Psychology's Feminist Voices Oral History Project
Interview with Virginia "Ginny" Braun

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

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Conducted over the Zoom™
July 26, 2022

LD: Lois Donnelly, Interviewer

VB: Virginia Braun, Interview Participant

LD: I'm Lois Donnelly, interviewing Professor Virginia Braun on the 26th of July 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, I wonder if you could just tell me a little bit about yourself, so maybe in terms of kind of the trajectory of your career and the topics of your work.

VB: Yeah, it's really interesting to reflect on how my career has now…career trajectory – that's really becoming increasingly unusual for people. So I had a year off when I finished high school because I was kind of, like, uncertain what I wanted to do. I thought I wanted to do photography and I got rejected from the art school that I applied for, which sort of sent me in a bit of a spin. And over the year of being exceptionally bored working in a shop, I decided that psychology was, you know, where my hopes and dreams lay. And of course, having, like, absolutely no idea what psychology was beyond clinical psychology and imagining a great career for myself, solving people's problems, you know, I think as many people who enter psychology as youngsters do. And we had no, you know, in New Zealand, certainly at that time, there was no coverage of psychology in the high school curriculum or anything like that. So I started psychology after a year off, at Auckland University in New Zealand. At the time, it was an incredibly sort of competitive degree to get into, it was really hard to get onto psychology and I had to line up for, you know, ages to get in, so I think that sort of, like, slight challenge at the start maybe fixed my commitment to the discipline, because I am somehow still very committed to the discipline, even though I'm very critical of the discipline, so it's a funny sort of position to be in. And I was, like, "Clinical psychology, that's what I want to do," I mean, I think, as I started studying, I had just, like, this mind-blowing experience of, "Wow, this thing is so vast and huge and there's so many different areas and they're

all fascinating and interesting," and I kind of just got so involved and loved them all, but it was in my very first year general psychology class, it was called, that I was taught by a feminist psychologist who introduced kind of feminist ideas, and they were the ones that really grabbed me. But anyway, I'm diverting from my trajectory. So I finished my bachelors and decided that was it, and was heading off to explore the world and give up on academia and I got offered a Masters scholarship, and I was living in Australia, and I really had to make a difficult decision of whether I came back to do a Masters or not. And so my career was not interrupted, as it were, I went back and did a two year Masters' degree, and my research was supervised by a feminist psychologist Nicola Gavey, and then during that process, I really became kind of clear that I wanted to do a PhD. By the end of my second year undergraduate, I'd been kind of talked out of clinical psychology, and I loved research, and so doing the masters solidified that, and I was incredibly fortunate to get a scholarship to the UK to do a PhD, and so about eight months after I finished my masters, I turned up to start a PhD, supervised by Celia Kitzinger and Sue Wilkinson at Loughborough University, and that was a particularly rich cohort of us that arrived and started at the same time in 1997. Then yeah, I finished my PhD within the three years, which is…it sounds like it's one of those brags, but it's not really, I was solely driven and worked incredibly hard to get it finished in that timeframe because that was when my money ran out, and I had no other way of supporting myself. So I think I submitted on the last day of my scholarship. And I was thinking that I'd stay in the UK but I got encouraged to apply for a lectureship at Auckland Uni. The process took eight months and it was so stressful, because I was kind of caught in this indecision, but I got a lectureship at Auckland, which I think is still miraculous, given the shape of the department and what they focused on and what I was doing my research on. And I have been here ever since, so I'm now a Professor in the department, which is now the School of Psychology, and I've been here, yeah, over 20 years. So I've had this kind of very linear, uninterrupted sort of trajectory in my career, and you know, I think it's offered a lot of sort of stability and options to do things in the context of that, you know, not having to navigate the difficulties of precarious and short-term contracts that so many do now. And from my Masters research on what I had been kind of interested in, kind of gender, gendered bodies, sex, sexuality and health, really those four sort of intersecting areas, and my Masters thesis looked at cervical cancer prevention policy in New Zealand, and how decisions had been made not to highlight a primary prevention opportunity, and specifically around HPV connections and the prevention of HPV as part of cervical cancer prevention. Now, that's completely changed, but at the time, it was not even being discussed, it was before any vaccine like Gardasil. And then my PhD was going to extend on from there, and I was interested in kind of gynaecology and gynaecological cancers, and vaginal reconstruction and kind of heteronormative ideas about sex and penile-vaginal intercourse, and the kind of ideas that seemed to shape women's experiences and understandings and surgical

practices and interventions. And that spun out into being my PhD about representations of and experiences around the vagina, because it was something, I was, like, oh cool and I can do some research and find out about this topic, then there was nothing. And so that was an interesting…and fantastic experience, and then I moved on and looked at a range of topics, genital cosmetic surgery, sexual health, STI preventions, healthy eating, and you know, a whole range. So it was a very long answer…

[00:07:30]

LD: No… Yeah, absolutely brilliant, thank you. Yeah, so I suppose then psychology was almost your second choice, in a way, but what attracted you to psychology in particular, do you think?

VB: I think I've always been quite…as a person, I think I've always been sort of quite analytic and questioning about things, and kind of empathetic and listening and being, you know, the friend that people talk to or, you know, that kind of gave people advice or helped people through things. And so I think that kind of combination was, like, "Okay, this thing allows me…" when I was still fantasising that I was going to be the clinical psychologist, to have this kind of analytic take on things, and also sort of help tip things. And I think, you know, growing up in a context of sort of an idea that you can and should engage with the world and change the world, kind of curious that my focus went on sort of, like, individuals at that point, but it did, but then it rapidly disappeared. You know, I had a particular, colleague now, then supervisor/mentor, who really sort of talked me through the decision around kind of, like, not even deciding to try to get into clinical psychology, that it's literally almost impossible to get into clinical psychology here, our programmes are so tiny, so abandoning that and embracing research felt liberating, good feminist mentoring, in retrospect.

LD: Yeah, who was that, if…?

VB: Nicola Gavey, who's a feminist psychologist still here at Auckland.

LD: Yeah, oh, amazing. Yeah, so when you kind of switched gears then from the clinical to the research, what made you feel like you wanted to carry on with that path?

VB: I think it was just…I think it's hard to say except that I just loved research, I just loved thinking and making sense of and trying to understand and engaging with information, you know, in whatever shape or form that it was, and so one of the things that most students don't do, but there's an opportunity to do at Auckland is an undergraduate research project. And you know, mostly we don't, most students

don't do that as part of their degree, but if you're really sort of keen, you can, and Nicola Gavey was…I think had a project that she wasn't offering for an undergraduate project, but I basically went and badgered her, and made my case that she should take me on and I should be her undergraduate supervisee. Now knowing how much work undergraduate student projects are to supervise, I'm even more grateful than I was at the time. But that very early experience, and that was a project which was looking at the publication of clinical case material and looking at kind of grappling with some of the ethical questions around how clinical case material gets published, and what sort of detailed information gets included and some of the kind of ethical elements around that. But that just, I think that just sort of set me off and going, "Wow, research is amazing." Yeah, but it's hard to describe it, it's just, like, you know when you find something that just feels so right.

LD: Yeah, oh, that's interesting. So where along the journey do you think your kind of feminist identity started developing?

VB: It's such a good question, and I was on a panel a couple of days ago about gender and the university and equity and these sorts of things, and so I was pondering sort of a bit for that as well. And I think, you know, I grew up in a…I was born in seventy two and had most of my sort of adolescence in the 80s, and it was that era of, "Girls can do anything," you know, that was this kind of, like, this strong motto of opportunity and that gender is not something that can or should hold you back or something like that. Before I got to uni, despite having grown up where I think, you know, my mother was just inherently feminist and I grew up in a single mum household, and kind of hitting that sort of analysis, and she was, you know, she'd been very much kind of active and is still engaged in social change, but hadn't brought me up explicitly as feminist in any kind of way, like, it wasn't…I wasn't part of teen groups or anything like that. And so I got to uni not sort of having that as a particular identity, not particularly being interested in gender. And it's interesting reflecting on how I think high school context didn't sort of facilitate that either.

[00:13:18]

LD: Yeah.

VB: And I didn't choose papers that focused on gender, like, I constantly shake my head and go…you know, there was a gender and psychology course that I could have taken and I didn't take it, and I think, you know, I have to remember that when I'm supervising students, and I'm, like, "Why didn't you take that course?" and they're, like, "Oh, I did the other one," And I go "But this is the best one." Anyway, I think, you know, my interest in feminist things and feminist psychology just kind of grew through university, and there wasn't one sort of particular instance or particular

event that sort of triggered it. I think when Nicola maybe lectured me in my first year and she did a specific module that included things like violence and sex and gender, and those things really grabbed me, like, her lectures were the ones which, you know, that's why I begged with her terribly to let me do the project in third year. And so, you know, campus was a really…I think I was sort of, like, at university at a time when students were really still quite activist, and so we had protests all the time about things, and you know, protests and activism to try and get abusive men banned from campus and things like that. So there was just this kind of feminist activism and engagement, without necessarily being kind of explicitly named as such in that context. But by the end of that time, I was certainly explicitly kind of reading and engaging with feminist scholarship, although maybe…yeah, I don't know. I don't know about when I would have enthusiastically adopted the label, I can't remember that. Certainly within my Masters, I was, but I'm not sure at what point it happened, I can't remember that one.

LD: I suppose it's quite a process, as you've described there, of kind of, like, slowly getting into that and, yeah, that's really interesting.

VB: Yeah, and I think you can have the sort of dualities, like, I can look back on my life and go, you know, I did a period of time, my school offered these kind of exchanges, which were a bit unusual in a New Zealand context, and I did some schooling in Germany, and you know, I absolutely was infuriated by the fact that our physical education classes, for instance, were separated into boys and girls, and I was very sporty and loved sport, and I couldn't do the sport because the girls just did, like, 'girl sport' and the boys did the 'real sport', and they were, like, playing basketball, and I loved basketball, and I was, like, arguing my way into playing basketball with the boys.

LD: Wow.

VB: And at my high school, I argued to be allowed to play in our inter-schools competition because it was a small school and we didn't have girls teams for sport, you know, I argued that I should be able to play hockey with the boys, and I managed about two games before other schools objected. You know, so I had these kind of things where, you know, the sort of gendered norms and ideas and expectations and kind of ingrained misogyny of society were kind of butting up against me, but I didn't have a kind of framework to put that in, and a thing to kind of attach it to, if that makes sense. And those things kind of just connected, I was saying in the panel that I had this, like, internal shame because despite having a bad memory, this memory won't go away; I was sitting in a tutorial as a maybe first year student, saying, you know, "Well I've never been discriminated on the basis of gender," and just going, "Oh my god…" you know, "How could I say that?" Another

thing where I have to feel empathy if another student says this, and going, “Well, that was me once.”

LD: Yeah.

[00:17:39]

VB: I understand that position, but I look back on it now and I was, like, those two things can coexist, you know, those experiences where I really, at a personal level being quite fighting against things which were unjust, and other things, and yet could still sort of articulate that. So yeah, I don’t know.

LD: Yeah, no, absolutely.

VB: I think what I think is useful to hold onto in relation to that is in some of the kind of activisms and (inaudible 00:18:12) that you find now, I find there can be, in some spaces, not all, a kind of hope for, demand for, drive for kind of perfectionism and perfectness in our political take on things, and it’s useful to go, “Well, you know, I got things wrong all over the place and I fucked up all over the place,” I probably shouldn’t say that on tape, I messed up all over the place, you know, and continue to do so because, you know, we’re not perfect and we’re more complex than that, and we’re situated in contexts and so, yeah, I think it’s useful to have that kind of sense of…the understanding that, you know, that’s what it’s like, you know, where imperfect probably in various contexts, and processes that we find ourselves in.

LD: Yeah, absolutely, that’s such a good point. Yes, so I suppose then, did that kind of fluidly come into your work, you know, feminist values, into that work that you then did in your PhD and beyond?

VB: Yeah, absolutely. By my Masters, I was completely kind of thinking and operating within a kind of feminist framework and I’m sure that was Nicola’s key influence in kind of shaping things. And she had a…our Masters were two years, so a year of courses and then a year of research, and the best course that I did as a Masters student was Nicola’s course, which was on psychology and critical theory, and it was ideas and concepts and values and, you know, interrogating psychology, interrogating the discipline, and it was absolutely brilliant. And so that context was key, I think, in really starting to get me to know the feminist concepts and thinking in psychology, and then, yeah, my Masters was completely kind of situated within that, and you know, I was very enthusiastic and deliberately seeking sort of feminist psychology supervisors, and Celia and Sue were key suggestions from Nicola as a really good place to go and pursue research and feminist psychology.

LD: Oh, wow, amazing. So would you say that they were key mentors? And was there any other key mentors on that path?

VB: I think, yeah, so you know, I was kind of at this intersection of kind of discourse approaches and discourse analysis and feminist psychology, so Loughborough was, you know, the sort of one of the two dream options. And so, yeah, I think Sue Wilkinson and Celia Kitzinger really saw themselves and took a role to be kind of mentors to their students, and we…the expectations of us were high, which I guess made the expectations of ourselves really high, it was quite intense at times.

LD: Okay.

VB: But it was a very vibrant environment and they mentored us, you know, I remember one of my first supervision discussions, which was really asking me about what I wanted, what my purpose was, where I saw myself going, you know, was I getting into academia or, you know, why was I doing the PhD? And the sort of discussion was, like, "This is so I know how to mentor and supervise you and I know what you need in this." And so within that then, all sorts of opportunities were offered. So we were sort of pushed and pushed into things like participating in POWES, you know, they encouraged us to go very early on, maybe our first year as students, and to start presenting and to engage and to connect, and to think and to question, and to sort of be very actively part of an intellectual world.

LD: Yeah, that's amazing, and really beneficial, I suppose, for that…like, so early on in that path.

VB: Yeah, it was really amazing to kind of go to that first POWES conference and sort of to be surrounded by these people who felt like the kind of giants in feminist psychology, and already by that stage, you know, I was fully immersed in critical psychology and, you know, rejecting any kind of positivist psychology sort of approaches. And so North American psychology, although there are amazing feminist psychologists, in that context, you know, that context for me wasn't interesting because of the kind of dominance of positivism, I guess, as a kind of influencing frame. And so to go to somewhere like POWES, these were many of those people who are the absolute kind of, yeah, the titans, as it were, in the field. And then I guess the fourth person I was really, as a feminist sort of mentor, and in a much less formal sense, you know, I think Nicola Gavey, Sue Wilkinson and Celia Kitzinger had formal kind of supervising roles. And then much kind of later would be Leonore Tiefer, from the US, so a key sort of clinical psychologist within sexuality and social construction of sexuality, and kind of operating in a space of activism as well as academia, and doing a lot of activist work in relation to disrupting dominant models of sex and sexuality, and particularly around genital cosmetic surgery and

other things. So she is, I think, someone who I connected with a few years out of my PhD and has been a very sort of strong influence. And the fifth person in a less substantial way but no less significant way would be Margie Weatherall as well, and I met her before I went to do my PhD, and she eventually became a colleague at The University of Auckland for some time as well, and I think one of the key ways that I would see her as having been influential as being another New Zealander who went to the UK. I think she had the same scholarship that I had and had gone much earlier, and kind of understood the navigating of that space which is more complicated than it might seem.

[00:26:02]

LD: Yeah, actually, now that you kind of touch on that, how was that experience, to go to a totally different country? And was the psychology different in any way, you know, the area, the fields?

VB: Yes. Yes, it was different. Actually, I think, you know, Margie sort of warned me, I guess about the experience of shifting from, you know, a colonised country to kind of a colonial centre, and the sort of, like, one of the narratives you have about the UK in New Zealand, it's kind of gone now, but it used to be a dominant narrative, you know, 'the mother country', and there's almost this idea that, you know, our identity is we're New Zealanders, but we're English, you know, like, this kind of ridiculous thing that's not quite stated in those kind of explicit terms, but you know, it's encapsulated in that notion of the mother country. And I really didn't think the process of transitioning from the New Zealand cultural context to the English cultural context would be difficult and challenging, and it really was, because it felt uncomfortable and wrong and unfamiliar in all sorts of ways, and I got so many things so wrong because I just had no idea how to read social cues in an English context, and you know, interaction is so different, and, yeah, so it was really quite an overwhelming experience. And Maggie had kind of prepared me for that a little bit, and I'm eternally grateful for that. But she also, you know, she also kind of commented on what the intellectual experience would be like, and the intellectual experience was also really overwhelming, like, I think the people I was surrounded with had read more, and thought more, were more confident in their positions and understandings of psychology, so it felt like, you know, it really did feel like being a little kid from the colonies who turned up and feels clueless, and you know, like, that was both life and intellectual environment. And the Loughborough context encouraged us to be, you know, knowledgeable, opinionated, argumentative, reflect on and consider things, like, you know, not always…I don't think always entirely in positive ways, but they encouraged that kind of fiery, fierce, thoughtful engaged debate, deeply intellectual, of course, but that kind of thing. And so it was a…and I don't know to what extent that was partly particular to Loughborough and what it

had with the, you know, the incredible scholars that it had there, and the sort of types of students that went there, and whether that was a familiar experience to other people of my kind of age doing PhDs or not, but it was…I think it was a daunting place, and I don't think I was quite prepared for that, how daunting it was going to be.

LD: Yeah, I can't imagine that, I'm sure it was, yeah, quite tough, as you describe.

VB: Yeah, Maggie said something to me like, you know, "Everyone will have read more than you, everyone will have thought more than you, everyone will have, you know, opinions about things, but don't let that put you off," but with a real, like, "This is what you will experience," and that's exactly what it felt like.

[00:30:05]

LD: Gosh. Do you think, yeah, so perhaps that might have been to do with kind of different educational systems perhaps?

VB: Yeah, absolutely, I think so, definitely. And partly just a big wodge of personal insecurity as well. Someone else might have been, like, "This is amazing…"

LD: Yeah, no, I imagine that would be tough. Brilliant. So I suppose then, moving onto your work more specifically, do you have a kind of particular accomplishment or piece of work that you're most proud of?

VB: I mean, I think it's really…it's not a feminist piece, but it would be so hard to sort of go beyond the thematic analysis paper that Victoria Clarke and I co-wrote, because it has been influential in ways we never expected or anticipated or wanted. And so, Victoria and I met on the first day of our PhDs, we were both in that cohort at Loughborough and supervised by Sue and Celia, and yeah, no, we wrote that paper some years later, which came out of our Loughborough experiences to some extent, and it has been, I guess, influential for shaping the way people do qualitative research in some domains, not always in good ways, but I think, you know, so that felt like… It's a funny question, like, "Proud of," like, at a level, I feel like it's given a lot, like, the value and the contribution that it's made has been substantial and that feels really good and worthwhile, but in terms of my thinking, you know, like, I think…you come back to that question of loving research, so I talked about, you know, that sort of process of grappling with data and ideas and thinking and working something out in a process of kind of analysis and theorising and sense-making. You know, there's a paper that I wrote which looked at how condoms were being constructed in a certain way and talked about in relation to heterosexual safety and sexual risk, which took me years and years to write because I kind of just had no

time and I kept coming back to it. But actually, that paper, I think, for me, feels like I got somewhere with the analysis that we don't often get the opportunity to do because we're often pushed by time pressures or other things, you know. So in terms of kind of my thinking and my kind of research, that would be the thing that I'm most satisfied with, I think.

LD: Good, I like that answer, yeah, interesting. Thank you. I'm just going to just put the light on before I ask my next question because I can see it darkening here. There we go, sorry about that.

VB: It's lightening here and I'm looking at this orange…we have, at home, the lights always look orange on Zoom, so I look this orange now, so that's good.

LD: Yeah, I can't see any orangeness, brilliant. Yes, so thinking about your kind of more methodological work then in terms of kind of the qualitative research methods and particularly thematic analysis, as you're talking about. Could you maybe tell me a bit about how that work has kind of developed over the years?

VB: Yeah, we…Loughborough, to go back to Loughborough, as if it all starts there, which it doesn't, but you know, and Sue and Celia in particular really, but the whole of the kind of Loughborough social sciences pushed this kind of methodological curiosity, and a way of always questioning yourself, or always questioning kind of things about data and what you're doing when you're doing research and how you're doing it, and you know, what did data mean, and what kind of claims can you be making, what evidence base can we make those claims from? And so we were in this kind of environment of, like, deep methodological questioning, and then you're kind of…and I think one of the things that really drove it, I don't think I've ever expressed it in quite this way before, but was this sense of needing a methodological integrity, and you know, this is…and kind of conceptual coherence in the ways research and analysis are done and undertaken. And you know, those aren't my own terms, they come from other scholars, but really, that's what they were asking us to do, to defend everything, and you know, "Why can you claim this on a basis of that?" and, "Doesn't this mean that although you think you're getting that from your interviews, how can you know that that's what you're getting from your interviews?" you know, "What's the basis of being able to make those claims?" And it led to us being, I think, Victoria and I in the paper described ourselves as being kind of bratty, because you know, we were so sort of full of these notions, that we'd been, you know, at conferences, being critical of, like, presentations that seemed, you know, methodological incoherent or where things were not so thought through in the way that we'd been sort of pushed into thinking things through.

[00:36:41]

So we eventually wrote that thematic analysis paper and we arrived at quite quickly in a very kind of, like, literally in one room for a week, talking through, researching, writing, putting it together and making sense of it. And we realised after some years, when it started to get popular and we'd start to hear people making claims about what we'd said in the paper, that we were, like, "We didn't say that," and we had to go back and look at it and go, "Did I say that? I didn't say that," you go, "Oh my goodness. Thank goodness," or, you know, maybe misread the things that we thought were relatively clearly expressed or articulated, and it's made us realise that, you know, even though as reflexive scholars, you can access some of those kind of assumptions and things that shape what you do, you never have a kind of full and final access to that. And so there were assumptions and ideas and things in there that we kind of needed to explicate more clearly and more fully. And so over the course of writing that thematic analysis, I think what we really clarified is the values base on which a kind of reflexive approach to thematic analysis operates, and a clearer sense of the things that connect and the things that differentiate different approaches to thematic analysis. And at the time, we really just wrote about thematic analysis, but now, given how popular and widely used the approach has become, it's important to kind of understand, you know, that there is a lot of diversity and some of the approaches have very different values bases, so we've sort of explored some of those different aspects and the ways they're different, so quality criteria need to be applied and used in different approaches, and really sort of pushing for a more thoughtful approach to method and methodology.

And then at the same time, it's just had quite a lot of exploring other methodological questions, like the approach to story completion, which you know, we were first introduced to by Celia, as a kind of…as a method to explore and have a go with, and you know, we've since done quite a lot of work exploring the potential of that, and having a lot of fun and a lot of success with it, and exploring the potential of kind of a range of, I guess, online or virtual approaches. So we edited a book, you know, collecting qualitative data in a context where there was very little discussion actually, really about data beyond interviews and focus groups, and it was before the pandemic, and we kind of laughed to ourselves that in some ways we were sort of anticipating the context in which people had to switch and transition out of what had been, in some areas, and I think psychology is part of this, a sort of fairly well-established canon of ways of collecting data, that some people were exploring and exploding, but the qualitative methodological explorations, I think within psychology are still quite constrained compared to some other disciplinary areas, and reflecting quite different, you know, disciplines, quite different histories, quite different research questions and those sorts of things. But also, you know, compared to some other disciplines, I think there's a bit of conservatism in the sort of psychological qualitative fields, and there's also lots of creativity that it's sort of, as I

say, just amazing creative and exciting methodological work that is going on in psychology.

LD: Yeah, absolutely. That's a really interesting distinction that you make there, or kind of trend, I suppose, in those different disciplines.

VB: Yeah, I think we sort of…we'd been asked to write across disciplines sometimes, and it's quite interesting to sort of encounter debates or issues that we're confronted with, like, "What do you make of this?" and it's, like, "Well, that's not even a consideration or a concern or a challenge that's really part of the discussion in psychology, or in the psychology world that we operate in," but I'm sure that's a positionality thing too and as an outsider looking into these contexts, if you're in those contexts, you might have a very similar take, which you're trying to get people to understand what they are when they look in.

LD: Yeah, no, that's really interesting. And so I'm just wondering, because I suppose, talking about Loughborough and that kind of methodological thought, was it, I suppose, just thinking in terms of kind of mainstream psychology and, you know, the almost obsession with, like, quantitative work, how was that in Loughborough, or, maybe, like, also in comparison to how it was in New Zealand? You know, what was that like for you, and was that, like, a kind of easy path that you went down?

[00:42:26]

VB: That's a really good kind of thing to reflect on, and I feel incredibly privileged in that unlike many people who do qualitative or feminist or critical or queer or, you know, approaches in psychology that challenge that kind of mainstream dominance, I really feel that I have virtually gone through, without having that challenged or having that questioned, or really having to kind of defend it, and I know that that's not most people's or many people's experience. So at Auckland, as an undergraduate, it was certainly, and as a Masters student, certainly aware of the dominance and the norms and the expectations of kind of quantitative or positivism and those sorts of things. But I could kind of operate in parallel to that, you know, and so I think, you know, Nicola and, you know, a few others created an environment for work to flourish sort of alongside that in silent parallel, and I think, you know, when I came back to Auckland and started work here, I think I felt almost like it, that I was just sort of silently going along and doing my thing and hopefully nobody would notice, and, you know, I wouldn't get found out that I wasn't one of the…I wasn't team quantitative positivism. But at Loughborough, it was like that whole kind of context was sort of just absent, like, I think it meant that we didn't have to deal with the kind of intellectual load of dealing with that, you know, we could just focus on what we were doing on our own terms, and those terms weren't

set by somebody else and they weren't set by a set of contexts and conditions that weren't relevant or appropriate, and there's lots of ways that you could kind of parallel those environments to other contexts or other kind of situations, or, you know, imagine what as minoritized students coming into a university context, you know, how do we create environments that allow them to exist and operate in their own terms, rather than being forced into the kind of normative dominant structures. And so there's kind of lots of parallels for how incredibly freeing and liberating and from a pedagogical perspective, incredibly positive and empowering that kind of context is. And you know, not having to kind of defend doing qualitative research led to a lot of critical feminist qualitative research really liberates you, not having to kind of engage with those conversation of, "Why didn't you do numbers?" or, "Why didn't you do an experiment?" it really liberates you to kind of embrace what you are doing and explore the potential of it, and do better work because of it, I think.

LD: Yeah, that's a really interesting perspective, yeah. And so you haven't really met any tension there during your career in Auckland either then?

VB: Not really. Like, I think, you know, sort of critical psychology has been…there's always been a good community, a small community and a good community, and we got to a point where we had a number of academics that were in psychology at Auckland, and you know, we have, you know, critical psychology really draw those boundaries, feminist psychology, you know, there's these other (inaudible 00:46:21) things, we have Māori or Pasifika psychologists who kind of…our situation within or close or, you know, as critical scholars who might be primarily community psychology or those sorts of things. So there's this…we kind of have this…a group of, I guess, like-minded individuals. But for a long time it was relatively few of us, with students working in these kinds of ways, and building connections usually outside of the discipline, at least in part. And I remember, I think it was when…it was after Margie had joined us that it really felt like, you know, because she was such a kind of…Margie Weatherall, she was such an influential figure, and so important, and you know, having her, being able to kind of have her come back and be in New Zealand and be at Auckland really felt like it kind of gave a weight to critical and qualitative approaches. And you know, we had a retreat for the School of Psychology at one time, and one of the things we had to map was, you know, where, in small groups, you know, small group activities, fun times…we had to map where we saw the strengths of the school and blah, blah, blah. And virtually every group put critical as, like, one of the top two strands, and it was kind of this moment that blew me away and I was, like, "But we're, like, this little marginalised person over here," and it just really sort of…it made me realise how much you can kind of hold onto these narratives too, and these positionalities, which don't necessarily reflect context, and it's good to question those. But to come back to your question, you know, mostly not, mostly not having to deal with that sort of…that resistance.

And I think it's good, you know, some people say, "Oh, it's actually better, because you get your arguments better," or, "You might have had a fight and to challenge them," I'm, like, "We don't need that, you know, why do we need that?" The quantitative people who make those points, they're not arguing that they need to defend themselves against qualitative and critical approaches, so just take it away.

[00:48:51]

LD: Yeah, that's so true.

VB: It's not the adversity that produces great resilience, you know, get rid of all this stuff.

LD: Yeah, yeah, interesting. Oh, lovely. So going more to different aspects of your work then, you obviously do quite a lot of work around kind of gendered bodies, hair removal and stuff like that, could you tell me a bit about those kind of topics and maybe what interested you in those?

VB: I think, yeah, so I've done, you know, a cluster of research around body and body hair norms and body hair practices, and body hair sort of removal or retention practices, sometimes with students, sometimes with colleagues, and genital cosmetic surgery, which I sort of tried to get away from but kept dipping back into every now and then. And you know, hoping it was one of those things that would go away. But I think I've always been, I mean, I think I've always been interested in how ideas about…or normative ideas or sort of societally available ideas shift and shape what's possible for people to, you know, to practice, to do, to experience, and how they can feel and be as individuals, and those body practices have been often demarcated on a kind of binary gendered idea, you know, "This is what a woman looks like in terms of body hair, this is what a man looks like in terms of body hair." And so, a lot, I think, of current…you know, go beyond specific topics, a lot of my interest is in, you know, how do people navigate and make sense of this sense-making world that they operate within. But I think I'm at least as interested in that world itself, like, what is being made available to us, how are we being…what opportunities are we being offered up and how do we then kind of navigate and make sense of those opportunities.

LD: Yeah.

VB: And the, you know, I think if we're talking about gender and gendered bodies, you know, the context has changed a lot in the last decade in terms of kind of understanding and context and ways of being. Obviously, you know, not necessarily unthought for people, but still the kinds of questioning of rigid binaries and those kind of rigid ideas about gendered bodies has been…I feel like I couldn't have

anticipated what's happened now with the pattern, you know, from 20 years ago. But at the same time, it was sort of those critiques were being made and those challenges to kind of very kind of heteronormative or cis-heteronormative ideas about gender and bodies were being made at that time.

LD: Yeah. Oh, that's really interesting, thank you. So I also wanted to ask that you've been…you have been an editor for the Journal of Feminism and Psychology as well, and I was wondering, maybe kind of what that role was like and did it influence your understanding of feminist psychology as a field?

VB: Yeah. I was actually thinking that when I was talking about the mentoring and things of, you know, Sue and Celia, but one of the things I forgot to mention was, you know, that they encouraged opportunities like that. So I worked as an editorial assistant for a while on Feminism and Psychology, along with others like Victoria Clarke, at different times. And so I got some sort of insight or understanding into the publishing world that you wouldn't necessarily get at that stage, or indeed any stage, if you're not sort of actively involved. And then, you know, the opportunity to co-edit with Nicola Gavey was really an amazing experience, and that kind of felt like an opportunity and a bit of a responsibility at the same time, because the journal was a beloved journal, and you know, a significant journal for a community of feminist psychology. And I think we made a decision to really sort of focus, as an editorial decision, to really sort of focus on the critical, qualitative approaches within the journal, rather than kind of being a kind of potential home for a wide range, you know, the other feminist psychology journals, like PWQ and Sex Roles were doing that, or offered a home to other approaches. And so I think what you get to see as an editor is the vast array of research and ideas at are engaged with that don't necessarily get through publication. And so you have, I think, much more of a richer sense of what's going on, and what are the things that people are finding interesting or curious or urgent or necessary and so on.

[00:55:09]

And so, I think that, you know, that sort of a curious obligation – and I didn't come up with this idea myself, it was someone I interviewed for a piece, I can't remember who it was now, so apologies to whoever it was who said this – but you know, like, you also have a kind of ethical obligation and a responsibility because like…you know, you're not just…you're not simply revealing something, the journal process also is actively part of shaping what feminist psychology is and becomes, because you are, as an editor of these journals, you are publishing the material which shapes the field. And so, it's a sort of…it's a responsibility in that way, and I think, you know, we have conversations about and, you know, never quite, I think, did as well as we would have wanted to in terms of how do you get past, you know,

English language dominance, how do we get past Anglo-Western frameworks, how do we get past white dominance in terms of scholars and academia, and those kinds of things. And I think those remain challenges for academia more broadly as well as, you know, feminist…the sort of challenges that we were facing. But I think those are really important questions, because like the question of who, you know, who's teaching, you know, "Why is my professor white?" for instance, it's the same kind of questions, it's like, "Whose knowledge is appearing in those spaces and whose knowledge is therefore part of what becomes a canon?" if we want to think of published knowledge as that of what this field is. So it was a really…and I think in some ways I can kind of reflect back on those things more in retrospect, and they are ongoing conversations, they are ongoing discussions and debates and considerations.

LD: Yeah.

VB: And that sort of spiralled out from what you were asking me about, but it was amazing.

LD: Perfect, perfect.

VB: And a lot of work.

LD: Yeah, I'm sure.

VB: A lot of work. There is, you know, I think people don't realise, and I think maybe people don't realise how much work goes into editing and how hard it is, and you can sit there as a scholar and be frustrated by the delays in the process and those sorts of things, but it's, yeah, it's a lot of work.

LD: Yeah, I can imagine, yeah. So I'll just switch gears a little bit then and go back to talking about the Psychology of Women and Equalities Section [POWES] of the BPS [British Psychological Society], which you touched on earlier. So I suppose I just wanted, was wondering if you wanted to tell me a little bit more about your involvement with POWES and what was that like?

VB: Yeah, so my first kind of connection with POWES was in…that first conference, which was, as I described, was kind of, like, "Wow!" awe-inspiring kind of moment. And some time not long after, I became, I was the sort of postgrad rep for Psypag on POWES. I had, like, I was trying to think about how did this come about, how did this happen, and I have absolutely no idea how it came about and how it happened. So I was on the committee, the POWES committee some time between 1997 and 2000, as that Psypag rep. But I think it was…I think I always felt like, because I

came in the Psypag route, because I was, like, the Psypag rep, I never sort of felt like I was, like, quite fully part of POWES, which is ridiculous, nobody made me feel like that, but that didn't feel like it was my kind of primary entry point, if that makes sense. Like, I came in on a sort of specific role. But yeah, so that was a really…a great opportunity to sort of get connected with a range of, like, feminist academics, who were, you know, like the F&P editorial assistant role, you know, these kind of very junior entry points into spaces of decision making and engagement and thinking, and community and connection, which was really fantastic. And don't ask me about anything that happened in those meetings, because I can't remember! But yeah, and then I remained, you know, connected to POWES in a sense, and that really feels like since coming back to New Zealand, I have been to a majority of the annual conferences, you know, it is and has always been my kind of…it feels like a kind of intellectual home, you know, it feels like a kind of space and community, because there are so many people that have, you know, built up those connections with over the years. And yeah, it's been something to miss in lockdown as well, and through Covid, to not be able to kind of go back into those spaces. Sorry, I got distracted by moving onto Covid.

[01:01:26]

LD: Yeah. Oh, that's brilliant, so quite kind of a major part of…or you were quite involved then in kind of going to conferences and yeah, being on the committee early on.

VB: Yeah. I was going to say, a minor committee role. But definitely a kind of sense of identification and a kind of key part of…this is a key part of my scholarly community and my scholarly sort of world. But I still feel that way.

LD: Oh yeah, that's brilliant, so, yeah, like a network of people that you were able to create.

VB: Yeah.

LD: Brilliant. And so, do you think POWES has maybe developed over the years, and also do you think it should be developing in the future?

VB: I think it has developed, yes, and you know, like, some of the early debates about, you know, should it be feminist psychology or should it be psychology of women and those…and now Psychology of Women and Equalities Section, so you know, those languages are something that has shifted. When I was on the committee, now that you've asked that question, I can remember that that language debate was a language debate that we revisited fiercely as a committee, you know, we were

POWS, but should we be trying to push for feminist psychology, you know, should this be a different orientation? And POWS persisted, and I can't quite remember the full details of the debate, but it was, like, a really…a good discussion and consideration. And I think…so it has evolved, but I think that's right, you know, should organisations that occur in context, and I think POWES has a number of contexts that it exists within, you know, and there's the context of the BPS and so the context of the BPS was part of, indeed, a missing factor in terms of thinking about naming and language and those sorts of aspects. And you know, it exists in the context of a scholarly community and its membership and who it's responding to and who it provides a kind of welcoming home for, and you know, who it doesn't, you know, who it sort of inadvertently or whatever, doesn't provide that home for. Like, I feel lucky in that for me, it's a comfortable space, because it's been that kind of intellectual and community home for a long time, but you know, I know that reflects a particular entry point and a particular engagement and a particular set of possibilities. And the third context of, you know, is the societal context, and so, you know, the name change, you know, I did not participate in the discussions and debates about the changes of POWS to POWES, with, you know, the addition of equalities. But you know, it's responding to and reflecting different contexts and different understandings and different analyses, and that feels entirely right and entirely appropriate. Our social and political contexts change and our scholarly contexts change as well, and you know, we have really pressing, urgent needs and issues in the world now that we didn't have, you know, a decade ago, or that weren't visible…not that we didn't have them, but they maybe weren't visible in the ways that they are now.

LD: Yeah.

VB: And so it seems right that, you know, as a community of psychologists which are founded in our history of activism and a history of social change and a history of, you know, social justice or, you know, a push for social justice, it feels important that the organisation continues to kind of hold that, for me, to hold that as core, and then, for me, that also involves turning the lens on itself and going, you know, "What are the things that we are doing well and what are the things that we ought to do better or that we haven't quite got there yet."

[01:06:39]

LD: Yes.

VB: And you know, POWES can't necessarily solve all those things, but how can it be part of the change or resource or facilitate change. So how can it work to create more inclusive environments, you know, whether it's around, you know, disability or

race or, you know, gender, those sorts of important aspects that are maybe, you know, have been maybe kind of under-represented in terms of, you know, who goes to POWES and who participates in that space, and does it just reflect our community of scholars and PhD students? And if it does, you know, do we have an obligation to be in there actively pushing for psychology as a discipline to change more broadly to shift that, rather than just responding. I'm not saying POWES is just responding at all, but that's what feels important for me in terms of kind of ongoing change and the move for ongoing change.

LD: Absolutely, yeah, that's so important. Brilliant, thank you. I'm also just wondering whether you've been involved with kind of other feminist organisations that are maybe similar in a sense to POWES?

VB: Yeah, not particularly, because we haven't had, like, a sort of feminist psychology organisation in New Zealand or even Australia, I don't think, so there's been nothing kind of local, or not while I've been here, there have been kind of discussions about those sorts of things. But our Psychological Society operates and exists in a quite different way to how the BPS exists, or how the APA in the States exists, like, it doesn't occupy the same sort of space here. And you know, it's just a smaller community. And I have been a member of the Psychology of…the Division 35, whatever it is of the APA, at different points, and been to conferences, and the Association…I can never remember whether it's Of or For Women in Psychology, AWP, both of which are sort of feminist psychology organisations in the US. But they don't….they're bigger, and so, you know, AWP, I think is, from my experience, most resembles POWES in the sense of community, whereas the PWQ is, from my experience, feels bigger and kind of a bit overwhelming, and that may be because I have connections in AWP particularly, or those sorts of things. But they don't feel like…they feel like, for me, they've never felt the same easy fit as POWES, I guess, and that's a combination of context of connections and personal connections, and also of intellectual traditions and the different intellectual traditions in the UK versus the US in terms of feminist psychology.

LD: Yeah. Oh, that's…

VB: And you know, I think, yeah, I was going to say, I've been part of the…I was part of the New View, which is The New View Campaign around sort of women and sexuality that was Leonore Tiefer's organisation. So I was involved in that for a number of years as well, but that's not a sort of organisation that is…it was a looser, sort of more activistic oriented kind of collection of scholars and clinicians and other people, not a sort of formal body like POWES is.

LD: Right, yeah. Oh no, that's really interesting. And so, do you think that involvement with POWES impacts your work? I know we've talked a bit about kind of that network and stuff, but yeah, has it influenced your work and maybe your path in any way?

VB: That's a good question, and I'm not sure in any direct way, like, it feels like…I think I would say indirectly in the sense that it provided a space for validation of the type of scholarship that I was…I was fairly junior and fairly, you know, PhD and early career academic and that sort of thing. So it provided, I think, a nurturing environment in which to feel like, you know, even though I wasn't being explicitly challenged, it still provided that sort of sense…and also a sense of a community that you could, in terms of conferences, present your ideas to and we knew that the community would get it, and they would also be able to ask these things and critique and engage, so a sense of a scholarly community beyond the local ones that I had. And so I think that's probably the main sort of influence. But then of course, you know, the less directly, all the work of the amazing scholars that make up POWES as well, you know, has been kind of influential in terms of shaping and thinking of new idea and that sort of thing. So yeah, two indirect influences, I would think.

[01:12:40]

LD: Brilliant. Okay, well, I'm getting to the end now, so just in terms of feminism and psychology more broadly, what impact do you think feminists have made in psychology so far and where do you think remains to be done?

VB: Good questions. I think feminists have been, you know, some feminists have been really influential and disrupting and challenging what was the male stream, you know, like that language, the male stream.

LD: Yeah.

VB: And so those kinds of feminist challenges to male-centric thinking and kind of male norms within psychology and you know, using that language because I'm reflecting the context of the time they were operating in in the 70s and other, you know, those kind of contexts. And you know, the work of the influential feminist psychologists to disrupt or challenge key theorists and key theories, you know, has been really influential. Often, I think maybe under-acknowledged in the mainstream context and specifically feminist sort of influence. So I think, yeah, you know…but then I question this, because I had so little to do with male-stream positivist, quantitative psychology and you know, I just don't engage with it. So maybe I'm, like, I'm going, "Yeah, and you're really thinking more kind of complexly about gender and you know, you're not using just kind of, like, simple sex difference frameworks for

researching (inaudible 01:14:50). But people still are, and I'm just…so I don't even want to claim that. I'll just say, big influence in some ways, but still lots of challenges.

LD: Yeah.

VB: And I think, you know, going forward, I think…I can't remember what the second part of your question was. But if it is what I think it was, I think, you know, what our challenges are is to more completely de-centre our norms and disrupt the norms and the centrality of whiteness, the centrality of ableness, the centrality of all sorts of dimensions of privilege, which have had…until relatively recently and with the exception of some small kind of pockets of amazing work and activism, have kind of, you know, there's still so much to do there, and so much to allow spaces for completely different knowledge frameworks and completely different ways of kind of thinking and engaging. And you know, we're really lucky in New Zealand, that we have a growing cohort of Indigenous psychologists and Māori and Pasifika psychologists who are building and specialising and growing and developing knowledges which diverge from and provide, you know, other ways of thinking about and doing psychology. And you know, yet what we teach, you know, until quite recently has still been this very kind of Anglo, white Anglocentric kind of normative model of psychology. And so that feels like…those feels like the things that are important, and I think, you know, recognising and thinking about what challenges we have to grapple with in a world that's, you know, currently in a pandemic that isn't going anywhere, and a context of increasing and vast and gross inequities and growing inequities, you know, increasing poverty and those kinds of challenges. And climate change, climate, you know, catastrophe that is, you know, as the UK has been experiencing recently, with heatwaves that we are having, mass flooding in New Zealand at the moment because we've had, you know, the wettest July on record of many places. And you know, a world that is kind of rapidly shifting, you know, white supremacy an ever kind of growing threat, and kind of fascist sort of movements. Like, what are our responsibilities then as a discipline? And that feels to me like there is, you know, as feminists, we have a kind of very important conversation to be having about that change, and what we do in terms of research and practice and teaching, and how we kind of mentor future generations into a space where this is a kind of very different context from the context in which maybe we started becoming academics.

[01:18:23]

LD: Yeah, absolutely. Brilliant. And so…

VB: Sorry, that was a whole lot of things.

LD: No, that was lovely, great, very comprehensive. Lastly, what advice would you give to feminists entering psychology now?

VB: I would say if anybody questions feminism as relevant or central to what you want to do, like if you're talking if someone who's a supervisor or a potential supervisor, or a mentor in any way, or influential in any way, don't take their word, you know, go and find someone else, because you know, that is an archaic view that nobody should be expressing any more. And you know, find the right people to talk to because there are people out there who will support what it is that you want to do as a feminist psychologist, and someone using and exploring psychology through a feminist framework, there will be people in our communities, and to find those communities or those scholars within your department, or online networks or whatever it is, that can kind of support what you want to do.

LD: Lovely. That's very nice, yeah, thank you. Brilliant. So I think we're done, I think I've covered everything that I want to, is there anything else that I haven't mentioned that you want to touch on?

VB: I'm sure there might be, but I'm a bit tired, so I can't think of anything. I've surprised myself by talking a lot, so I hope I didn't talk too much.

LD: No, it's been absolutely brilliant, thank you so much, I've really enjoyed listening to you and it's, yeah, it's just been great. Oh, I want to ask, for the record, could you state your gender?

VB: Yeah, I am a woman and yes, I…it's a slightly complicated question because it's not a…I mean, I'm a cisgender woman, but I don't know that that would be my identity now if I was 30 or 20, because I, you know, I was a tomboy throughout my whole adolescence and I think it's interesting to reflect on the ways that identity sits or has solidified, but isn't necessarily the identity I would have now if I had come up in a different context, I guess. So it's sort of, like, it's not a way of trying to avoid the question or disclaim an identity, but it's a slightly more complicated one than it might seem.

LD: Okay, no, thank you, that's really interesting. Okay, and then also could you say your place and date of birth?

VB: Yeah, I was born in Hamilton in New Zealand, in 30th of September 1972. I had to think about that!

LD: And your occupation?

VB: I am an academic, I'm a Professor in the School of Psychology in the University of Auckland.

LD: Lovely, thank you so much.

VB: I did think of one thing I wanted to say, which was that I apologise to anybody that I have inadvertently, through my bad memory, left out of this discussion.

[End of Transcript]