

Women Psychologists Growing Older: Questions of Identity

Hilary Lapsley, PhD

Independent Scholar, Auckland, hlapsley@ihug.co.nz

What happens to our professional identities as women psychologists grow older? For many women who became psychologists in the 1970s, identities were hard-won. Feminism saw us call our profession/discipline to account, challenging the status of women in psychology and the ways in which psychology portrayed women: distorting, devaluing and damning difference, to quote from “D for Psychology”, an invited address I gave to the NZ Psychological Society in the 1980s. Feminist psychologists developed networks of activism and support and thirty years on, some of these networks are still functioning, as exemplified by this conference.

Those of us who recall the early days of feminist psychology are growing older. Some have moved out of psychology, some have changed careers and interests, some have relinquished full-on careers, some are still going strong and others continue to operate from the edges of the discipline, both in terms of professional and academic/intellectual work.

I would like to start a discussion on our professional identities within psychology as we grow older. What can we learn from psychology about nurturing or leaving behind professional identities? Is professional identity unduly shaped by our current occupational status, our ability to pay professional society fees or go to conferences? Or is it more enduring – once a psychologist, always a psychologist (although of course professional gatekeeping limits how we publicly describe ourselves)?

How should we challenge psychologies of ageing to take us into account? Twentieth century developmental psychology might not have much to say to us in the new and extended landscape of ageing.

I invite thoughts and discussion on these issues, from older women psychologists here and from anyone else contemplates getting older. (274)