

**Psychology's Feminist Voices Oral History Project
Interview with Valerie Walkerdine**

*Interviewed by Lois Donnelly over Zoom™
May 31, 2022*

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Psychology's Feminist Voices Oral History Project

Interview with Valerie Walkerdine

Interviewed by Lois Donnelly

Conducted over the Zoom online platform

May 31, 2022

Lois: I'm Lois Donnelly, interviewing Professor Valerie Walkerdine on 31st 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 a little bit about yourself, so it may be a little bit in terms of your career, the trajectory of that and topics of your work.

Valerie: Oh, just a bit then. (Laughter)

Lois: Yes! (Laughter)

Valerie: Okay. Well, I think one of the salient issues for me is how I got into psychology really. Because I was... I went to a grammar school as a working-class girl. I was the first person in my family to go on to higher education. And when I was at school, I don't know, I didn't really know what a university was. I really had no idea. And what I really wanted to be was an artist, but I didn't think you could be an artist. And there was somebody in my class who mentioned psychology, but I'd never heard of psychology really. I didn't know what it was or what you could do, but I had this really clear idea that I had to think about a job at the end and that any kind of higher education was a bit like an apprenticeship.

So, I chose primary school teacher training, which then was a three-year course, but it wasn't a degree. I went to Goldsmiths and when I was there, I realised that there were people no cleverer than me doing degrees, and I thought, "Oh, okay".

And I also discovered that I loved learning, you know, I just really, really wanted to learn. And so, I came to psychology through the psychology we did on teacher training. So, there was some psychology, and I became fascinated by that really. And so, I taught in a primary school for a couple of years and then I did a course which gave me a BPS graduate status, but it was a course for teachers at the Institute of Education in London. So, there was something called an Academic Diploma in Education and I specialised in psychology. And then I did a Master's in psychology. And then I did a PhD.

So, it's quite an unusual route but I became really, really interested in psychology, and doing this academic diploma, I mean I'd only taught for two years, so I was the youngest person they'd ever had on the diploma. (Laughter) But they said, you know, they'd let me in. And then I said, "Well, I think I'd quite like to do a Master's". And this woman who interviewed me said, "Well, you'll have to get a distinction". And I thought, "Oh bloody hell, a distinction". And I had no idea really what that meant.

So, I spent a huge amount of time in the library and thoroughly enjoyed myself. Duly got the distinction. But I'd also applied – I mean, tell me if this isn't relevant, but it seems relevant to me because it's part of kind of the career of a working-class woman at that particular moment.

So, I'd applied for some money. To do the diploma I'd cashed in two years of superannuation from my teaching, and I taught literacy on one day a week. So that's how I funded the diploma. But then I hadn't got any funding for the Master's. And I applied for funding from the equivalent of the ERSC. It was called the SSRC in those days. And I didn't get the funding. I remember phoning up from Waterloo Station, from a callbox at Waterloo Station, saying, obviously before mobile phones, and they said, "Oh no, you didn't get it". And I said, "Oh, well I got a distinction". I remember this woman on the end of the line saying, "Well, there are people who got firsts". And I said, "But I got a distinction," you couldn't get higher than a distinction. And that was the first time it kind of hit me that I understood that this thing that I'd got wasn't the right thing. I didn't know it wasn't the right thing. It was touted as equivalent to a degree, so I didn't know it wasn't equivalent to a degree. But anyway, I...

[0:06:35]

So, what they did at the Institute, they were very nice actually, the group of psychologists there, they got me a research assistant job with a visiting professor who asked me to do my dissertation on women and fear of success. Now that's not the topic I would have chosen, but it's what I did because that was the only way I could fund the Master's. But I did a fulltime job as a research assistant and was a fulltime student, which you couldn't get away with it these days, but I think they just sort of turned a blind eye.

Anyway, it was terribly exciting, and I got my recognition as a graduate member of the BPS, so that was all done. And I duly looked at fear of success. So, that was, I suppose, the first feminist psychology that I did because it was a big topic then. And I know I was very – I can't remember much about it, to be perfectly honest, but I know I was incredibly critical of the work of the person I was working for. (Laughter) Which I'm not sure went down terribly well. But I had to write my own dissertation, you know, and so I said what I wanted to say.

And then, having got the Master's, then I could apply for funding for a PhD. And my PhD is from Bristol in developmental psychology. But this was, so my PhD was from 1972 to 75, and it was the, you know, second wave feminism was really a big deal then. And although the topic of my PhD in developmental psychology was also linked to somebody's project. And was not in any way overtly feminist. I was, you know, the whole milieu was about feminism and feminist politics. And that's – I became caught up in what I would have called then socialist feminism, especially in relation to the intersection of class and gender.

One of the things that I discovered was that the higher up in education I went, the less working-class women they were. Well, I mean I didn't know any. I didn't know a single one. There were plenty on teacher training. I'm not sure that I... oh no, I met one more on my Master's, but I didn't know anybody during my PhD.

So that, and it was... the time was, you know, it was after May 1968 when the students had rebelled in Paris. And so, there was this huge kind of issue with radical politics and feminist critiques of the male left really. So, that's what I was part of. And also, I was very interested in, what in those days, I would have called French feminism, because I was a bit of a Francophile. (Laughter)

Lois: Okay. Interesting.

Valerie: Well, I was a bit of a Francophile because my school had an exchange scheme with a school in France and we went to stay for three weeks with a penfriend and then the penfriend came back to stay with us. I was 14, I'd never been further than Skegness, and it was the most exciting thing I'd ever done. So that's how I became a bit of a Francophile, because I just thought... there was like this deeply romantic idea of this kind of other place.

So, is this the sort of thing you want to hear?

Lois: Absolutely, yeah. I was just going to ask actually what do you mean by French feminism and what that was like.

Valerie: Oh, in those days, that would have been, so Lacan, Jacques Lacan, was very big in France, and so there were quite a few feminists in France who wrote psychoanalytically, but against Lacan. Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, for example, there were a lot of them. There were a lot of them. So, what I would have called French feminism used psychoanalysis but in a different kind of way, and they were very radical. And I was quite taken with psychoanalysis myself because at that time there were books like *Feminism and Psychoanalysis* and that became important to me in relation to thinking about psychology. I had this bright idea that me and some friends should start a journal. This was soon after I'd done my PhD; I finished my PhD in 1975. And I wanted to make it a radical psychology journal. That was my original idea. Because at that time, you know, I mean there was no internet and lots of radical groups self-published journals because there was something called the Radical Distribution Co-op, and there were whole distribution networks and subscription networks, bookshops stocked these journals, especially more radical bookshops.

[0:14:21]

So, I spoke to various people, most of whom had a background in psychology, and said, "Let's do this journal". I can't remember why I thought it was a good idea, but anyway...

And we eventually agreed that we were so critical of mainstream psychology that we were not going to call it a radical psychology journal. We were going to call it, it's a terrible title, *Ideology and Consciousness*.

Lois: Oh.

Valerie: Yes. Well, indeed. It doesn't naturally trip off the tongue. And that was because we were all interested in French left theory, at that time, which was dominated by Louis Althusser and Jacques Lacan and the critiques around that. So, it was very big on ideology.

And so, we thought if you look at *Ideology and Consciousness* number one, which is still floating around, you would see that we are very critical of a previous generation of radical psychologists who were around. Poor old John Shotter, we gave John Shotter a very hard time. And which since I've got much older, I think was so unfair really because it failed to, you know, we really thought we were the bee's knees, and we knew everything. And everything that had gone before most just such a load of rubbish, you know?

And so that was, you know, and we were going to do high theory, we were not going to be constrained by the limits of psychology, but we were going to define something else that wasn't or didn't make a distinction between the psychic and the social. We wanted to cross these boundaries and we called it subjectivity. We called what we were looking at subjectivity. And we were very critical of a psychology that just dealt with a kind of singular person, a singular subject.

And so that journal, *Ideology and Consciousness*, was part of, as I said, there was a group of these radical journals. *Feminist Review* started at that sort of time. There was a feminist one called MF. You know, there were a whole number of them. And so, there was very much a kind of left, feminist scene. That's the best way I could put it. Because everybody, all the women in this kind of scene would have identified with socialism in some way, or with Marxism.

Lois: Yeah. Yeah, that makes sense. Do you remember any of the people that you were involved with in the journal?

Valerie: Oh yes. Nikolas Rose, Diana Adlam then, Couze Venn, Angie Salfield, Julian Henriques.

Lois: Ah okay. So, you had a kind of a little community or network of people there that you were all kind of working together?

Valerie: Yes. Yes. You know, I got this group together and then I said to these people I knew, "Are you interested in doing this journal?" and then we formed, we called ourselves the collective, a collective

was very big in those days because it spoke of collective action. We weren't going to call ourselves an editorial board or even an editorial group. We were an editorial collective.

[0:19:06]

Lois: Okay. And how did you all meet then at the beginning, kind of how did you...?

Valerie: I knew Couze Venn through work, I met Nik Rose on the Master's. We were both doing the Master's at the Institute of Education together. I met Diana Adlam and Angie Salfield through Nik, although both of them had worked at the Institute of Education.

Lois: Ah okay.

Valerie: And Julian I knew through my PhD. He did a PhD in psychology at the same time as me in Bristol.

Lois: Okay. That's really interesting. So, yeah, kind of like tightly connected but in various different ways.

Valerie: Yes. Well, I mean that's how I found, they were people I knew who then brought in other people, but that's how it worked, yeah. I just contacted people I knew really. (Laughter)

Lois: No, that's really interesting. Yeah, okay, so I was just wondering if we could go back a little bit maybe and just talk about that kind of beginning of when you were doing your diploma and thinking about not knowing that it maybe wasn't equal to a degree. And, yeah, how that was for you and as well you were saying there not being any other working-class people whilst doing your Master's or your PhD. And what that experience was like.

Valerie: Well, I was very excited, of course, to be doing something and learning and I think learning how to study. You know, all these things, I don't know that I really knew. I sort of worked them out by sitting in the library. But I should also say that I wasn't very good in seminars. I was very quiet. I felt very, this is where I felt, I think I felt femininity and class, you know, those...

There were men who, of course, were very voluble. And it took me a lot to say something. And when I said it, it often was very angry because I'd had to really, really work myself up into a bit of a lather to actually say something. Whereas I clearly remember men who were very keen on the sound of their own voices and had no difficulty in saying anything really.

And so, I think that was a big thing. You know, to actually gradually over quite a number of years really find what I wanted to say and the confidence to say it without caring what anybody else thought and to not allow these particularly men to dominate.

So, even despite the fact that within feminism at the time there was a lot of talk about men dominating conversations and arguments, nevertheless it's one thing to be able to talk about that amongst a group of women, it's quite another to feel very stupid. I felt stupid and ignorant as though I didn't know anything. And here I was among these clever people who, you know, what right had I to say anything? And I'm pretty sure, my memory's a bit hazy, but I'm pretty sure that when I really got roused to say something it was because they were really saying something stupid about working class people actually. I think that's what, you know, because there was not only a lot of sexism, there was a lot of classism. A lot.

Lois: Yeah. I can imagine.

Valerie: And a lot in psychology, so you know I mean it was so, I suppose it was both wildly exciting and daunting and at some level frightening. But I never gave it up. I mean I would never have given it up. It was so exciting; it just was wonderful really.

Lois: Oh brilliant. Yeah, so as you say that is quite an interesting way into psychology. And so, what was kind of, yeah, the first thing that attracted you to the discipline I suppose. If you can think about...

[0:25:10]

Valerie: It's a good question, but I don't...

I'm having to guess now because I can't remember.

Lois: That's fine.

Valerie: I know I really enjoyed these lectures as part of the teacher training and I'm trying to think why did I enjoy them so much? Do you know, I think it was because there was this idea at that time of a kind of complex... well, the word I'm going to use I don't know whether it's right, interiority, at that time that it was about feelings and thinking and attitudes and what would be some of the other things that came, childrearing I'm sure would have come up. But there was something about... I think it would have been something about that, this way that it looked at, it gave me a way to look at issues that felt relevant to me and my complicated inner and outer life I suppose. I think it was something like that. Because that's always what continues to fascinate me. It's not just, you know, I work in the social sciences, but I approach things so differently than most sociologists because I'm always looking at more complex subjective processes and relationships and most sociologists who I work with don't do that. They don't work in that way.

So, I think it's always been that that fascinated me, always been that that I was trying to understand. Probably later trying to understand something more about me and my family. Those sorts of things. I didn't at that point think, "Oh psychology is the way to change the world". No. It was much more... it was much kind of more mundane than that. It just interested me. It really interested me.

Lois: And so, do you think that kind of idea around your background and your experiences then kind of going into higher education, did that impact your work going forward then?

Valerie: Oh yes. It's always impacted my work, yeah. I think I became more vocal about it from the 1980s, so it wouldn't have been so obvious when I got my PhD, which was 1975. I don't think it would have been so obvious then at all, until the mid-1980s where I did start to publish work that involved talking about myself.

Lois: That's interesting, yeah. And why do you think that shift maybe happened?

Valerie: I found the confidence to say something and to... it was part of a kind of critical voice, having a kind of critical voice and thinking that I might have something to say I suppose. (Laughter) And finding, yeah, finding the confidence to say it. And the first time I remember this was there was a book edited by a woman called Liz Heron called Truth, Dare or Promise: Girls Growing Up in the Fifties. And she invited a group of, well, women she knew to write chapters for this book. So, like kind of autobiographical chapters. And I remember, I read some of them and they were women talking about taking up painting in Paris, these are the ones I remember, or going to live in an ashram in India, and all I could think was, "Well, what have I got to say?" I was a girl guide, and I couldn't, and it was as though I didn't have a story, I didn't have the right kind of story because it was so ordinary.

So, I called it Dreams from an Ordinary Childhood because there were stories of people dropping out and things like that. Well, I wasn't going to drop out because I was only just being let into something. And so, I was quite angry when I wrote this. And it was a sort of coming out piece really. And I think it was through that that I began to feel not only that I had something to say, but that I needed to say it.

But also, the work on the journal Ideology and Consciousness, also gave me a particular view of the work in psychology and what I was doing. So, I think I just started to gain more and more confidence and allowed the kind of mix of emotions that I felt to be spoken.

[0:32:20]

Lois: That's really interesting, yeah, thank you for explaining that. It's really, really nice. Okay, so then kind of, yeah, you mentioned I suppose that maybe was it the Master's that was the kind of first feminist thing you'd done.

Valerie: Yeah.

Lois: So, do you think that's when your identity as a feminist developed, or do you think there was anything before that, or what was that experience of that identity developing? What was that like?

Valerie: Well, it's a really hard question. I don't know. I'm not quite sure really. I mean I don't think... I wouldn't at that time have quite identified so much with a women's movement. That was much more when I'd started my PhD really. But I was very aware of feminism and feminist arguments and how they were appearing in some psychological work. So, that was exciting and also, but the thing that's coming into my mind particularly actually is something that's not academic at all but it's... I remember my mum coming to London for a day, for a day trip. And she said something like, "I can see why you really like this". And she'd never said anything like that before. And there was a way in which because of course it was exciting. I'd left home in Derby, I'd got on a train, and I'd gone to London and then I'd started to have this career in London. And I realised I think that unlike her I could have this career. Feminism had opened up this possibility of a particular trajectory in my life that had not been available to her. So that's what it meant at that point really.

Lois: Yeah, that seems really important. Yeah. Okay, and so I suppose afterwards your feminism and work came together. Do you feel like that was quite a natural thing?

Valerie: Yes.

Lois: Yeah.

Valerie: Yes. It was a natural thing. It was the politics I was into, it's the context I was in. Yeah. I mean that's just what I did. It became what I did. Yeah.

Lois: Sorry, did we talk about what your PhD topic was on? I feel like...

Valerie: I said it was in developmental psychology.

Lois: Oh yes, yeah.

Valerie: That was not a feminist topic at that time.

Lois: Okay.

Valerie: But it was about, because the PhD, I did get a scholarship for that, but it was, my PhD was linked to the work of my supervisor who was doing work on children's linguistic and cognitive development. So that's what I worked on.

Lois: Right, okay.

Valerie: And I think that's why I'm saying it wasn't really til after my PhD when I kind of... because if you think about it, I hadn't chosen the topic for my Master's, and I hadn't had a completely free rein on the topic for my PhD. Because I needed money, and this is what was being offered. So, I think it wasn't until, you know, I was already of course interested in feminism during my PhD, but it wasn't what I was working on in quite the same way.

Lois: Yeah, I see what you mean. And so, did you get a chance to explore what you wanted to explore after the PhD?

[0:37:29]

Valerie: Oh yeah.

Lois: What kind of...? Where did you head after that?

Valerie: Well, you mean where did I head theoretically? Or where did...? What do you mean where did I head?

Lois: Yeah, just in terms of the topics of your work I suppose and your career.

Valerie: Well, yeah, I got a job at what was then called Northeast London Polytechnic, and so within the limits of my teaching, I was much freer to kind of teach in a critical and feminist way. So, that's what I did. And I started to write and because you've got to remember in those days not everybody wrote things. There wasn't the pressure that there is now to produce.

As well as doing Ideology and Consciousness I got together with some of those people plus, so there was myself, Couze Venn, Julian Henriques, there was Wendy Hollway and Cathy Urwin, and we wrote a book called Changing the Subject: Psychology, Social Regulation and Subjectivity, which came out in 1984. And we took years to write this book. We wrote it all collectively. And you could never do it now. We had a, you know, nobody expected anything. Nobody expected a book. I mean it's nice if you did one, but the expectation wasn't there.

And so, we worked together for, do you know, I can't remember when we started it, but late 70s I would say we started it. We took ages. And it came out in 1984. But we used to meet all the time and discuss our ideas, share our ideas and build this text together. So, I would say, when you asked me about feminist psychology, actually of course it was absolutely imbued with feminism, but it was also imbued with this radical critique of psychology. So, the two things were always there together for me. And I also felt that feminism also could be a sensibility, it could be a way in which you can approach any topic. It doesn't have to be a feminist topic, or it doesn't necessarily in those days have to be about women. It can be about all kinds of things. But you approached the topic via a feminist way of thinking about that topic. And I still maintain that I still think that's what I think.

Lois: Yeah. Yeah, that's really interesting way of looking at it.

Valerie: Because otherwise I would have said that at that time a lot of feminist psychology was about women, but I think I also want to see it as about psychology. And what psychology is. And that's what I mean by a feminist sensibility, because you can be writing about things that are not necessarily involving women, but you are still approaching that topic of psychology critically in a way that's strongly influenced by your feminism.

Lois: Yeah.

Valerie: Does that make sense to you?

Lois: It does, yeah. Yeah, I think that's a really good point.

Valerie: But so, I mean I would have said at that time, I wouldn't have separated out my feminism from other forms of radical politics, and other forms of radical writing. So, I mean I think probably my trajectory is different in that way from some other feminists in psychology because it wasn't automatically just focused on women, despite the fact that I'd worked on theories of success in women for my Master's.

Lois: Yeah, I see what you mean. So, it's all kind of within this critical thought really?

Valerie: Yes. Yeah.

[0:42:54]

Lois: Yeah. That's really interesting. Okay, so I suppose talking more about kind of your work then over the life of your career, do you have any kind of particular accomplishment or piece of work that you're most proud of?

Valerie: Oh, I saw that in your interview questions, and I didn't know.

Lois: That's fine.

Valerie: I think I'm quite proud of all my work really. (Laughter) I'm sorry. I don't want to sound too boastful, but I don't know whether I could pick something out.

Lois: That's totally fine.

Valerie: I mean I'm very proud of the first thing I wrote which was this Dreams from an Ordinary Childhood. Because it was brave for me to do this. You know, I'm very proud of that. Even though it may not seem like much, it was a very big deal for me. But I think that... oh, you know, I don't know. I can't pick out one thing. I'm really sorry.

Lois: No, not at all. Yeah, it just kind of, it's interesting, isn't it, and I think you're absolutely right to be proud of all the achievements and work an everything.

Valerie: Well, I don't want to boast. My mum always said but self-praise was no recommendation, but I am, you know, I've really believed in everything I've written. And I think that's it really. You know, I believed mostly passionately about everything I've written.

Lois: Yeah. No, that's great. So, I was thinking I suppose that a lot of your work involves thinking about class and neoliberalism. And I was wondering maybe you could talk a bit about how that integrates with your feminist values maybe if we haven't touched, maybe you feel like you've covered that already, but...

Valerie: Well, of course, the work on neoliberalism is much more recent because I didn't start writing about neoliberalism until the 90s. And I'd like to just go back a little bit, if that's all right.

Lois: Of course.

Valerie: I'm thinking about what's coming into my mind actually is work that the first stage of which I did before any of the work on neoliberalism and that is work that's based around a study of girls at home and at school and that takes girls who were born, working class and middle class girls, born in the mid-1970s and I did some work that actually I didn't collect the original data. That was collected by Barbara Tizard, when the girls were four, but Helen, Lucy and I reanalysed the data and brought that out as a book. And then we also worked on the data again when the girls were ten, we saw them, and we wrote *Girls and Mathematics*.

So, for a while my work became known as somebody who works on *Girls and Mathematics*. And that actually also came out of my earlier work on development. It's all coming back to me now. Because I was interested in reasoning and rationality and therefore became interested in why girls were not considered to be very good at maths in those days, or science.

So, with the same kind of data or the same set of girls and their families, I started to with a, there were a group of us, started to look at this topic. So, the first book that came out about the four-year-olds is called *Democracy in the Kitchen: Regulating Mothers and Socialising Daughters*. So, that was about class and gender and very much focused on the intimacies of home and growing up.

So, I was also at that time, so that came out in 1985. And then there was also the girls and mathematics book called *Counting Girls Out* came out in also in 1985, both by Virago which was a feminist press. And then we found them again when they were 21 and wrote it up as *Growing Up Girl*.

[0:48:49]

So, and in-between then, I was doing a lot of writing about mostly used that and similar data, so cases from that work about girls, one girl and her family watching television, there was things about another one I wrote called *Behind the Painted Smile* which was about femininity.

So, I think before I got onto neoliberalism, I was in the 80s in particular and then in the early 90s I was working on these issues of girlhood, girls growing up, transition to womanhood, always crosscut by class. So that was the issue.

The original sample that Barbara Tizard had worked with were not exclusively white, but mostly white. And she didn't look at race at all. And in that early work we didn't really consider it. In the later work, we actually recruited some more young women to deal with the fact that it was a rather white piece of work.

And we did video diaries and there was a television series. And so, there was a lot of work on that during that period. And that took me right up to the mid-1990s and the Growing Up Girl didn't come out until 2001. But neoliberalism, as an issue, I think I want to relate it back to that work because it was the way that class differences across this group of girls and their families emerged and changed over the course of the 21 years that we had of these girls' lives and their families' lives. That, you know, you really started to see... well, not only differences in the way that class was thought about, because when Barbara Tizard first worked on this, class was defined in terms of classification of occupations and education. So, there was this huge split really between the middle class and the working-class families, and there was consequently, they did very different kinds of work, the families, and there were huge differences in attainment, educational attainment between the middle class and working-class girls. I mean, enormous.

And I remember finding it very, very upsetting because you'd get some of the girls in our sample were doing really well at school, but the school was not – the performance of the school in general wasn't anything like the performance of the schools that many of the middle-class girls attended. So there was, I was very upset and angry about it because there was no... the working class girls didn't have the same kind of chance and the working class modes of regulation of mothers and childrearing were also so different. But what you started to see across the period that they were growing up was you do start to see the influence of second wave feminism, you do start to see mothers having careers and some mothers doing degrees and that kind of thing. And you do eventually start to see more of the working-class girls going to higher education, but so few of them did it in a straightforward way. They were more like me in that sense that they got there in the end, but they didn't start off going there.

But because you could see these huge changes over the 21 years from the mid-70s to mid-90s, you also could see changes in incomes, ways of making money, kinds of work. I could see the impoverishment of many working-class families because dads, and it was the dads at first, were working in steady jobs and many of those jobs disappeared. And the jobs became less secure. And the income in the family became less secure.

And so, I was very kind of into all that through that work. And so when the work on neoliberalism started because the whole of Britain, and other countries, was changing because we lost the heavy industrial base. Margaret Thatcher got in. She moved to finance capital. And so I became interested in not only what was happening in relation to femininity at that time because there were occupational shifts, but also to masculinity and the relationship between masculinity and femininity that was brought about by the loss of heavy industry.

[0:56:35]

Lois: Yes.

Valerie: And so that's what I started to more explicitly work on in relation to neoliberalism. But I also, I worked on that, I worked in Australia for six years in Sydney and I worked on that there. I also worked on girls, masculinity, femininity and children and computer games, video games.

So I worked on a whole load of different things really. But I... and the video games stuff was also following up the rationality stuff about girls and –

Lois: Right.

Valerie: - maths, because people were saying girls weren't so good at video games, that kind of stuff. You know, and boys were so much better.

And those kinds of things used to annoy me. But the work that I started on neoliberalism was much more about the changing nature of the relationship between subjectivity and work and the way in which it no longer became a job that you did, but somehow something that you had to embody.

Lois: I see.

Valerie: I remember one woman talking to me about selling water, and she said, "Well, we're made up of a large percentage of water". So, for her, in a sense she became, you know, she felt the job was synonymous with her sense about the importance of water to her. And you started to see in the late 1990s, you started to see this sense of psychological profiling, personality testing, a move away from, as I say, a sense that anybody could do a job to the way in which you then had to find yourself, that you had to find your psychological and personality characteristics that made you suitable to embody this, a particular kind of work. And, of course, as we know with neoliberalism that's just become more and more and more intense so that the notion of choice, for example, which didn't make sense to my working class mothers and daughters in the late 1970s, it's absolutely ubiquitous now. Our whole trajectories are taken to be an object of choice. And so, while there have been profound changes in the labour market that relate to class and gender, they are also changes that are imbued with this neoliberal rhetoric of the self-choice trajectory striving. You know, the whole, everything has changed, and I became, you know, I was really wanting to intervene in that and also to think about some work I did was on TV shows that were, one was Ladette to Lady, others were about change the way you looked that go from have a new wardrobe to extreme makeover, well, you had plastic surgery. So, the incorporation of those things into neoliberalism was what really interested me.

And then I moved to Cardiff and I knew about the Welsh valleys, but there were a lot of people in my department working, doing work on the Welsh valleys and because I'd been doing this work in Australia on changes in work and neoliberalism, I applied for some funding through the ESRC identities programme which looked at changes in one former steel town in the South Wales valleys. And that, I suppose, brought together many of the things that had been of interest to me across my career from class, work, the experience of growing up in a family where the men did manual labour, heavy industry, the loss of manual work, the rise in service work, the impoverishment in the town, and not only the changing work in relation to masculinity, but also what was happening to the women in that community, about whom nobody was really talking. Everybody was focused on the men. I mean, quite rightly, because, you know, it was a terrible situation.

But the women that we talked to were kind of trying to hold everything together for these men and nobody was talking about them. Nobody.

Lois: That's a really interesting piece work.

[1:04:20]

Valerie: So, I mean I was trying to talk about all that really.

Lois: Yeah.

Valerie: I feel as though I'm going on really.

(Laughter)

I kind of... I do care passionately about all the work I've done and that's why it's difficult to pick any of it out.

Lois: No, it's so interesting. And you can really see there as you're talking about that how your work changes with the political climate.

Valerie: Yes, it does. It did. It does. And I think that's – because for me it was always political. As that changes, then the work itself changes.

Lois: Yeah. Yeah, absolutely.

Valerie: Or morphs a bit. Morphs a bit. (Laughter)

Lois: Yeah, no, that's really interesting. And I suppose what I was going to mention as well I think more recently you've done some work around Brexit and working class voters as well.

Valerie: Yeah. I have, yes.

Lois: And I suppose, yeah, I don't know if you wanted to unpack that a little bit as well, because that's again...

Valerie: Well, that also grew out of the work in the valleys, you see, and some other community-oriented work that I did in a town that was close to but not in the valleys. And in the way of these things, I got some more money from the ESRC to go and work with communities that I'd already worked with to talk about Brexit. And I got really fed up with the pathologisation of what I saw as pathologisation of working-class Brexit voters who appeared to be blamed for everything. And it made me very, very cross because I knew what had happened to the lives of these people, at least in South Wales, and I was really concerned about, a kind of a reading of their voting patterns as indicating that they were taken in or caught up in some fantasy of empire. I mean, really. Please. These are people who'd become really impoverished. I mean, caught up in a fantasy of empire? I don't think so.

And it sort of harked back to other work which had always pathologised working class families in relation to the media of one kind or another. You know? They're watching too much television in the 1950s or they don't watch it critically or they don't do this or they don't do that or they can't talk about it. So, of course, you get the same kind of arguments being brought up about social media and the use of social media.

Well, the first thing to note is that many of these people were too poor to spend much time on social media and didn't even have internet access except on a phone that they often couldn't afford to use. That's the first thing.

The second thing was that there were amongst people relatively high levels of illiteracy still. People talk to each other, but what came up in the discussions was jobs. It was jobs. It was jobs, jobs and more jobs. It was about a sense of never being heard. Apparently being given things that... but they weren't the right things. You know, a road that connected Birmingham and Swansea, funded by the EU, but which was 20 years too late. The loss of town centres, the loss of amenities, the loss of anywhere to do any shopping. Estates called The Reservation by other inhabitants as no-go areas. I mean it made me very upset and doing work, discussions with more middle-class people in these places, they talked about not going on holiday. And it was, you know, they weren't going to be able to go on holiday. But the working-class people weren't talking about that. They were talking about their living, their everyday living. They weren't interested in that because it wasn't relevant.

[1:11:00]

And so, well, you can see it, it kind of really got to me. And I thought I had to write up some of this work by looking at the approaches to affect that tended to have been utilised in relation to Brexit, so that's it really.

Lois: Yeah, no, that's incredibly interesting. And, yeah, I see what you mean there. And it's interesting to see how passionate you are as well about the subject, so that's really nice.

Valerie: Well, but you know, Lois, I couldn't do any of it if I didn't feel passionate about it. I mean I did learn that many, many, many years ago because I do remember somebody saying to me, I can't remember who they person was, but I'd published something... oh yes, I'd tried to publish something in a developmental psychology journal and they didn't want it, so I published it somewhere else. And

I remember this person saying to me, "You're so brave that you go and do this and you're not just going to like stick with the mainstream". And I remember thinking, "But I couldn't. I couldn't because why would I be doing it?"

Lois: Yeah.

Valerie: It wouldn't make any sense to me. I just... I don't think I could have lived with myself. Like if I was a sort of jobsworth". (Laughter) You know? And because you could only do this work, you could only get published in X journal if you did this kind of work. And at that point I realised I was never going to be that person.

Lois: Yeah.

Valerie: I was never going to be it. If I couldn't publish it in X journal, well, you know, I mean if I was not going to publish it there, I'd publish it somewhere else because there would be people who would hopefully want to read it in the way I wanted to write it. So, that's what I did.

Lois: Yeah, that's a really great way of looking at it.

Valerie: Yeah, but it makes me a bit unusual as a feminist psychologist I suppose because a lot of the places I published have not been in psychology.

Lois: Right, I see what you mean. Yeah.

Valerie: And so I tended to publish, well, people would ask for things, so I'd tend to publish in those places all I do books or...

Lois: Yeah.

Valerie: But I think it's got much harder now for psychologists who think of themselves as feminists because there's much more regulation via the REF [Research Excellence Framework] on where you can publish and therefore what you can publish. And so, I don't want to speak too lightly of this because it's a real burden for... you know, by the time this all came in, I was too, you know, my career had been going on for too long, so I just adapted to where people wanted to publish my work. But it's not like that for younger academics. It isn't. And so, I don't want to sound off as though anybody could do what I've done, because I did it at a particular moment or at particular moments.

[1:15:13]

Lois: Yes, yeah. And that context has changed.

Valerie: It has, it's changed hugely.

Lois: Yeah. Yeah, that's a really interesting point. Okay, well, I'd like to switch gears a little bit and talk about kind of, yeah, activism and POWES as well. So, I was wondering more broadly I suppose, do you have any involvement with feminist activism in general?

Valerie: Not these days. (Laughter)

Lois: Too much to do.

Valerie: Well, no, no. I think I've always tried to do my activism through my work actually. So, if you say 'am I involved in grassroots activism?', I don't know that I've ever been involved in grassroots activism in that way. Have I understood my academic work as activist? Always. Always. I hope I've got that across.

Lois: Absolutely.

Valerie: Always. And I know that what academic work can do in terms of activism is limited, but what I've done has always been a kind of activism for me. Always.

Lois: Yeah. No, that's lovely, that makes sense. So then in more kind of about POWES, could you maybe tell me a bit about your involvement with POWES then?

Valerie: Oh dear, I haven't had much involvement with POWES either. That's...
Well, I suppose, yes, in the kind of earlier days of feminist psychology, there were lots of feminist psychology gatherings and happenings and conferences that I would have been involved in, but I'm sorry to say that I haven't been involved in it in an active way for some years. Sorry.

Lois: No, that's fine. So, kind of mainly attending conferences and stuff like that? Is that...?

Valerie: Speaking at conferences.

Lois: Yes, speaking, yes.
(Laughter)

Valerie: You know, doing things at seminars. Speaking really. Yeah.

Lois: Okay. No, that's really interesting. I suppose just at kind of, yeah, even with that kind of limited involvement in that sense, although I think it's quite a big part of being involved with POWES, but how has that impacted your work and your career I suppose being involved with feminist organisations like POWES?

Valerie: I think the fact that an organisation like POWES is there is hugely, hugely important. To actually support feminism within the Academy, within psychology. It has huge significance, right from its inception. And I would also place feminism and psychology alongside that as a similar trajectory. I think the trajectories are quite similar, similar moments I think. Hugely, hugely important that they're there, that they impact upon psychology, a place in which feminist work can be talked about, where support can be given, where interventions into the psychology curriculum. All of those things I think are hugely important, and therefore, although I have to admit, I haven't had much formal involvement with it, I think it's hugely, hugely important that it's there.

[1:20:25]

And I'm also very grateful that POWES is doing this really lovely project on, you know, us older women. (Laughter)

Lois: Yeah, exactly, it's so important, I think, and it's such a great project. Yeah.

Valerie: Well, I mean, you know, it's very nice that should think of us in this way.

Lois: Absolutely. Definitely. It's amazing to be able to talk to you all. Lovely, so I suppose do you think that POWES and organisations like this should develop in any particular way over the next few decades?

Valerie: Ooh. (Laughter)

Lois: Quite a tough one.

Valerie: I'm sure the answer's yes, but I mean, you know... well, the one thing I will say is that over the course of my career, issues around gender, sexuality, femininity, masculinity have changed so much. So much. And you know, that is really, really important. Really important to keep up with, really important to understand and engage with those changed agendas. And the huge generational shifts in the way that sexuality is thought about, for example. So, and what it means to be a woman and a man. You know? All of these things, or to be neither.

Lois: Yeah.

Valerie: Be fluid. You know, goodness me, when I was working in the 70s, there was nothing, no debates like that were on any kind of agenda. So, not any kind of agenda that I knew about anyway, let's put it that way. But they're central debates now. And therefore, what does a psychology of women mean going forward? Because when we're actually thinking about what the category of women means, then clearly a psychology of women has to expand itself and change. So, yes, I think those are, you know, going forward, clearly, this is what's happening now, and in another few decades it will doubtless change again. So, I think it's really crucial that any organisation about the psychology of women is engaging with those debates and discussions to say, they can be quite difficult, but that doesn't mean that we shouldn't be engaging with them.

Lois: Yeah, that's Such a good point, yes. So, kind of keeping up with those changes and... yeah.

Valerie: Yeah. And also, feminist agenda, apart from that - feminist agendas change all the time. And so that means that any organisation needs to embrace those changes and work with them.

Lois: Yeah. Lovely. Okay, so in terms of kind of feminism and psychology a bit more broadly then, what impact, this is a very broad question, but what impact do you think feminists have made in psychology so far –

Valerie: Oh crikey!

(Laughter)

That's a big question, Lois. (Laughter)

Lois: Where do you think it might be going in future, if you've got any broad ideas.

Valerie: Well, I think I've said some of the things about where it can be going.

Lois: Yes, absolutely.

Valerie: Feminism, you know, over the course of my career, feminism has entered psychology. I mean let's just put it like that. When I was first learning about psychology during teacher training, was there any feminism? No. Was there in my later studies? Well, feminism was beginning, just beginning to emerge. But there wasn't an organisation that related to feminism and psychology. So, feminism entered psychology from the 70s onwards I would suggest. And people might want to contest my history, but I think, in my lifetime, that's when it entered psychology.

[1:26:25]

And so it's made a huge... it's transformed everything because I can't imagine a discipline without feminism now. I just can't imagine it. So, that's a big change.

Lois: Yeah, I agree. Yes, that's really interesting, and it's interesting to, yeah, kind of maybe, for you to have witnessed that change over time.

Valerie: Yeah.

Lois: Amazing. So, I suppose the final question I have then is what advice might you give to feminists entering psychology now? If any.

Valerie: Oh... So, the advice I would give to feminists in psychology now is you're not alone. Don't be alone. Don't think you're the only one. Always find support. They will always be support if you look for it. If you find a group of like-minded feminists to talk to, it's the most important thing in the world. And then I would say, on top of that, be courageous. Have courage. If you have things that you care about, that you think have to be said no matter how frightened you are in saying them, find the courage. Find the courage. Because there will be others who feel the same. There will be others to

support you. You will always get people who don't support you. You will always be criticised. There will always be others who don't like your work. Always. There will always be people who try to put you down because if you put your head above the parapet, people can see it. But, you know, feminism is politics. We have to try. You know, I was a student who couldn't speak for ages. (Laughter) And somewhere I found inside this bolder woman who had things to say.

Lois: Yeah.

Valerie: If I can find it, anybody can find it. We can all find it. And you will find your own things to say and your ways to say them. But never ever allow yourself to be stopped saying them. That's the advice I would give.

Lois: Lovely. That's absolutely lovely, yeah, really nice sentiment there. Perfect. Thank you. Okay, so I think we've covered everything, unless there's something else that you'd like to mention that maybe we haven't covered.

Valerie: I think I can't think of anything at this point. (Laughter)

[1:31:02]

Lois: Yeah.

Valerie: No, I mean I suppose the only thing is just to go back to that sense of the changed context of academic work really. Because, you know, well, at least in Britain, with the REF [Research Excellence Framework], it is so difficult and also far greater teaching loads than I had at the beginning of my career. Far greater. Far greater regulation and surveillance. So, I do appreciate that within that context, it's not the context that I had where with a group of friends we could get together and start a journal because we felt like it, or we could take X number of years to write a book because nobody was expecting anything. You know? It's not that context. So, what is possible within psychology now or within the Academy generally is different. And it is more regulated. And therefore, in its way it's harder. But in another way, there's more possibility of opening things up, I think. And so, I don't want anybody working now to feel that what they can achieve is less. But what we do have to do, what it's necessary to do, and it will be people who are coming after me have to do to really again speak out in this context about what neoliberalism has done to the Academy. And what it means for our place as feminists within it.

Lois: Yes. Yeah, because, as you say, some of those things particularly impact feminist and critical –

Valerie: Yeah. Yes. Absolutely they do impact feminist and critical psychology. So I don't want to be blasé about it and operate as though none of these things matter. They're hugely, hugely important. But that's why I think finding others like us is important. So at least we can talk and we can share our experiences and out of that if feminism is a political movement, it's not a movement about being on our own. It's about a movement about being together and finding a way to involve ourselves politically from a space of solidarity. And so we can speak from that and maybe POWES is a place from which feminism can speak to the Academy, if it's not already doing that. I don't want to for a minute suggest it's not doing that. But these are, we all have to find our own paths at specific historical moments. You know, that's what I've learned over my life in a way that when as a young academic I thought we could just criticise all the previous generation, because, you know, what a load of old rubbish, we've got the answer now. Now I'm much older, I really appreciate the significance of a history in which what it means to do certain kinds of work changes because the context changes. And therefore, I know that your generation and coming generations will find the context in which they can do whatever it is they can do. And as long as us older ones are around, if we can provide any support, we will provide it. But the future is yours.

Lois: Yeah, I think, yeah, as you say, that kind of maybe cross generational support and learning from each other and all of that is really important.

Valerie: Yeah.

Lois: Yeah. Yes, it's nice to have that kind of faith from you that we'll find our way somehow.

Valerie: Oh absolutely. Well, you know, come on. Who'd have thought I'd have found my way from being the first person in my family to go to higher education from a primary school teacher to a professor. Come on.

(Laughter)

A professor? Like God. (Laughter) Never. You know? At least girls can think that now. You know? It wasn't even a fantasy.

Lois: Yeah, exactly, yeah. So amazing achievement really.

Valerie: Well, it's one that, it's possible. It's possible. So, okay. Well, I won't say anymore. I think I've said enough. I think I'll shut up now. (Laughter)

Lois: Well, really great. So, thank you. Just before we finish then, could you for the record state your gender please.

Valerie: As I see myself I would call myself she.

Lois: Okay, lovely. Place and date of birth.

Valerie: Derby, 9th March 1947.

Lois: And current occupation.

Valerie: I'm a professor. Do you want the whole title?

Lois: Yes, yeah, feel free.

Valerie: Distinguished Research Professor in the School of Social Sciences at Cardiff University.

Lois: Lovely, thank you so much. That's brilliant.

[End of Transcript]