

# Reflecting on qualitative research, feminist methodologies and feminist psychology: In conversation with Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke

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*Psychology of Women Section Review, 19(1), 2017*



Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke met as PhD students at Loughborough University where their research was supervised by pioneering feminist psychologists Professors Sue Wilkinson and Celia Kitzinger. They began writing collaboratively about qualitative methods in 2006; their first output was a paper on thematic analysis that has proved rather popular (25,000 citations and counting on *Google Scholar*), and they have subsequently written numerous chapters on thematic analysis and qualitative methods, a prize-winning textbook *Successful Qualitative Research* (Sage, 2013), they have edited (with Debra Gray) *Collecting Qualitative Data* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), and have books on thematic analysis and story completion (the latter with Naomi Moller) in progress (both for Sage). They were invited to give a joint keynote address at the 2016 POWS Conference and speak to the conference theme of feminist methodologies. Their talk was entitled “We can do it!” *Feminist qualitative research and methodological innovation* and ended with everyone in the room flexing their biceps Rosie the Riveter style (you may have seen the pictures on Twitter)! Glen Jankowski met Virginia and Victoria at Victoria’s home in Gloucestershire in early November

2016 to discuss and reflect on their POWS keynote and feminist methodologies, qualitative research and feminist psychology more broadly. Glen audio recorded and transcribed the conversation, and all three have edited the transcript for clarity, including adding references where relevant for interested readers.

### **The POWS keynote**

Glen: You both did a blindingly good keynote at POWS. Could you explain briefly what you were discussing?

Victoria: Oh god, *briefly*? We're not very good at that! (laughs) Well we started writing the talk by thinking about innovation in feminist methods (this, by the way, illustrates beautifully the dangers of writing the conference abstract before you have really thought about a talk!). We decided to look back at past issues of *Psychology of Women Quarterly* (PWQ) and *Feminism & Psychology* (F&P), over the last decade or so, to track methodological innovation in qualitative research in these two key feminist psychology journals. We became absorbed in that exercise and started to notice things other than methodological innovation that were really interesting to us as feminist researchers. At this point the focus of our talk shifted to reflecting on feminist methods and methodologies more broadly, and it struck us that there was all this great writing on feminist methodology published in the 1980s and 1990s (e.g. Crawford & Kimmel, 1999; DuBois, 1993; Gorelick, 1996; Harding, 1987, 1991, 1993; Haug, 1987; Lather, 1991; Maynard & Purvis, 1994; Peplau & Conrad, 1989; Reinharz, 1992; Russo, 1999; Smith, 1990; Stanley & Wise, 1983; Unger, 1988, 1996), that Celia and Sue encouraged us to read and engage with when doing our PhDs in the late 1990s, and that current research *doesn't* seem to draw on. Those great feminist debates and discussions about how we should be doing research, about methodological and theoretical concerns, don't seem to be shaping how some feminist psychologists are doing research today. The talk evolved into returning to the themes in the feminist methodological literature of the 1980s and 1990s, and reflecting on what we could, and should, be doing differently today.

Virginia: This resonated with our frustration at seeing 'yet another interview study' in a feminist journal, and an apparent narrowing of the methodological possibilities for feminist

research. I want to feel excited by feminist research; the field should be innovating, shifting and changing.

Victoria: Yes, because feminists are really great methodological innovators. They were at the forefront of developing qualitative methods. For example, the great papers about qualitative interviews, such as Ann Oakley's (1981) paper on interviewing women, that suggested a different approach to interviewing and the relationship between researcher and participant, one based on empathy and friendship between women. And the thoughtful responses to that paper (Finch, 1984; Malseed, 1987; Ribbens, 1989), and papers about interviewing across difference (e.g. Edwards, 1990; Lee, 1997), power and control in interviews (e.g. Cotterill, 1992) and lots and lots of other papers acknowledging and exploring the complexities of interviews as a qualitative research tool (e.g. DeVault, 1990; Riessman, 1987; Scully, 1994). I tell my students 'to read this set of papers and you'll have *such* a great introduction to the methodological issues around interviewing'. And many of the students I teach and supervise don't tend to have a feminist background and often dismiss feminist writing, and don't see it's broader relevance – 'oh it's feminist, I don't have to engage with it'. I think feminism is so integral to the development of qualitative research that if you don't engage with feminist methodological writing, then you can't fully understand qualitative research. So, returning to the keynote, we were struck by the fact that feminists have been important innovators in the development of the research approach we love and then seeing that innovation and creativity missing from some of the research that's been going on in the last decade.

Virginia: Not that that feminist methodological discussions are missing entirely, but that they are fairly marginal, a backdrop; the conversations that shaped the 1980s and 1990s are no longer happening, or so it seemed to us. The conversations that were so vibrant and important for us, that invited us to question why and how we were doing something (rather than just following methodological protocol) seem to be no longer happening. In some ways, it's a positive thing that feminists aren't so visibly debating research practice, as lots of the things feminists were advocating for have now become more acceptable and understood (such as qualitative research). But at the same time, it's hard not to see that as a diminishment, that a lot has been lost on the way to acceptance and understanding. And we as a community of scholars not pausing to question that loss. Of course, this is

understandable. Higher education is so pressured now and we have little time to read and reflect. But we think it's important to recognise this loss.

**“We can do it!”**

Victoria: We were worried in writing our keynote that we were not saying anything original, that everyone's PhD supervisors encouraged them to engage with feminist methodological writing, and what we realised (duh!) after the keynote is that that our experience is not universal. It reinforced our feeling that we were lucky that our PhD supervisors were so interested in methodological concerns, and wrote so many great papers and books on feminist methods and methodology (e.g. Kitzinger & Powell, 1995; Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1997; Wilkinson, 1988, 1999; Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 1995, 1996). That engagement with methodology during our PhDs gave us confidence. Confidence to innovate in research, to do something different methodologically, rather than thinking 'I must use this qualitative approach because others have'.

Virginia: I love Carla Willig's (2008) image of qualitative research is an adventure – that's the idea that Celia and Sue instilled in us. But a well-planned and well-founded adventure. You go into the unknown and push boundaries, but for a good reason. It's asking the questions 'why not try this?', 'why not think differently around this'.

Victoria: What I have noticed with some qualitative researchers is that they don't have the confidence to do research that is not formulaic and I want to say 'it's fine! Just give it a go'. Feminist psychologists often have the skills they need, it's just a case of doing something a bit different with them.

Virginia: Yes, I see so much uncertainty among feminist and qualitative scholars on things like responding to reviewer criticisms. I don't think I'm *overly* confident, but I've got a sense of the foundation for what I am doing. That's where looking backwards to the feminist methodological literature is vital, because you know where you've come from and why you're at the point that you're at. Rather than having this slight panic, for example, when someone gets a reviewer or editor who says 'Sorry, but you've already analysed this data and published something already so you can't publish again', you *can* challenge that reviewer or editor by arguing the current analysis is different and original. But if you haven't got a solid sense of what qualitative research means and why you're doing it and where it

fits, then you can feel vulnerable when faced with such criticisms, and lack the confidence to defend your choices.

Glen: You mentioned losses. What are some of the losses in feminist qualitative research that spring to mind?

Virginia: I think research has become less political and more tied into neoliberal agendas of 'knowledge for knowledge's sake'. There is perhaps less reflection on the broader context of research and thinking about why you're doing it. There's lots of losses like discussions of power, of knowledge being political, an increasing psychologisation and so on.

Victoria: The mainstreaming of qualitative research as well is problematic. In some ways, qualitative research has lost its edge. For example, lots of health psychologists use qualitative research to 'listen to patients' voices', without addressing the political and structural context of health. Because there is less of a need to justify qualitative research, we've lost all those important discussions on reflexivity and power to some extent. What seems to be unquestioned now is having a reflexivity section in a qualitative thesis or dissertation as opposed to threading it throughout the text. I often wonder if people really understand what reflexivity is, if they are bracketing it off from the rest of the text, which is written in the third person and the objective and dispassionate voice of mainstream psychology. Returning to our keynote and our review of *F&P* and *PWQ*, we found the differences in reflexivity across the two journals striking. In qualitative research in *F&P*, you can hear the voice of the researcher, whereas in *PWQ*, the researcher is removed from the text, the writing style is that of the objective scientist.

### **Moving into the mainstream...**

Glen: Okay so you are feminists and a lot of people see you as 'methodological gods' as well. So how do the two - qualitative methods and feminism - fit together?

Victoria: It's interesting because writing our thematic analysis paper (Braun & Clarke, 2006) has taken us into a mainstream qualitative arena. Where we stand now is very different to where we stood as PhD students, in the beating heart of critical qualitative psychology, surrounded by academics who literally wrote the book on discourse analysis and discursive psychology. We are now having 'first principles' conversations about qualitative methods.

We see the terrain of qualitative research very differently today. We thought that everyone doing qualitative research really, really cared about methodological debates in qualitative research, and were heavily invested and engaged in these, when actually, the vast bulk of qualitative research is conducted and supervised by people who aren't really sure about, or feel confident about, what they're doing.

To answer your question, even though we are sitting in a more mainstream place, everything I think about qualitative research is so influenced by feminist methodology. For example, in writing our current book on thematic analysis I stumbled across a feminist methodological paper on reflexivity by Natasha Mauthner and Andrea Doucet (2003) in which they argue that methods are embedded with epistemological and ontological assumptions, they are not 'neutral' tools. As a result of reading this paper, we are trying to be much clearer about what values and assumptions underpin our approach to thematic analysis, than we were in the original paper.

Our mainstream engagements are also influenced by our feminist background and training. For example, it is often assumed that qualitative research equals conducting interviews and then analysing them using thematic analysis or IPA (interpretative phenomenological analysis). As Ginny mentioned earlier, 'not another interview study!' Sigh. Our edited book with Debra Gray, that's about to be published – *Collecting Qualitative Data* – is strongly influenced by our feminist PhD supervisors who emphasised the creative and play elements of qualitative research. We wanted to produce a book that showed how qualitative data collection can be fun and creative. Right from the start of our research careers, we've done qualitative research using all different kinds of data, including interviews and focus groups, but not limited to these; we've analysed therapy sessions, television talk shows, dictionary definitions, slang terms. We wanted to show the range and diversity of ways you can collect qualitative data. We know people lack confidence in using methods other than interviews, so we wanted to provide a practical 'how to' guide to a range of methods of data collection and data sources.

Virginia: The book also serves the purpose of legitimating these methods, so that people can use methods we love, with confidence, and rebut reviewer criticisms with confidence. To go back to the question of moving into the mainstream, and the increasing acceptance of qualitative research in mainstream psychology, I feel conflicted about that. On the one hand

I like the increasing accessibility and democratisation of qualitative research, where it's widely available and not just something that is for the relatively academically privileged to be a part of. But at the same time, there is a loss of the feminist foundations and contributions to qualitative research.

Good qualitative research is, to me, so strongly influenced by feminist scholars. The idea of doing qualitative research without the feminist principle of reflexivity is an anathema to me. Reflexivity is about acknowledging that a researcher is a positioned, subjective person who sees things from the influences that shape them as a person. This arises, of course, from the longstanding feminist notion of the 'personal is political'. But concepts like reflexivity are not generally part of a mainstream conversation about qualitative research. When we write about qualitative research, I think we do smuggle feminist work in. We are of course as positioned in our perspective on qualitative research as anyone else, our position is fundamentally feminist, even if we don't always label it as such. I don't think you can separate out those values of being a feminist scholar and those that come from being a qualitative scholar.

Glen: What does non-feminist or neoliberal qualitative research look like to you?

Victoria: I supervise students who in the main don't do feminist research, who are doing counselling, health or sport psychology. Sometimes I 'seduce' students (laughs) into doing feminist research, or into engaging with a critical feminist perspective. But, on the whole, it's quite mainstream experiential qualitative research. As in 'let's ask people a question about this aspect of their experience' and produce a descriptive thematic analysis of what they said.

Virginia: Yes, non-feminist research is often taking things at the end-point (asking '*what* is this experience?') rather than starting point of interrogation (then asking '*why* is this experience like this?' and more). It doesn't contextualise things in the wider context.

Victoria: More mainstream experiential qualitative research might engage with the feminist 'giving voice' agenda to some extent, but it doesn't fully engage with what it really means to 'give voice'; the feminist political agenda of recognising that some people are marginalised and experience the world differently, and those experiences need articulating. That political edge is lost.

## **The complexities of 'giving voice'**

Glen: You mentioned in your keynote that there was a tendency sometimes to give voice to 'marginalized women' by feminist academics, who are often white and often middle class, but that the complexities of 'representing the other' are not explored. Can you explain a bit more about this?

Victoria: Yes, that really stood out to us when reviewing qualitative research in *F&P* and *PWQ*. That the talk of marginalised women is 'given voice' to, it mainly features in *experiential* qualitative research, whereas the talk of white, middle class women is often *interrogated* using discursive and critical qualitative approaches. There was also little in the way of personal reflexivity in the research focused on marginalised women. We are white middle class feminists ourselves, so we asked each other 'should we be the ones making this point?'. There is something troubling about white, middle class feminists researching 'the other' (researching people from marginalised groups; see Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 1996) without any reflection on the power dynamics inherent in that process. It felt troubling and uncomfortable to notice this, but we also felt troubled and uncomfortable *articulating* that criticism.

Virginia: It seems problematic to us that the voices of marginalised women are treated in a non-complex, singular way. As if there are no nuances, complexities and multiple positionings to those voices. If you go back to those brilliant methodological writings by Michelle Fine (1992, 1994) and others, they discuss how 'giving voice' is such a deeply flawed notion. It's so inherently problematic and often re-inscribes existing power relationships. For me, in particular, this is interesting from a New Zealand perspective where those debates are so nuanced and historical, because we have an indigenous population. That makes me feel cautious about even speaking about this, but at the same time these conversations need to be happening. I think this is where neoliberalism comes in – the pressures of universities are there, compelling us to tell a certain story or depoliticise our data. But good feminist research tells a complex, contextualized and politicised story, which is lost often because of 'publish or perish' pressures and pressures to keep a job.

## **Problematising choice**

Glen: What contexts *should* we be including in our research?



Virginia: I think the idea of choice is just so problematic and is often unquestioned by many. It has become so mainstreamed and taken-for-granted, this idea of choice. Choice is often so decontextualized, as if it is something that just happens, rather than is something that is embedded in cultural meanings and practices, and structural and systematic practices too. I don't think we can take money out of the equation, for instance. Take hair removal practices for a random example (laughs); something I have researched quite a bit recently (e.g. Braun, Tricklebank, & Clarke, 2013; Terry & Braun, 2013, 2016). If you just conceptualise hair removal in terms of 'personal preferences', this is very limited. You need to go further, and ask why people are doing this and what businesses are making profits from this. Be critical and question this.

Victoria: I'm just reflecting on how difficult it is to problematize choice in the classroom. Because students are so enmeshed in neoliberal understandings (see Clarke, 2016). To create that critical space where there is dialogue is difficult without students feeling you are just telling them they are doing something wrong and they need to stop doing what they're doing. There's such a palpable shift to what students are bringing to the classroom now. Students seem to be far more anxious and compelled to engage with 'neoliberal performance demands'. There seems to be much greater enmeshment in neoliberal notions of choice and individuality, and the self as completely dislocated from the social. But at the same time, in the last few years, there's been a resurgence of criticality among the undergraduate students I teach, and an openness to different ways of thinking about things.

Virginia: I'm thinking of my niece and her friends who through social media such as *Tumblr* are identifying as feminists. The idea that a political analysis of the world that goes beyond the individual (feminism) is resonating with them gives me hope. Hope that there's maybe a recognition that notions of choice, which as a way of thinking benefits so *few* people, is shifting. Of course, it's always so complicated because choice as a second wave feminist concept was so fundamentally important, whereas now choice means something so very different.

Victoria: Originally, choice meant the right to access *certain* choices – the right to choose an abortion, for example – whereas today it's become the right to choose more generally; feminism equates to 'if a woman chooses something, it is feminist'. There seems to be a lot of resistance to questioning that. I often hear something along the lines of 'feminism is

about celebrating women's choices'. That version of 'feminism' has become so entrenched and hard to challenge.

### **Feminism and psychology?**

Glen: In the opening issue of *F&P*, Celia Kitzinger (1991) argued that mainstream psychology couldn't be feminist as it pathologised women's rational discontent with sexism. Others have said similar – for example, Martin Luther King about psychology pathologising Black protest. Do you disagree? If so can you outline how psychology can be feminist?

Victoria: That's a big question! (laughs) But it's a good question and one we perhaps stopped asking. Because there is a degree of tolerance from mainstream psychology for feminist psychology (or perhaps the psychology of women). At the same time, among younger generations of academics there is perhaps a degree of pragmatism, a desire to get on with things, and not get bogged down with complex, first-principle type discussions about methods and methodologies. Maybe that's a gain in some ways?

Virginia: There is some benefit in not being bogged down with long, complex discussions about epistemology and so on. You could argue that such conversations are navel gazing and unlikely to save the world and 'smash the patriarchy'. But I think the critique of the complicity of a discipline in oppression is just as important today as it was then (during the early days of feminist psychology). I feel like I disengage with the mainstream of psychology totally, and am kind of siloed away, which is of course a privilege in some ways. Sometimes I go to a talk in mainstream psychology and think 'Really – how can researchers still be using personality to explain these behaviours?' or, you know, with each version of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) that comes out, you get more horrors, more pathologising of everyday life, more biologising. As psychology has shifted more and more into the brain, there seems to be less interest in politics and socio-political analysis. Perhaps feminist psychology is not talking to mainstream psychology, and therefore not influencing it. In the same way things that have become mainstream, such as benevolent sexism and hostile sexism, have become taken for granted truths that have widespread popularity and here mainstream uptake *is* useful (though we can also still critique and question those too).

Victoria: Yes, like the notion of respecting difference is in the British Psychological Society (BPS) *Code of Ethics and Conduct* (2009), and most universities have policies on difference and 'diversity'. What that means in practice in the mainstream can be different to what it means in other contexts, where there is a more thorough-going engagement with difference.

Virginia: Yes, I think feminist psychology can often have a liberal tolerance response to the mainstream, which only goes so far. As opposed to a more radical, 'let's change the world' response. At times, I want to say to mainstream (and some feminist) psychology, this is not radically changing the context of people's lives. It's not even saying 'our entire system here is so radically inequitable and gross' that we need to radically shift how things are done. I think feminist psychology can be dancing around the edges a little bit.

Victoria: I think there is still a place for feminist psychology.

Virginia: Yes, but I think the context for being a feminist psychologist now is both easier and harder. This might reflect mine and Vic's positions as being more-or-less securely employed. For example, I am in the midst of industrial action at my university, which doesn't feel threatening to me personally, and fortunately! But I am aware a lot of people (including academics) are underemployed or unemployed. I feel for more junior, more precarious, scholars, because these kinds of discussions about choice and so on are just harder to have when you're concentrating on 'performance' and finding a secure position. It may be easier to be a feminist psychologist now, as we have more freedom to speak frankly and to do feminist research, particularly with the support of established networks like POWS. Though again this might be more reflective of my privileged position in academia at the moment. If I was 28 and coming out of a PhD now, it might be a different story.

Victoria: Yes, it's much harder to have a 'great' academic career now.

Virginia: Yes, I can't imagine I would have got my job now, having the exact same research interests and experiences I had in 2001 when I started.

Glen: Thinking practically and pragmatically, can you give examples of what feminist psychological research could be? What kind of research in psychology would align with and benefit feminism?

Victoria: One of my doctoral students – Iduna Shah-Beckley – did a great feminist doctorate recently. She works in the field of counselling psychology, which has a strong social justice agenda, and a strong engagement with difference, but in quite a mainstream way. The broader argument of her thesis was to encourage counselling psychology to be feminist, critical and constructionist to fully realise the social justice agenda. She used story completion to explore how therapists make sense of scenarios suggestive of potential trouble in heterosexual relationships (where someone finds their partner masturbating, or someone suggests ‘trying something new’ – sexually – to their partner). What she found was fascinating – she compared the stories written by therapists to those written by a general population sample and compared women and men’s stories too (a design that might offend some purist critical researchers). The stories written by the therapists were very different, in some ways, to those written by the general population sample, showing for example, evidence of therapists’ training in ‘case formulation’. The stories were also very similar in other ways, particularly in relation to drawing on heteronormative discourses of heterosex. Iduna was pragmatic in her research, not getting bogged down in the questions and challenges an innovative method like story completion raises, and found fascinating results that seemed to suggest that therapeutic training doesn’t equip therapists to question and challenge heteronormative discourses. This was a great piece of feminist research that raised some important questions and contributed to a dialogue in the field of counselling psychology about what social justice really means. It’s a good example of what feminist research can do – start a conversation in a field where this wouldn’t normally happen. Her interest in this topic stemmed from her own discomfort as a therapist entrenched in heteronormative discourses, and wanting to challenge these discourses, but not feeling like she had any resources to do so.

Virginia: I’m going to say three things to follow on from this. The first is that one of the most fundamentally important things to feminist scholarship is to look at the world and to go ‘what ideas are being taken for granted and what are the power/gendered implications of those, and how might these impact negatively and impact different groups of people?’. For example, I have a student who is interrogating the discourse of addiction in relation to pornography. The second thing is the value of connecting to the ‘real world’. For example, I have a student who is researching queer people’s participation in women’s (competitive)

sports. This ultimately has the aim of improving participation in sport. My third criteria for what makes good feminist psychology is using your privilege to support others - for example, to supervise research that you can't (or wouldn't) necessarily do, because of your social location, but can facilitate others to do. For example, I see this as my role in relation to a Māori former PhD student and now colleague of mine, Jade le Grice, who explored reproduction and parenting within Māori communities and knowledge frameworks. She has intersected her feminism thoroughly with Māori knowledge frameworks, coming from a position where she doesn't want to side-line or lose her (western-ideas-influenced) feminism or her Māori gendered knowledge frameworks. She has produced lovely research, which really pushes forward thinking on gendered reproductive knowledge and Māori feminist knowledge (e.g. Le Grice, 2014; Le Grice & Braun, 2016, 2017). That's not work I could do, but can support!

Victoria: There is for me still value in 'giving voice', however. I have a doctoral student – Eóin Earley – who interviewed gay fathers, from religious backgrounds, who had children in heterosexual relationships. Their stories are so invisible and untold, part from some very early research on 'divorced' gay fathers in the 1970s and early 1980s. This is a group that seem 'left behind', not part of the 'queer baby boom'. For me there is still value in doing feminist, queer research that tries to articulate what is missing, what is left behind.

### **Working intersectionally**

Glen: I find sometimes, because there is a worry about colonially 'representing the other', that people end up not doing anything, for example, only researching white people if they are white. Which I don't think is the solution.

Victoria: Yes, there is a great paper by Erica Burman (2006) exploring intersectionality in counselling service provision. She argues that because of white counsellor's desire to be culturally sensitive, they end up referring any black clients elsewhere. And the result is that black clients don't get any counselling service at all. It's a thought-provoking question – should we offer the best service we can with the resources that we have, rather than none? I find intersectionality useful in thinking about how I am positioned and what entitlements I have, and I feel immensely privileged in general – intersectionality as a concept is useful for enabling me to see and reflect on that. But I notice that there's a real reluctance to examine

our own privilege, even among academics who are relatively privileged. Once at a conference I said 'privilege largely defines my existence' and I got really roasted for this in the question and answer session afterwards. I was told as a 'you're a queer woman how can you say that'? But it's true. Like many senior academics, I'm in the top 10% of earners in this country, I am white and middle class, I own a nice period house in a 'small market town' (that's practically a trade mark!) in the Cotswolds (laughs). How can I not be privileged? My experiences of marginality – being a woman, queer, disabled – feel less significant, currently, than my privilege, in defining how I live. Especially as I work in higher education, which right now, although this may change, feels like a fairly 'safe' place to work if you are a woman, queer or disabled, let alone white, middle class and a senior academic.

One of the teaching sessions I love the most is about intersectionality and inviting students to think about how gender is classed and raced. But I am concerned that in psychology there will be just a tokenistic nod to this concept and people won't really engage with what it means. In fact, I have seen examples of this in mainstream psychology – the word intersectionality on a PowerPoint slide, but no serious engagement with the concept. I think psychology in general isn't very good at engaging with what intersectionality means really.

Virginia: Psychology isn't good at intersectionality, as it wants to break people down into categories, which is the opposite of what intersectionality is.

Victoria: I don't know how psychology is going to respond to intersectionality, as it is such a challenge to it as a discipline.

Glen: Do you have any tips for working intersectionally?

Victoria: It's hard, isn't it? It's even more difficult to do this in a student project where it needs to be completed within 6 months or a year. Often intersectionality can just 'fall out' of a project. But even that reflects a privileged position, that intersectionality is something we can choose to take up or discard, rather than seeing it as something enmeshed in our everyday existence.

Virginia: I think it's hard, because of the structure and organisation of universities. For example, around 40% of undergraduate students at my university don't speak English as a first language; even those that do come from a wide range of cultural backgrounds and

identities, including indigenous ones. It's a diverse study body. But if you look at the academic staff, they are mostly White, mostly male, mostly straight, mostly able bodied, mostly middle classed and we teach a curriculum that is (still!) mostly White, North-American based. By and large there is a massive disconnect between the knowledge that is taught, and who the students are in terms of their positions and identities. In general, we don't treat intersectionality as the starting point for how we think about research and the knowledge we might want to generate. We still have this disconnect. Structurally it's hard because we have Honours students who have to do projects in 7 months in a stressful year, so how can they think about these complicated issues – complicated if they are *new* to the students? It's really, really hard. If students are not being taught these ideas as integral *at the start* (which is beginning to shift in some places), then it means as a supervisor you sort of burden them with a whole other set of intellectual and political knowledge they have to gain. We - Vic and I – used to moan about this during our PhDs, as feminist students we felt we were doing a whole extra chunk of work on top of our PhDs, that the non-feminist PhD students just didn't have to do! That kind of extra quality that feminist and intersectional thinking gives to a project gets no extra credit. There's no recognition for it. A student has to be really passionate and committed to intersectionality to want to do that, and to come alongside.

Victoria: I know I'm seen as really hard work by some students (laughs). They think 'Victoria will work you really hard. She'll make you cry' (laughs). 'She'll make you think about all these extra things and get you to read all these extra things. She's a good supervisor in some ways, but there's this massive critical engagement tax that comes with it' (laughs).

### **Publishing critical, qualitative and feminist research**

Glen: I was surprised and relieved to hear you say in your keynote that even you faced barriers to publishing. Could you talk about these a bit more?

Virginia: Well it is the case isn't it? It is a constant battle to get feminist research out there. But I've shifted in the last couple of years, to where I fundamentally feel like I understand the foundations for what I am doing and why I am doing it. Which might sound arrogant, but I think the deep and thorough training with Celia and Sue gave us confidence. When you encounter critique (which there's so much of), you can decide to argue back. The fact that

our thematic analysis paper has been so successful is pragmatically useful; when people question the methodology of your research, you have something to fall back on. I can say to an editor, 'I am not going to change the method, as I am published as saying doing that is problematic and therefore I would be contradicting myself'.

But that's also about having a certain level of confidence, which we are fortunate to have. It's also about recognising that reviewers are positioning themselves, and not always 100% right. You don't always have to do what they say. What I saw as an editor – of *Feminism & Psychology* – is that responding to all of the reviewers' comments can sometimes make papers worse, and a dilution of what it originally could have been. It can become a paper to fit many different agendas, and with little coherence. When it comes to feminist research, of course, you will need to pick your venues (of publication) and pick your battles.

Victoria: It is a great line though to say to a reviewer or editor, 'well I can't possibly do that, because I'm published as saying doing that is wrong' (laughs).

Glen: Does that include self-publishing? I've got loads of that to back me up (laughs).

Virginia: Yes, 'Sorry Reviewer 2, but in my blog I said I can't possibly do what you're asking me to do' (laughs).

Glen: That seems like a good place to leave things. Thank you very much.

Virginia: Thank you!

Victoria: Thank you!

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