's not really feminist activism but it kind of is in a way when you see who's working there and also when you see who's using that service so, yeah, it's just a local thing.

Lois: That's really interesting, yeah. So you see a lot of women at the service, is that what you mean?

Ros Gill: Yeah, yeah, definitely.

Lois: Okay, interesting.

Ros Gill: Yeah, women who are... oh God, just women who feel so ashamed that they have to use that service and that they rely on it and, yeah, I mean it's this country that should feel shame for putting people in that position and it's just getting so much worse.

Lois: Yeah.

Ros Gill: But, yeah, it's the way that that plays out on individuals is just horrible to see and like aside from the food or, you know, products that are donated, it just feels like the interaction that you have of trying to kind of at least try and like cut through some of that shame and say this is not your fault and this is okay and like this is just a community trying to support each other, that feels really important just some of those conversations feel really, yeah, really profound.

Lois: Yeah, absolutely, yes. That's very worthwhile I think of a kind of volunteering thing. And so you were saying as well about the kind of academic workload and, yeah, how do you find that and could you tell me a bit more maybe about it?

Ros Gill: It's impossible I mean it is just absolutely impossible and I mean for me it's been impossible for probably about 15 years I think I've found it, the last 15 years have been just impossible. And I mean it's probably because it is just objectively getting worse for everyone the kind of... they're just turning the screws on us and they just want more and more from less and less. I guess it is that, but it is just, yeah, I find it really, really, yeah, impossible to manage. And I think it's really hard to because I want to... I love teaching, I love my students, I want to be a good teacher and I want to be a good colleague and I want to be a good citizen and, you know, all of those things but it's just literally impossible.

And when I ever switch off my email it's just like there just hundreds or thousands of emails in there that I don't even get to open because, yeah, like for example just now I took two weeks off over Easter actually, and this is again kind of an indictment of the system. I had to take this annual leave so that I could actually do some of my own work and finish this project that I was working on but then I've come back and I've been back at work for two weeks and I still haven't had time to go back through the emails that came in. So I've got 3,000 just unread emails in there.

Lois: Wow.

Ros Gill: And then I'm getting the new emails coming in with people saying I haven't heard back from you from my email of May the 2nd or whatever and I'm just oh, God and I hate to be that person because I am like super organised and I'm always just always on email and I'm always trying to get it but it's just this impossible workload.

[0:32:21]

Lois: Yeah. Well, as you say, yeah, it's got nothing to do with you as a person but with the system I suppose so, yeah, and particularly as a carer that's a real thing on top of that as well so, yeah. Yeah, it's really interesting that it's gotten worse kind of that you can see it getting worse that's something isn't it?

Ros Gill: Definitely, and I've been involved in the strikes that... I'm involved in my union and I've been on strike over the last, well, last few weeks but also last few years taken strike action a lot and one of our demands is around workload and the kind of concept of the unsafe workload. It just feels like nothing's happening on that, yeah, we're not getting anywhere with it.

Lois: Yeah, yeah, it's very slow. Okay, so switching gears a little bit again then, if we go back to kind of maybe, yeah, your work maybe in more depth and the first thing I wanted to ask really was did you have any particular accomplishment or kind of piece of work that you're most proud of?

Ros Gill: Well, I'm really proud of a book that's just come out this year with my colleague and very dear friend, Shani Orgad and it's called Confidence Culture. We've been working on it, well, we sort of wrote our first piece about it in 2015 and we've basically... she's a feminist sociologist in kind of media and communications and she works a lot around motherhood and work. And I was kind of working around body image and sex and relationship advice and basically we sort of had this conversation and we realised we were both seeing these same confidence messages everywhere, even the same kind of phrases and words were being used about, you know, women just need to be confident.

So she was finding it in the workplace that women were just constantly being sent on these confidence training programmes as if that was the reason that they weren't kind of progressing up the organisation and I was finding it in the kind of body image stuff it was just about loving your body and feeling comfortable in your own skin. And then all this kind of advice to kind of take up more space in the world and change the way that you speak and practice this kind of verbal hygiene where you don't use the word "just" and you don't say, "I'm no expert" and this, we were seeing this kind of across all the spheres that we were working in. And we decided that we would start writing about it and then it just turned into a book, and it came out this year. It's been absolutely amazing to see the kind of reaction that it's had, it's really resonated with so many people.

Lois: Oh really?

Ros Gill: Yeah, the sort of main thrust of the argument is that confidence culture, it sounds like a superficially kind of feminist engagement but actually it ends up saying change the woman, don't change the world and it turns us away from broader structures, structural inequalities and kind of the social transformation that's needed. And it just makes us do yet more work on ourselves and be yet more vigilant about how we speak, how we hold our bodies, all that sort of thing.

Lois: Yeah, that's very interesting that kind of self-surveillance and, yeah, that sounds really interesting.

Ros Gill: Thank you, it is. It's been so great, I mean we're just like every day we get loads of messages about it from people and like next week we're going to speak to the Women and Games Federation which is a massive organisation of games developers and we're speaking to the General Medical Council next week, we've got a big talk for them and also it's been to a domestic violence charity, I mean just there's been so much uptake and it's almost like maybe post pandemic it's just sort of fallen on very receptive ears.

Lois: Yeah, absolutely. Okay. And so I suppose I chose a few things from your kind of vast career and work and I thought maybe one of your significant contributions was discussion around post feminism and stuff like that, and so I was wondering maybe if you could tell me a bit about that and how it's developed over the years.

[0:37:53]

Ros Gill: Yeah, thank you Lois, yes. Yeah, I started writing about post feminism partly... and it partly sort of relates to my PhD work and what I was saying to you about just kind of seeing how dynamic and how flexible sexism can be and how it can take so many different forms. And then it was sort of seeing kind of a particular point I think in the early 90s really where, you know, it's that kind of girl power moment and the ladette and all these sort of like seemingly positive cultural iterations of feminism in various forms and the idea that we no longer need feminism as a social movement because actually we're there already and that kind of thing. And then it was just kind of starting to notice a really distinctive pattern of ideas and feelings and practices that kept on recurring that seemed not exactly to be feminist in the way that I understood it but they also weren't exactly anti-feminist.

And so, yeah, there was a lot of writing about post-feminism then and people were saying, "Oh post-feminism's a backlash" and then some people were saying, "Oh, no, it's actually it's a historical shift" and it's kind of like, "Post-feminism's become, you know, it's a new iteration of feminism, it's maybe third wave feminism." And some people were saying, "No, it's an epistemological shift, it's actually this is feminism trying to take account of intersectional differences." And I kind of coined a different way of thinking about it as the sort of sensibility and just kind of just trying to... I mean I didn't know when I wrote that that it was going to be so widely taken up, I was just trying to make sense of it in my own head and I kept going - it always seems to have these features, you know, these particular things going on, this sort of very individualistic tone that is kind of like defiant and feisty but somehow never, ever talks about structures or, you know, power really. And, yeah, I guess the sort of sexualisation of women's bodies but wrapped up in a discourse of, "Hey, we can do this now because we're free and we've chosen it and we're autonomous", and it just seemed to be everywhere, yeah, so that's kind of what I was writing about, yeah.

Lois: Yeah, that's so interesting and, yeah, as you say has been kind of widely written about off of that in multiple different ways so, yeah, it's such an interesting concept, yeah, brilliant. And then I was also thinking about kind of how a lot of your work really focuses on maybe media and its effects on us and that's obviously a really fast developing thing over the last kind of two decades. And I was wondering, yeah, how it is to work with that and to, yeah, see that developing so fast and integrating that into your work I suppose?

Ros Gill: Yeah, oh it's been great, I mean I'm always so behind and I went to a conference this week and I was learning some new stuff about TikTok and just, oh, wow, just some of the incredible kind of feminist creativity that's going on it's just amazing. But, yeah, I mean I've always worked on media in a way since my PhD so it's kind of, yeah, feel like I am kind of a bit of a sort of media-y culturally-y feminist-y, psychologist-y kind of person.

But can I just mention one thing that I've been working on during the pandemic because I think this might be of interest?

Lois: Yes.

Ros Gill: And it's specifically about social media and basically I started off doing some interviews with young people about their kind of experiences on social media, some men, mainly women, some non-binary people and just started just having like quite a relaxed conversation with them about their lives on their phone in the context of lockdown and just sort of how it had changed. Because everyone was saying, "I'm just sitting on my phone all the time it's just there, I'm just randomly scrolling" and I just wanted to know a bit more about their social media lives. And that's what I've just finished just now, I've just finished drafting this book it's going to be called Perfect: Feeling Judged on Social Media

because it was absolutely incredible to do these interviews with young people and hear about how hard their lives are.

Obviously the pandemic really, you know, so much illness, so much bereavement, so much kind of loss of employment, so much isolation and loneliness from schools, universities being closed so lots and lots of kind of like material things going on. But also they really, really wanted to talk about their social media presence and how to present themselves and just how hard it is with the whole kind of Instagram perfect life thing, not just perfect appearance but the whole perfect life, you know, the perfect friends, the perfect restaurant, perfect bars, the best looking drink with the steam and the cocktail, just all of it, this sort of like Instagram perfect life and the kind of pressure that exerts. But then also just how silencing that can be and how they can't talk about how they're actually feeling.

And it was really interesting because I'd just done the confidence book and at the end of that Shani and I were really noticing what seemed to be like a turn away from confidence and a turn towards vulnerability and it seemed like, you know, celebrities were sort of coming out every day as kind of vulnerable and, "My struggle with x", "My struggle with y", that kind of thing. But it didn't seem to operate at the level of kind of everyday people and what young people were telling me especially young women was just that you literally cannot be real because if you do, you'll be seen at attention seeking, you know, if you post anything that's less than this kind of hyper-perfect aesthetic you'll be torn apart, all the kind of negative comments.

I think one of the things that just really, really struck me about it was how lonely it is for them and so it's this kind of paradoxical very, very social experience and they're in some ways loving like seeing and being seen and being part of the flow of life and knowing what's happening and who's in and who's out and all of that. But at the same time feeling incredibly lonely and feeling like even their closest friends are not necessarily people that they could be fully open with because there's so much judgement all the time about everything. And the specificity of the judgement was just absolutely incredible.

[0:46:35]

Lois: Yeah.

Ros Gill: Yeah, so I'm living in my head at the moment because I've literally just finished this draft and I absolutely loved it and just feel like it's really important to... I feel like I'm holding their words very carefully and cherishing them and trying to listen to them properly and capture the ambivalences of their experiences because I just haven't seen it written about quite like that.

Lois: Yeah, absolutely, I think you're right, neither have I. And, yeah, as you say so important and so interesting and particularly, kind of in this period of time as well where, yeah, it's just so different and new and, yeah, absolutely, that sounds very interesting.

Ros Gill: Yeah, yeah, it is. Yeah, and I think there's something there about being so old was that it just kind of... like a lot of them kind of... I mean some of them explicitly and some of them implicitly, but they all kind of positioned me as this sort of mum figure. So I think I was seen as kind of like quite naïve but basically kind and so at the end of it, it was quite profound really the number of people that sort of said, "Wow, this has been like a detox", "This has been amazing just being able to speak about this" and quite often they'd just tell me about experiences like for example an experience of they post something on Instagram and then they find out that it's been screenshotted by their close group of friends and then in a kind of private Snapchat group it's been like torn apart.

Lois: Yeah, wow.

Ros Gill: And just like horrible cruelty and then I would just be kind of jaw dropping of like, "God, this sounds really tough, that sounds horrible for you" and it was something about even just saying that made them realise for the first time almost how brutal that really is. So it felt like quite an important space for them to speak.

Lois: Yeah, that's really interesting kind of, yeah, having you almost as an outsider that they're kind of, yeah, telling about these things, that's a really interesting dynamic as well. Gosh, yeah, it's definitely kind of a very new area that like, yeah, people are trying to navigate isn't it, yeah, that's really interesting.

And so I wanted to think about, as well, I know you did a report on sexting with the NSPCC and I think you've also worked with a range of other official bodies but I was wondering kind of what that process was like and that engagement with maybe a bit more of like the policy side of things I suppose rather than the research?

[0:50:09]

Ros Gill: Yeah. Well, that was fantastic working with the NSPCC on that report, it was good. I mean it was a very, very small amount of money and we were kind of, yeah, I think we just were sort of very lucky, we kind of got it at the end of the financial year and there was some loose change in the budget. We did it very cheaply and quite quickly and then we really kind of, yeah, really, really tried to change the conversation actually with the report because I think in a way it prefigured a lot of the stuff that's come out more recently with things like the "#EveryonesInvited" and the kind of level of sexual harassment and bullying and actual sexual assault in school and just how normalised that is.

But at the time the kind of prevalent policy discourses were around stranger danger and we were kind of trying to say, "No, it's not, most young people know about kind of not giving out their details to strangers online and stuff but actually the real danger especially for young women is their peers and what's happening to them". So, yeah, that was good, but do you mean sort of from a perspective of like how it was to work with the organisation itself?

Lois: Yeah, yes, and any kind of other maybe policy focused work that you've done, yeah, what is that process like I suppose?

Ros Gill: Yeah. It wasn't as engaged as I thought it would be, so it really was kind of here's the money, you go off and do this. And then we kind of came back together for the launch and sort of had... it wasn't like they were kind of pouring over the draft and saying, "You can't say this" or "We don't want you to say that". And similarly, on this social media work I submitted it to a government inquiry and again, I just I mean it was like minimal engagement really, I just kind of uploaded it through a website, didn't even really know if it had gone and then when I saw the report there were lots and lots of parts of it were quoted in the government report. But I hadn't had any kind of personal engagement with them and I suppose that's why the Confidence Culture book's been different because so it's not been kind of so much government but there's just been so many organisations that have said, "Please come and talk to us about this because this is key for our members" or "This is key for doctors to know about" or "This is key for games developers to know about" or whatever.

Lois: Oh, that's interesting. I wonder why there's kind of a bit of that difference, maybe it's the topic of the work as you say is so maybe relevant to now but, yeah, that's interesting.

Ros Gill: Yeah, yeah, it is.

Lois: Okay, perfect. So I suppose thinking about your career, do you play a role as a mentor yourself now?

Ros Gill: I do, yeah. So I'm a formal mentor for several people in my university and then I feel like I am an informal mentor for a lot of other people and, yeah, lots actually, lots. I've also got a kind of relationship with a couple of universities in Australia and I have kind of formal mentoring relationships there. But more than that, I mean I try to be, well, a mentor but I try to be supportive and engaged with people's work and give feedback on it and just try and make myself as available as I can be to like help with things from... it could be I get loads of kind of like A Level students saying, "I'm doing my A Level project on gender and media, please can you help me?" "Could I speak to you for five minutes?" or whatever, that sort of thing up to kind of colleagues, yeah, all my kind of immediate colleagues. And lots of colleagues that I don't know will contact me and ask me if I'd mind advising them on something or reading something or helping with a grant application, that sort of thing.

Lois: Oh nice, yeah, that's amazing. So, yeah, you seem to have put a lot of time and effort into that which is on top of, you know, the workload-

[0:55:27]

Ros Gill: It's really important to me and I feel... I feel like we can be really good peer mentors for each other, you know, I think the way universities think of mentoring it's somehow very kind of linear isn't it and hierarchical but actually, you know, with this book that I've just finished I've sent it to one of my PhD students, I've sent it to several kind of colleagues and friends to ask them if they'll give me feedback and they do the same with me and it's just, yeah, it's just nice to be in those supportive relationships.

Lois: Yeah, absolutely. Lovely. Okay, and so moving back to thinking about POWES a little bit and the future of feminist psychology as well, do you think that POWES in particular as an organisation, do you think there could be any changes in the way that... you know, in its aims and projects and stuff like that?

Ros Gill: I don't know, I mean I suppose because my engagement with POWES is relatively limited... I don't know, I mean I know it has its kind of policy engagement and challenging marginalisation and challenging inequality and being proactive about feminist methods and feminist research and that seems really, really vital. I don't really know much about its work within the BPS [British Psychological Society] and I to be honest, don't really... probably just don't know enough to be able to answer this properly.

Lois: Yeah, that's fine, yeah, no worries. Well, I suppose maybe more broadly then in terms of like feminism and psychology, what impacts do you think feminists have kind of made in psychology so far and what do you think remains to be accomplished?

Ros Gill: Oh, wow, that's a huge question (laughter).

Lois: Yeah.

Ros Gill: Yeah, I think feminists have made huge impacts, absolutely huge impacts in psychology and it's just... I mean over my lifetime in psychology it's transformed. When I did my undergraduate degree there was not a woman on the academic staff in the department where I was studying, there simply wasn't anyone, not even a woman teaching let alone any feminist content, let alone anything centred on gender, I mean there was nothing. And now that wouldn't be the case, I mean the courses that are about gender, that are about race, that are about class, I mean these are the most popular courses. All undergraduate students want to be studying them and there's such an uptake. I still think there's just a lot of resistance, I mean we've been going, I don't even think I can kind of dignify it with the kind of... going through a process of decolonising the curriculum... that sounds far too grand for what it is.

But I think like like most institutions we've been trying to kind of look critically at our own practice and what we do and, yeah, think about the changes that need to be made and just generally in terms of greater inclusiveness. And I think what's been shocking for me, although I'm not in a psychology department I still think it resonates is how many male colleagues still... I mean their curricular are just still so white, so... well, so male, so cisnormative, so heteronormative, I mean it's just extraordinary. And it just feels like within feminism or within the kind of critical areas around critical race studies, I mean the debates are happening, there's so much exciting discussion happening all the time about all of these issues. But I still feel that there's areas of... and they probably are the biggest areas, it's just that I don't have all that much to do with them, thankfully, that remain entirely kind of untouched by all of the debates that we're all having.

Lois: Yeah, that's quite a bizarre thing to think isn't it, that there's kind of almost a bubble of the field that as you say, is just not thinking about those things that seem so prevalent in maybe our worlds or kind of sections of the field so, yeah.

Ros Gill: Yeah, yeah.

Lois: So I suppose what do you see as the future of feminist psychology then?

[1:01:11]

Ros Gill: I think it's, yeah, I think it... well, I don't know enough institutionally in terms of kind of, yeah, how it's positioned really but in terms of student interest and in terms of the impact that the work has outside the academy, I'm just even thinking of something like massive changes are happening and psychologists are really involved in this, I'm just thinking of like the debates about the menopause and how that has gone from being invisible, completely invisible as a kind of, you know, a biopsychosocial, cultural, political issue to becoming kind of, you know, you can't move for documentaries about menopause, news articles about menopause and for, you know, medical, psychological discourses about it. I mean that's because people have been active and they've tried to make a change. And likewise, in terms of just, you know, gender identity, you know, what a huge transformation in the conversation over a few years so I mean there's just so much work to do but I think that change is really happening and sometimes it can feel like, "Oh, God, it's too slow" or... but things are transforming.

Lois: Yeah, yeah, it's nice to be able to see things happening as you say.

Ros Gill: Yeah. What do you think? Am I allowed to ask you?

Lois: Yeah (laughter), yeah, of course. Unexpected but, yes. Yeah, I don't know, I think as you say, I think definitely students are kind of more engaged with that kind of aspect of things and I think it's about making sure that the opportunity is there wherever students go to kind of open up that discussion and show... I suppose give them the opportunity to think about things in a more critical way and from kind of different viewpoints. I think that's where it all really starts because I think once students start thinking about, you know, criticality and stuff I think it's exciting but it's just kind of giving them that opportunity to do it and to think about it, if that makes sense.

Ros Gill: Yeah, that really does. And does it feel as if sort of the BPS is the BPS kind of responding to pressure for change and is it moving in a kind of progressive direction?

Lois: Yeah, I think so. I think it's still fairly mainstream I would say in terms of kind of mainstream psychology and maybe that's where it focuses but I think, you know, within the BPS like POWES is such an important section and obviously also other sections like sexualities section and stuff, but, yeah, I think there are pockets of sections that are really good and just such like a... as we were talking earlier, an important community for people, I think that's where it's doing well I think.

But, yeah, so I suppose my last question really is what advice would you give to feminists or activists entering psychology now or sociology even?

Ros Gill: Well, I think it's, you know, as we were saying earlier academia as a space is getting harder isn't it? I think clinical psychology is also getting much harder, you know, NHS work is hard as well now and I think is getting harder. I think, yeah, building a network, having kind of friendships and relationships of solidarity and care are really, really important and they are the things that will get you through definitely. And I know that we're all... apparently the REF results came out today, this very day that we're doing the interview, and I know that within academia we're all kind of like mesmerised by those things, our institutions are at any rate.

Lois: Yeah.

Ros Gill: And they do matter because they allocate, they become mechanisms for allocating funding, but I do think that there's still a lot of space to do your own work and not be so kind of mesmerised by what the REF requires you to do or, you know, what your impact requirement needs you to do. I think that, you know, there are spaces to do great work and critical work and, yeah, just working together and finding your people and, yeah, and taking care of each other I think is... I think it's such an individualised place, it's very, very, yeah, it's very hard, it's so hard for people especially starting out not to feel like imposters, not to feel like failures, not to feel like, "Oh everybody else has got this sorted and it's just me and I'm not coping and what's wrong with me?" and all of that. And it really,

really isn't, I think if we can break some of the silence around that and just say this is a kind of systemic issue and actually, we just need to find ways of making it more liveable and caring for each other then it can still be a really good place to be.

[1:07:55]

Lois: Absolutely, yeah, that's such good advice, I will take it onboard myself. Yeah, I think, yeah, that's all really important. And do you think it is more difficult for kind of people doing feminist work to meet those things like REFs and those kind of institutional standards?

Ros Gill: It might be, it might be within psychology, yeah, yeah. I think it isn't within most of the rest of the social sciences I don't think it is, I think sort of say within sociology there's such a long and established and important tradition of feminist work and in a way that kind of feels like it partly is the mainstream but, yeah, in psychology maybe it is harder, yeah, just in terms of like having you know, there's lists of journals that are deemed the ones that you should publish in, that is really tough.

Lois: Yeah, that's interesting kind of the difference maybe between those different fields depending on as you say, the history of the work that's been before.

Ros Gill: Yeah, yes, but then if you've been hired in to a department then that's in itself a statement of your work being seen as valuable isn't it?

Lois: Yes, yeah, true, yeah. Okay, so I think I've covered everything. But is there anything else that I haven't mentioned that you'd like to talk about or touch on about yourself or feminist psychology?

Ros Gill: I think just one thing I'd just like to say which is I think sort of like one of the biggest pleasures of my career is and has been, working with PhD students, I absolutely love it and I think I've supervised 50 students to completion and a lot of my PhD students are now even professors, it's just amazing.

Lois: Oh wow.

Ros Gill: I just heard about another student this week who's becomes a professor which is just fantastic and, yeah, it's such... I mean it kind of goes to your question around mentoring because it's sort of a kind of mentoring but it is such a pleasure and what I feel that is, yeah, has been amazing, it's been amazing working with those people. But it's also been incredible now how they've gone from being students to being friends and peers and how it just feels like we're in this kind of peer network of real support and solidarity and care. Yeah, it's just, yeah. And just thinking that we can build these things, we can do these things, we can build them ourselves and, yeah, just needs one or two and then three and then four people and we really can make quite a big difference to the kind of like emotional texture of our lives and our institution's lives just be doing things differently.

Lois: Yeah, absolutely. It's really nice to see, yeah, to see that developing as you say kind of almost, yeah, in front of your eyes like that is possible.

Ros Gill: Yeah, absolutely.

Lois: That's a really good point.

Ros Gill: We must resist this competitive isolating individualising toxic culture.

Lois: Yeah, absolutely which is, yeah, kind of particularly within the institutions and universities I think.

Ros Gill: Yeah, yeah.

Lois: So just for the record, could you state your gender please?

Ros Gill: Yes, I am a woman.

Lois: And your place and date of birth?

Ros Gill: 22/04/63, Hyde in Manchester.

Lois: Lovely. And your occupation?

Ros Gill: Professor of Social and Cultural Analysis at City University of London.