



**Psychology's Feminist Voices Oral History Project  
Interview with Sonia Livingstone**

*Interviewed by Lois Donnelly over Zoom™  
July 26, 2022*

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# Psychology's Feminist Voices Oral History Project

## Interview with Sonia Livingstone

Interviewed by Lois Donnelly

Conducted over the Zoom online platform

July 26, 2022

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- Lois: I'm Lois Donnelly, interviewing Professor Sonia Livingstone on the 26<sup>th</sup> of July 2022 over Zoom, and we're discussing her life and career in the context of feminism and its history within psychology.
- Sonia: Great.
- Lois: So first of all then, could you tell me just a little bit about yourself? So in terms of the trajectory of your career and the topics of your work?
- Sonia: Yes, so I began as a psychologist with my degree in 1979 at UCL. I did a PhD in the Department of Experimental Psychology at Oxford, and that was the point at which I really chose to be a social psychologist. I was fairly active in the BPS [British Psychological Society] kind of from the start, and I would say over the years, my research, actually, right from the start, my research focused on media, because for my PhD I got funding to study psychological aspects of media and so I focused on audiences for a long time, and then about 20 years ago, I began focusing increasingly on child audiences and the family's relation to media, and increasingly I've taken that into not only academic but also policy and advocacy work.
- Lois: Brilliant. Yeah, so what first kind of piqued your interest in psychology then? Why did you kind of decide to go into that field?
- Sonia: Well, it was a fantastically hard thing for someone when they're 17 to decide what to study, unless you're lucky enough to kind of be struck by that bolt of lightning that tells you what you really want to do in life. I had no idea, and I was interested in science and the arts, and it was...I was encouraged to think of psychology as a discipline that fused or at least allowed both science and arts approaches and that actually turned out to be quite indicative of my career since I've always tried to bridge divergent, sometimes even opposed positions. Of course, since then, psychology has become more scientific, but back in the late 70s, it was a bit more broad.
- Lois: Yeah, brilliant. That's really interesting, because yes, as you say, like, I suppose now, it's definitely seen as more of a science and kind of, yeah, wanting to go down that particular one path, I suppose.
- Sonia: Yeah, I think... I can give much longer answers or shorter answers by the way, depending on what you want me to do, so...
- Lois: Yeah.
- Sonia: I'm not sure. I think, I mean, to my mind, it's a shame and a problem that psychology took such a scientific route, but I do think they've been pushed by government and by generations of kind of

funding mechanisms into becoming more scientific. I really loved that when I began studying psychology there was psychoanalysis, there was literary research, there was, you know, it was a whole range of approaches to psychology.

Lois: Yeah. So do you feel like that's narrowed now?

Sonia: Yes, I do, and I think to the detriment of the field, both because a lot of thinking about the human subject and especially all social aspects of...many social aspects of psychology have been kind of pushed out into other fields, so you know, there was a very significant period doing my PhD in the 1980s, when lots of social psychologists left psychology altogether and went into media studies or culture studies or women's studies or sociology, and it was a kind of evacuation of a huge richness and diversity and especially qualitative and more critical work was, you know, felt itself to be actively excluded, and I think psychology is a poorer subject for it, even though, you know, those social psychologists who left the field have had very rich and interesting careers in other disciplines, in which I count myself as well.

[00:05:05]

Lois: Yeah, that's quite a shame, as you say, in terms of the kind of outpouring. How have you maybe dealt with that kind of change then throughout your career, you know, in terms of...?

Sonia: It was, yeah, I mean, it was painful at the time. I think when...there was a kind of struggle both within...among the social psychologists, you know, particularly the social psychology section of the BPS, but also a wider redefining of the nature of psychology as a field, both because of the pressures that, mainly kind of government and funding pressures, but I think also the internal argument that psychology should be a proper science. So I think it was painful at the time, and there were many years when I didn't call myself a psychologist and didn't have anything to do with the BPS. And it's only really in the last 10 years or more that I have kind of re-embraced being a psychologist and found a kind of way of healing that breach for myself, but I think also in a way with colleagues.

Lois: Yeah, that's really interesting kind of almost change of identity, I suppose, over the years.

Sonia: It's hard to embrace a group if you feel you're not welcome in it.

Lois: Absolutely.

Sonia: So, you know, it's not that I've only done qualitative work, I've always done quantitative as well as qualitative, though not really experimental research. But I have always felt very strongly that psychology should be that broad field, and when I hear generations of A Level students going to study psychology and being disappointed and finding it much more narrow than they wished, and without the study of the whole person and social life and psychology in the community, psychology in the world, you know, I've just heard that from so many young people, that to my mind for a long time I just felt a kind of despair that psychology was turning its back on so many things happening in the world. I realise there are others that would contest that view, but I think there were many who've seen it that way. And so, I think my kind of coming to terms in the last 10 or 15 years has been a determination to say, "Well, actually, I/we can define this field, it's not only for those policing the boundaries of what counts as psychology who get to actually have the final say."

Lois: Yeah, I like that. That's brilliant. Okay, so kind of going back then to when you were first getting, you know, starting your degree, I'm wondering kind of how and when really feminism came into your life and into your work?

Sonia: So the 1970s were an interesting and significant time for feminism. I went to university in 1979, and I would say that feminism had come into my life from the age of about 10 or 11, so I kind of lived my teens as what I think people would now call a second wave feminist. And it partly came from my parents, you know, I had a single parent mother, but she was an academic, and the times were, it was just kind of...it was in the air, it seemed to me. So there were feminist arguments happening in some ways around me, and in the books that I was reading, you know, I kind of did all those things, I

read Spare Rib, I went on the marches, I kind of read, Our Bodies, Ourselves, it was, I tried to track down kind of women scientists, or notable women, so there was, you know, there was a certain kind of way of growing up as a feminist. But I think when I got to UCL to study psychology, I don't think any of that was there. I think psychology then was a subject that studied people and the predominant ways of differentiating people was 'normal' and 'abnormal', and we were always being encouraged to study the 'abnormal' as a way of understanding the 'normal'. I don't recall any politicisation of that. I don't recall any scare quotes around 'normal', or 'abnormal' or whatever, and every study we, you know, a lot of the research we studied was uncritically about boys or men, I don't recall people pointing that out and saying, "Isn't it weird that Bandura only studied boys when he did his Bobo Doll Experiment, in fact, I can remember kind of going back later and saying, "Oh my god, how come no-one pointed it out and how come we didn't notice?" But when there were men and women in the study, you know, it was always called sex differences and it was kind of taken into account in your analysis of variance in a routine way. I do remember somewhere in that early degree studying the work of Sandra Bem, and the idea of androgyny, and of course, outside, Dale Spender was writing Man Made Language, and there was the argument...and Ann Oakley had published her work on housewives, and there was that whole kind of sex and gender discussion going on, but I don't recall that within the discipline really.

[00:11:53]

Lois: Yeah, that's really interesting. So was there a point, you know, a stage or any time where you felt like it did enter your experience at university or kind of beyond that?

Sonia: Within psychology...I mean, student life was definitely politicised at that time, in relation to feminism and many other debates as well, I mean, there was a lot of socialist activity, there was a lot of, you know, that decade was also the decade of concern about the bomb and nuclear disarmament, and there was lots of politics, there was lots of class politics going on. Somehow it must have come into my studies, because by the third year, when I was thinking that maybe I was going to do a PhD, I had decided that I would do a PhD on gender and genetics, sorry, people's understanding of genetics as a way of pursuing the idea of what was nature or nurture. I did have a lot about nature and nurture. So somehow it came in and I had conceived my kind of passion project, which was going to be, you know, why is the public so enamoured of naturalistic genetic accounts of gender or sex. That's what I wanted to study. I didn't get funding to do it, so I didn't do it.

Lois: I see.

Sonia: But definitely I had come to that as a project and I was hearing it everywhere, that the counter to feminism was an essentialist and biological account of men and women, and it has interesting resonance now, with our kind of current debates about trans and rethinking gender boundaries. But then it seemed like just undoing the tying of gender to sex in an incredibly binary way, that already seemed radical and that's where I wanted to be at.

Lois: Yeah.

Sonia: I don't know who...I can't remember if I discussed that with any...I did discuss a lot of what I was thinking with the academics in the department, so maybe I did.

Lois: Yeah, that's really interesting. So then when you went off on kind of the different PhD, how did that feel, and I mean, for you, was any of that kind of feminist thinking into that work?

Sonia: I can remember, so I did my PhD at Oxford and...how did it go... So I was given a project about the media, about television, about which I knew very little, I mean, as a field of study, as an object of study.

Lois: Yes.

Sonia: I went straight into doing my first paper, which I had an industry co-funder for the PhD, a regulatory co-funder actually, and the first thing they said is, "Why don't you do a study of representation of gender in advertising?" So I kind of began with a project that was about gender, and I can remember

at that time, you know, that was when I kind of took more note of the BPS and joined the social section and the women's section, and kind of...and there was a postgraduate section as well, and I can kind of remember participating in those. I don't think there was much going on at Oxford that was about feminism, but again, university life is always politicised and the student body is politicised, and so you know, I didn't...I think I wasn't bothered that it was a fairly traditional department, I kind of found other spaces. So for a long time I thought about gender, and then my eventual PhD project was very deliberately about gender with a feminist lens, and I think my work has always had a feminist lens, but I don't, I typically haven't worked with explicitly feminist theory or written pieces that have feminism in the title necessarily. Anyway, my PhD project was about the soap opera, and the soap opera was supposedly women's trash for mindless, stupid housewives, and I picked it as the project that was going to be a kind of opportunity to listen to audiences, the public, many of them women, but not all, interestingly, and a way of kind of opening up what it is that ordinary people were engaged with and what meanings they found in their life. And so I applied a semiotic lens to people's engagement with trash/popular culture, precisely in order to give voice and recognise the meanings of everyday life, the micropolitics of everyday life, the struggles of everyday life, as kind of, as I saw them, dramatized through the soap opera, and then kind of lived through people's engagement with the narratives and characters of the soap opera. So it was kind of, yes, so in a way, there was a definite feminist motivation. At the same time, I can recall kind of moving into that point of, you could call it interest or perhaps despair about the fights that were happening within feminism, and the moment at which, you know, I felt I'd suddenly become dubbed a middle class white feminist, whose positionality was in some ways too privileged to be part of the... So you know, there were a lot of tensions and difficulties, but nonetheless, I think it was interesting times. The department kind of put up with it, my supervisor put up with it, he thought my project was bizarre and weird, but I was clearly very determined and committed, and he sat back and eventually...and let me do what I want basically.

[00:18:56]

Lois: That's really interesting. How did that feel, that kind of dynamic, and maybe your place within the department then?

Sonia: It was...I don't know how much you know about that department, it was...it's a nasty concrete building in north Oxford, on the ground floor was Richard Dawkins, making his very politicised arguments about genes, and having to check under his car parked outside the department every day because of the possible bombs that would have been put in his car. And then we had the department, and on the top floor was where they put the monkeys whose cortexes or neo...they'd taken the...I don't know, cut the (inaudible 00:19:43) out, which of course, we could never go to, because that was high security. So one was somehow trying to think about people, human beings in their social lives and all their difference and debates, stuck between these arguments about genetics and these horribly massacred monkeys. It was a very weird place to be, quite frankly. And in it, especially in the social psychology group, we kind of formed a very tight support group who said, "We will support each other against all these kind of weird happenings," and especially, in some ways kind of against the experimental label of that department. And we just read everything, we just said, "Okay, we'll do it ourselves, we'll read everything, we'll debate everything, we'll engage with whatever seems exciting," and it was a group of, I don't know, over the years, probably a group of 10 or 12 people who did that and we just said, "We'll find our intellectual currents elsewhere." And Rom Harré, who was at Lineker College at the time, kind of came in and created lots of debates with the social psychology group, kind of opening up currents of what's happening in philosophy and the philosophy of science in, you know, deliberately questioning what is the science that psychology is meant to be part of, and opening a way to think about more critical and political accounts of knowledge, and that was very helpful.

Lois: Yeah, brilliant. So even within that kind of weird setting, you kind of had, like, a network of people that, I suppose, were a bit more on your wavelength?

Sonia: Yeah, exactly, and then we...you know, I kind of joined and became quite active in the social psychology section of the BPS, and that's why it was so painful kind of towards the end of that time, so that's now kind of mid to late-80s, when the social psychologists kind of pulled apart, and you know, I mean, I can see now looking back that the kind of the critical administrative or

qualitative/quantitative walls were happening in lots of different disciplines at the time, but the critical quant...critical qualitative approach in psychology lost and people left the field and moved elsewhere, as I already said, and I was one of those. So I then went off and got a job as a sociologist for a bit.

Lois: That's really interesting. How was that kind of...how was that shift for you at the time?

Sonia: It was terrifying actually, I thought, "Someone's going to ask me to teach Marx, Weber and Durkheim, and I'd never studied those, how am I going to blag my way through in this new world?" where I wasn't trained and wasn't prepared. So it was quite terrifying, but I suppose... But on the other hand, the actual research I was doing had a kind of space, I mean, they thought I was a psychologist, they looked at me, you know, they were very worried that I was going to be too reductionist and individualistic, and not recognise the nature of culture and structures of society, so I did a lot of reading, and then...what happened... So yeah, so I worked as a sociologist for a while, feeling intrigued and the world was full of possibilities, but also worried that I would be kind of shown up for not knowing my Marx, Weber and Durkheim. And then in retrospect, it was just three years after that I got a job as a social psychologist at LSE [London School of Economics and Political Science], and LSE is...itself, is a kind of unusual place in terms of how it conceives of its disciplines and puts boundaries around its disciplines, and so then it was possible to be myself again for a while.

[00:24:10]

Lois: Okay, really nice, thank you. Yeah, I'm just kind of pondering over maybe the need for that space that you didn't have in social psychology and yet to feel kind of out of place in that kind of space as well, and that difficulty, so yeah, that must have been tough.

Sonia: Yeah, I mean, you know, as struggles go, it wasn't a nightmare, and I kind of found ways to get work and to build a career and eventually to kind of find a voice. But I do think some people fit neatly within a disciplinary structure and embrace it and that provides an identity and a network, and I have not fitted within that and eventually became part of building...actually, I've built networks all my career, which have been absolutely kind of cross-disciplinary and built around projects or around areas of thinking, and I've always kind of welcomed multiple currents coming in and wanted to have the debates that result from those. But I have been helped and privileged by being at LSE, which as a deliberately kind of...solely a social science institution, one that has the social end of all the, you know, social psychology not psychology, social anthropology not anthropology, social history and not the whole of history, etcetera, etcetera, so it's always... And then being a smaller institution, people, you know, you could cross-fertilise. And first of all, one of the early things I got involved in at LSE was creating the Gender Institute, and that was, I think, just a few years after I arrived, various folk, primarily from sociology, and government, began drawing people together across the institution to create what became the Gender Institute, and that was the kind of next struggle, if you like, because LSE actually turned out to be very hostile and it was quite a struggle.

Lois: Oh, I see, so how did that play out?

Sonia: I think in the classic way, the institution said, "Who needs a bunch of disruptive women making arguments about how the departmental structures should be changed, and shedding a light on the patriarchal assumptions and practices of the institution?" And so, I mean, I say 'we', because I was part of it, but it was primarily led by others, by Anne Phillips and Sylvia Walby and Gail Wilson, and there were a number of...Sylvia Chant, there were a number of kind of really fantastic people who had devoted their careers to being feminist political scientists, feminist sociologists and so forth.

Lois: Yeah.

Sonia: So they were the kind of core, and there was a number of perhaps another 20 of us, and we were regarded as a bit troublemakers, probably irrelevant, best to ignore them... But eventually the argument was made and the Gender Institute was formed, and it's been a very successful, I think, and effective part of LSE, but it did take a long time. And in fact, they have inspired me, I think, now looking back, because then I began to build a network of people who were interested in media

studies in a very similar way, and then we formed, eventually, after yet another fight, the Department of Media and Communications, which for me, it wasn't especially a gendered or a feminist space, though we have had some notable feminist scholars within it, and still do, but it was definitely a space where people could bring whatever ideas they wanted and build a more kind of critical and multidisciplinary and open-minded space of discussion.

Lois: That sounds lovely. So quite a lot of, yeah, as you said, kind of network building and...

[00:29:03]

Sonia: Yeah, and a bit of institution building, I mean, LSE, I think when we created the Department of Media and Communications, they hadn't made a new department since the late-60s, when they in fact made the Department of Social Psychology under Hilde Himmelweit, so that was then... Very soon after they made the Department of International Development, the Gender Institute became a department and there was a bit of kind of, you know, in that moment of heightened interdisciplinarity, let's say, maybe about 10 or 20 years ago, there was a bit of shifting. Now there's, again, I think not much talk of new departments and shifting around and people are a bit back into disciplines, and something like the Research Evaluation Framework, the REF, pushes people, I think, back into their disciplines in a way that's regrettable.

Lois: Yeah, that's interesting, maybe limiting that kind of interdisciplinary outlook.

Sonia: Yeah.

Lois: Okay, so did you have any kind of key mentors during that time and journey?

Sonia: I have had a number of really brilliant mentors. I have to say they have been men, and one of the things I look back on is, you know, there just were few effective women with power to mentor in a way, in the generation that preceded me. I would say that my PhD supervisor, despite not having a clue what I was doing, was actually a fantastically supportive mentor, that was Michael Argyle, a social psychologist who was interested in sex differences but not interested in gender or cultural politics very much. But anyway, he was in fact very supportive, and enabled me to do what I want and introduced me to many...made a lot of contacts and kind of bridge building and supported me in negotiating the contract for my first book, you know, things that really mattered. My PhD external examiner, Jay Blumler, was a lifelong mentor – he just died recently – and from the minute he examined my PhD, played a brilliant role in kind of smoothing my path and pointing out opportunities. He was just always very encouraging and wanted to make sure I was at the kind of intellectual edge of what I could do. He played a key role in supporting me in the international conferences, kind of making sure, introducing me, making sure I had someone to talk to, and he in fact brokered my first really big grant, which was on children and the changing media environment, and he was kind of instrumental in making that happen, so that was really significant. And then two more – so I've been incredibly fortunately – so Elihu Katz, who was perhaps the father of media and communications internationally, a key figure, he died last year, very sadly – but was a mentor, again, all through my career and gave me the opportunity for my first postdoctoral position and introduced me to lots of people, supported me, you know, kind of made sure things were, I don't know, just brokered a number of opportunities. And then last, perhaps I would say Roger Silverstone, who was the first, actually, gave me my first position, first academic position, it was a one year to cover him, that was the first sociology job I had. He got an ESRC grant and said, "Sonia, do you want to come and teach my courses for a year?" That was the first job I got after my PhD. And then when we got media and communications together going at LSE, he came and was its first Head of Department, and kind of built the department from its first days to being pretty well established, and then he died very early, which was a tragedy, but...yeah. So actually, I would say four men have mentored me, very warmly and constructively and helped build a lot of opportunities for me that mattered.

Lois: Oh brilliant, great. So going back to your work then, do you have a particular accomplishment or piece of work that maybe you're most proud of?

Sonia: Oh, quite a difficult question! Well, academic work, I don't know, the thing I am most proud of is the thing I've actually done most recently, and that was to...and in fact, I was just writing about it just now, which is to work with the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, to write a statement, which is a piece of international law about children's rights in the digital environment. And that's really kind of my move into advocacy and policy work, and is the most, probably the most influential 10,000 words I will ever write, because it's... So it's written, the Convention on the Rights of the Child is the UN instrument for children's rights. A general comment is a 10,000 word document that says, "This is how it applies in relation to a particular area or field," and I was asked to lead the drafting team that wrote it for digital technologies, which is to say, "What do the rights of the child look like in relation to digital technologies? What is privacy online? What is child protection from violence when the violence is online?" and so forth. And as a document, it goes to every state, and it is independently then kind of taken up, more or less, as they choose, but they are all committed to taking it up and implementing it. And it becomes also a tool of advocacy among NGOs around the world, who use it to call for children's privacy online, or children's protection from bullying or child sexual exploitation online, or children's education during the pandemic, you know, online, whatever it is. It becomes an advocacy tool as well as a mechanism for assessing governments about how well they are delivering children's rights in relation to technology. So I am actually fantastically proud of that, though it's a document, it doesn't have my name on, which is the nature of working with the UN. But it took all my intellectual grasp of children's lives, children's rights and digital technologies, and drew on all the evidence of which I was aware and the research I'd done, and then there was a global consultation in which lots of organisations fed in evidence and ideas and insights, and then we kind of drew it together and debated it, and finally nailed it and now it's done. And that was published last year.

[00:37:17]

Lois: Oh wow, that sounds amazing, yeah, I can see why you'd be proud of that one. And I suppose that links into one of my other questions actually, which is that you have worked a lot alongside or consulted for, you know, the UK Government, the UN and various other organisations, so I was just wondering kind of how...maybe you could tell me a little bit about how it is to collaborate beyond academia and how important that is to you?

Sonia: It's very important, and it's very important to me. I firmly believe that academics all make their own choices for whatever reason, and are under whatever pressures. So some go into advocacy, some, including some of my colleagues, go into activism, which I would see as a bit different, and some write, as it were, for the library shelves, and I think all of those things are important, and what I really love about the academy is there are these multiple pathways. But for me, at a certain point, it became frustrating to write...to feel like I was contributing to an understanding of people's lives and nothing followed and no-one took any notice, you know, this was an understanding that just kind of sat on the page. And when I was studying audiences and people engaging with soap opera and various other kinds of audiences, the intellectual debates within the academy were kind of enough for me, and that was fine, but I think when I began researching children and families, actually, I think people started to come to me, journalists started to come to me and say, "Ah, there's this new technology, is it good or bad, what should be done?" And other organisations, charities, NGOs, and occasionally the Government would say, "We have to make a law on this, we have to make a regulation on this, we have to have a policy on this – is there any evidence?" And I guess I felt those were...I didn't generally like the way they asked the questions, I often disagreed with their framing, but I saw the, I felt the imperative to find a way to answer the questions, and rather than just saying, "Yeah, well here's some evidence," it felt to me imperative to engage with how the questions were framed and what got asked and then what was done with that evidence, and so I got kind of drawn more and more into saying, "Okay, well if you are concerned about," I don't know, journalists would say, you know, "Should children have..." the early question, "Should children have television in their bedroom?" Now what they will ask me is, "What's the right age for a child to have a mobile phone?" and I could say, you know, that's just the wrong question, I'm never going to look in journals and find, "Here's the right age, and that's good and that's bad," it's just not how academics think. But on the other hand, if people are asking that question, and every parent actually is asking that question, then it's a moment to say, "Well, this is what research says, this is what children have to say, this is what we find about what does help and is problematic." So it seems to be an opportunity to kind of deepen the public debate, and sometimes to also influence what the policymakers say in kind of framing what the possibilities are. So it just seemed...and then I actually found that also incredibly



intellectually interesting. And this is, I think, the bit that people often miss, that they think that you kind of do that intellectual work in the academy and then you go out and you tell them the answer, and it's not the case, because actually, people ask incredibly interesting and challenging questions, and even though I don't necessarily agree with their framing, they ask it for a reason that is itself worth thinking about, and they frame it in ways because they're afraid or anxious. And, you know, in my last book, I wanted to explore why are parents so anxious about technologies that they are always restricting and monitoring and surveilling their children, which seems to me an infringement of childhood freedom and child rights? But it's not that the parents are wrong or idiotic, so you know, I kind of...I keep wanting to find out, "Well why is that? And where do these powerful emotions and fears and anxieties come from?" and, "Then can I intervene in ways that, whatever I might have learned through research, can that be helpful?"

[00:42:13]

Lois: Yeah, that's incredibly interesting. And I suppose, you touched on it there, but obviously with your focus on media, which is a kind of ever changing landscape, but also I think then other areas, and so yeah, how has your work maybe developed over those years in kind of dealing with drastic changes quite suddenly?

Sonia: How it developed...I would say, yes, so the media, I think that's something that has fascinated and driven me and probably all of those who work in media and communication, that it feels like the change is coming from outside in ways that are challenging and demanding and difficult to live with and difficult to understand, so there's always more. Actually, that becomes quite a pressure, you know, you feel that the article you wrote five years ago is already out of date, and that's what policymakers are always telling you, "Oh, 2016, well that's old..." So there's a pressure. At the same time, intellectually, you know, what is our task, is to stand back and question that sense of rush and pace. And so of course, intellectually, it becomes kind of interesting to identify the challenge, the continuities and the ways in which perhaps family life is not changing so much, it's still recognisable today compared with 10 or 40 years ago; that's going to be my next book.

Lois: Great.

Sonia: And so, it becomes kind of interesting to identify where are continuities, and the dynamic of continuity and changes, you know, perhaps underpins the social sciences in so many ways. But my work has...I think there are several big changes for me: one is, yes, coming to kind of recognise the continuities within apparent change, another is the way in which technology – media used to be kind of optional and part of our leisure lives and now they are the infrastructure for society, and I think the pandemic absolutely nailed that, so that was the moment at which... And now we're building technologies into the infrastructure of our healthcare, of our education system, of our social care, of our family, relationships, in ways that, you know, if it stopped, if there was an internet shutdown, as many governments do around the world, I think many people couldn't get up in the morning and they wouldn't know what time of day it was. You know, it's become really kind of profoundly embedded in our lives. So I think kind of finding ways to understand that, I think is really fascinating. And then for me, as I already said, I've kind of made this move from, as it were, trying to understand how families engage with media, to thinking about normative questions of what their rights are and how things should be. For a long time, I've kind of resisted that normative...it's interesting to think about how much a rights perspective, going back to the questions of critique and feminism, in some ways, it intersects with critical approaches and with feminist approaches, and in other ways, it doesn't, because it seeks to be kind of universalistic, that everyone, human rights are everyone's. And yet, forms of discrimination and exclusion within that, and the biggest forms of exclusion from the digital world are: number one – poverty, and number two – gender, worldwide. So you know, thinking about the forms of exclusion and discrimination and the reasons for them is kind of always there within a rights focus, so, yeah.

Lois: No, that's brilliant. Great, so I'm actually going to switch gears a little bit now, and I suppose, ask, you touched kind of upon the BPS and different sections that you've been a part of, so I was wondering if you could maybe tell me a bit about your involvement with POWES, the Psychology of Women and Equalities Section of the BPS?

Sonia: I fear not that much and not very actively, certainly in recent years. I used to go to the conferences, read the journal. I contributed at one point, a rather embarrassing piece about having a son, which didn't seem to be something that feminists ought to do, but anyway, I did. And kind of always sort of been there as a sort of, you know, certainly not ever playing a leading role, but you know, glad that it was there, and supporting when it seemed that was possible. But I think since my concerns switched to thinking about children, I think there are lots of kind of intellectual parallels between thinking about and advocating for gender and in terms of children and generation, but I haven't been active in the last probably couple of decades.

[00:48:22]

Lois: That's interesting. And so, when do you think, because you said that sort of early on in your PhD, that's when you kind of got involved with sections, were you involved kind of at that stage, when...?

Sonia: Yes, I would say, yes, PhD into my early career, yes. And then thereafter, more passively kind of reading and, you know, keeping up with the journals, what do you call it, the little thing that came...

Lois: The Review?

Sonia: The Review, yes, exactly, something between the journal and a magazine somehow.

Lois: Yes. Brilliant, I'm just wondering whether being part of the BPS and those sections impacted your work in any way?

Sonia: Well, again, I saw the BPS as a really crucial way of knowing what the debates were and feeling part of the conversation. I would say that ever since I kind of moved more into media studies, my networks and associations became much more international.

Lois: Right.

Sonia: I think there was a point at which I sort of took my head out of thinking about a national level organisation, I mean, partly I was very cross with the BPS for excluding...for redefining psychology as a science and excluding what I saw as all the interesting debates, and treating them persistently as marginal. No doubt the BPS has changed, but I think by then, I had moved into thinking more internationally, and in fact, the early grant that I got, that my mentor arranged, on children and the changing media environment, that was a 12 country European study, and I think there was something about taking my research focus to Europe. We then, a big group of people, they kind of formed a European Communication Association, there were European networks, it was the days of European funding, which might begin to seem very historic to people now post-Brexit, but there was a European fund. And I turned out to be good at getting European funding – that always required a cross-national network, and so, actually, I think I just took my head out of the BPS, partly because I just sort of shifted disciplines, and partly because I wasn't thinking about a national organisation any more, and I became very involved in the International Communication Association, and soon after that became its president, and my mind was all about how intellectual work and research was organised internationally. And now, for the first time, actually, in a good 20 years, I'm doing research on Britain, or about British young people, and I've sort of come back, and I'm also doing research on young people with mental health problems and working with psychologists. So I'm, at the moment now, in this kind of period of a return, perhaps a full circle, but for a long time, my head has been really elsewhere.

Lois: Yeah, okay. Yeah, I can see that kind of pattern, I suppose. That's really interesting. So just sitting with POWES for a bit then, how did you experience, what were your experiences like at those conferences and so on?

Sonia: I would say generally very positive, a bit like kind of getting into a warm bath, because people were kind of coming from the same place, so...it's horrible mixing your metaphors, but that feeling that people were arguing for and advocating something that, you know, had purpose, and included people. You know, those were the places where a lot of the things that I think eventually have transformed the academy, insofar as it's been transformed, were being advocated – thinking about

childcare when you organise a conference, think about the arrangement of the room when people are speaking and the role of chairs, and including audiences and giving space to shy or marginalised voices. I mean, a lot of that thinking that has, I think, changed at least some parts of the academy, you know, I felt that was where it was being kind of hammered out and developed. It was always interesting for me to, I mean, I suppose I did, I was aware, I also realised that being a feminist and always thinking about feminism and gender was something that was always going to be a crucial thread in my life, but probably wasn't going to be the dominant identity, and so, at those conferences and other kinds of feminist events, you know, the main voices are those who live it as their major professional identity. And so, you know, if I look at what I've written over the years, there have been kind of papers that have moved in and out of being more kind of drawing on and concerned with those themes, but basically... So it was also perhaps just slightly experiences of conferences and networks and debates that made me think, "Yeah, but there's other things I want to do as well."

[00:55:19]

Lois: Yeah, totally fair enough. That's a nice description there. Do you think, with that kind of knowledge and experiences, in that way, do you think POWES should be developing in any particular way in the future of the organisation?

Sonia: I would...there's always this question, isn't there, about whether the organisation that one belongs to, that people can belong to and that does the advocacy, should that be a unit or should it be a cross-cutting strand through all the others, you know, does one want a kind of feminist focus in all the other sections, and I confess, I'm not quite sure how far that has developed. But I would be horrified if it weren't a strong group with an established future, you know, the way I'm kind of free to say, "Okay, well I'm going to go and do other things," taking that sensibility, and knowing that such a body exists, I'm free to go and do other things because I feel it's secure. If I felt it weren't secure, you know, one might have to...and you can tell me if it is – and I felt the same about the Gender Institute at LSE, I could kind of go off and say, "Okay, we're going to create a media department now," because it was in good hands and it was secure. But every time it looked like it was under threat again, you know, I and many others would go back to the meetings and fight the case again, and you know, show the support again. So it is a bit about feeling it's a little like...what was that research about children going away from their parent, you know, they kind of check that the parent is still there and then off they can go and do their own thing.

Lois: Yes.

Sonia: I really ought to remember the name of the person who did those lovely studies.

Lois: Yeah, no, I know exactly what you mean. That's, yeah, that's great. So then in terms of...

Sonia: Oh sorry, I mean, one other thing, I also don't quite know what POWES does, but clearly there's a role to play in terms of...I said I was a second wave feminist, I hope you're not going to strike me out of the record for saying that...

Lois: Not at all.

Sonia: What I...but there are still all those questions about gender pay gaps and provision of childcare, and recognition of the effect the problems of discrimination or exclusion for, you know, in relation to the REF or promotion or whatever. At LSE, there's a group that, a cross-institution group, that is called the Gender Forum, that actually kind of keeps those issues, and fights, I think, the organisation quite effectively. I don't know how much POWES does that within the BPS in terms of...but I hope it does.

Lois: Yeah. So that yes, I mean, well, from my perspective, we try our best, but yeah, I think that's a really good point in that being kind of an aim and a key kind of purpose for it. Yeah, okay, so in terms of feminism and psychology more broadly then, what impact do you think feminists have made in psychology so far? And where do you think there remains to be things to be accomplished?

[00:59:31]

- Sonia: Okay, where has it... So well, over the years, I can think of a range of enormously significant impacts, I mean, if you think of the version of the kind of sex versus gender debate as it originally was in psychology is now...I don't think anyone...I haven't heard a psychologist making kind of naïve essentialist biological reductionist accounts of gender in the last 20 or 30 years, I think that argument is kind of won. I think maybe people still do those experiments in which they say, "I've got to have an equal number of men and women because that's what the textbook says, and I can plug sex in as a variable in my analysis of variance, but I don't really have any ideas..." I don't know if that still goes in, I hope it doesn't. I feel like there should be a critical sensibility that says... So I think there is much more, a greater level of nuance and complexity in thinking about gender within psychology and in people's lives. For whatever historical reasons, it seems to me that the research on gender within psychology or the psychology of women also kind of connected itself to qualitative rather than quantitative, that was one big fight, to bringing in discursive methods, narrative methods, biographical methods, other ways of understanding people's lives and their own understanding, thinking about reflexivity. I think all of those arguments, in some ways, they could have come in through social psychology as well, but I don't think they did, I think it was the study of, the POWES group that really did that. And now, I think, actually, I haven't looked at undergraduate or graduate methods courses in psychology for a long time, but I know that at LSE, that's what we've taught for a long time. And it has been really, you know, so thinking about research methods, and thinking about them critically and reflexively and about research ethics, and recognising... So, you know, these transformations in a field, they all have multiple causes, but I would say in this country, it's been kind of spearheaded by the POWES group and effective, because you know, when you make an institutional change, it develops its own...it becomes sustainable in a way that is more significant, in a way than having to keep making the arguments.
- Lois: Yeah.
- Sonia: So I would...that may be what comes to mind. I hope every psychology department knows that if it promotes its men and not its women, or has, you know, problematic glass ceilings or whatever, there is a group in the BPS that will pay attention and that will provide support and guidance and critique, and effort. I don't want to burden the group with the responsibility for equality and diversity across the academy, but yeah. When I look at the statements made, you know, when you read the statements made by people, when you vote for who's going to be the president, let's say, of the BPS, it seems to me attention to questions of gender and equality and diversity are now always embedded there, in a way that probably they weren't 30 or 40 years ago, although I haven't checked.
- Lois: Yeah, absolutely. Brilliant. So what advice might you give to feminist psychologists entering the field today?
- Sonia: Go for it, enjoy it, but watch your back, probably. So I might distinguish being a feminist psychologist from feminist advice to psychologists. So a feminist psychologist probably does still have to watch their back, and there is still, it seems to me, this idea that there's kind of only space for one in a department.
- Lois: Yes.
- Sonia: You know, there's not kind of opportunity to really kind of...so that can create regrettable competition within feminist psychologists, as well as a feeling that there's not really kind of necessarily space to overtake or refashion how psychology is thought of in a department. So I'm sure there is still very significant fights. Feminist advice to psychologists might be more kind of practical, and about, as you've already hinted, finding mentors, identifying where support structures are, being ready to join others' fights, but also getting support for yourself, negotiating salaries, not sitting back and hoping someone will promote you out of the goodness of their heart. Yeah.
- Lois: Yeah, brilliant advice. Thank you. Okay, so I think you've kind of covered everything. I did want to, and now I'm kind of going backwards a little bit, but I just wanted to make sure that we'd covered everything kind of in time. But I wanted maybe to go back to your work around, I suppose there are kind of dominant discourses in the media area around harm and safety and risk, especially when it

comes to children. I'm just kind of wondering what your understanding of kind of safety and privacy is in that context and whether that's impacted by those kind of underlying feminist values at all?

[01:06:51]

Sonia: Yes. Yes, so the evidence is overwhelming, that risk and harm are...the evidence is overwhelming that those are more experienced by girls. Girls are more often exposed to all kinds of online harms and intrusions on their privacy, both from parents seeking to keep them safe, ironically, and because schools, you know, there's just all kinds of monitoring now. In a way, it affects everyone, but you could argue girls need particular spaces of privacy. The work we did looking at gender in middle and low income countries, there was a lot of research about girls needing to get access to health and reproductive information online, and they had a greater need of that than boys, but also their parents were surveilling them so much more that they were unable to get that. So there are some really interesting kind of advocacy struggles going on around access, girls' access to tech in many countries, which is generally worse than boys'. There's some, certainly in some Global South countries, there's very upsetting evidence about girls being under pressure to...the phrase is kind of, "Provide sexual favours," but that's way too nice a phrase, and are being sexually exploited in a trade for digital access, which is truly horrifying. And a lot of interesting facts about, yes, whether the right to information, for example, includes the right to information about sexual health, or indeed sexual identity or sexual expression, which is all, like, controversial, actually, in most places. Of course, there is always lots of concern about boys in relation to pornography and aggression and hate, and so it's not that there aren't, you know, questions of gender actually embrace both and of course, insofar as the boys grow up to be the men who are partly the problem for the girls/women. Of course, all of it's important, and all of it requires our kind of critical attention. But questions of access, questions of violence or aggression and questions of privacy are absolutely gendered, yes, so that's, yeah, that's a really fascinating thing. There's a lot of advocacy groups that have this as their priority; how effective they are, I don't know. Drawing on the kind of feminism that advocates for equality, as it were, and equal opportunity and equity of outcomes.

Lois: Absolutely, okay, lovely, thank you very much. Brilliant, so I think I've definitely covered everything now. Is there anything I haven't mentioned that you'd like to touch on and talk about at all?

Sonia: I did a similar interview with a colleague recently, as it happens, and she asked me lots about my own personal experience of being passed over or harassed or being treated worse because I was a woman in the academy. I'm interested that you didn't ask that. But my answer to her was actually, I don't have very many such stories, and I've been reflecting on why that is, and I do think there is something generational about... I've often been pushed forward to sit on a committee or have an opportunity, because I think the time had come when finally someone said, "We have to have a woman there." I don't love that reason one bit, but I did just want to say, I think, you know, there are different fights to fight at different times, and my career, in a way, because it kind of overlaps with the rising tide of feminist effectiveness, has meant that in some ways, I've had some opportunities, and not suffered some problems that, you know, will of course be the reason why there are no, or very few women mentors in the generation older than me, and perhaps explain a kind of, well, I don't know, there's probably more to dig into about, you know, how I somehow managed to avoid some of the forms of harassment that I know other people have suffered. But I have been, I do think it interesting that sometimes there are, you know, you're kind of pushed forward and given an opportunity, and I can remember some of my colleagues being shocked when I got promoted to professor, as they saw it, 'early'. I don't think it was so early, but they saw it as early, and I can remember thinking, you know, both their shock is gendered, but also the fact that I was promoted at that point was a deliberate effort by the institution to try to right a historic wrong of not promoting women.

Lois: That's really interesting, yeah, thank you for bringing that up, I think that is definitely, yeah, a really interesting topic, and yeah, just, as you say, kind of strange that it can differ between people so drastically.

[01:13:21]

Sonia: Yeah, for many complex reasons, yeah.

Lois: Yeah, well, I'm glad that there wasn't too many kind of situations of being overlooked, but...yeah, I totally know, totally see what you mean by those kind of gendered reactions to that, that's really interesting. Lovely. Thank you. So just for the record, could you please state your gender?

Sonia: Yes, in what terms?

Lois: However you'd like to describe it.

Sonia: As a woman, her.

Lois: Yeah, brilliant. Place and date of birth?

Sonia: I was born in 1960 in Adelaide, Australia.

Lois: Oh, gosh, exciting.

Sonia: My parents went out there for jobs, and found it too hot and came back.

Lois: I see. And occupation?

Sonia: A Professor of Social Psychology at LSE.  
[End of Transcript]