

Psychology's Feminist Voices Oral History Project

Interview with Sue Wilkinson

*Interviewed by Jacy Young
York, England
May 26, 2015*

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SW: Sue Wilkinson, Interview participant

JY: Jacy Young, Interviewer

JY: So just to begin, could you please state your full name, place and date of birth for the record.

SW: Right. I am Susan Jane Wilkinson. Usually known as Sue. And I was born on the 11th of February 1954.

JY: Thank you. Our first question is often about the emergence of your feminist identity. I wonder if you can tell us a bit about how that came about?

SW: Yeah, my feminist identity is inextricably bound up with my identity as a feminist psychologist. So it would have been in the late 1970s, early 1980s, just as I was starting my academic career. I began to become aware of the restrictions on women within psychology, how few were represented in senior positions and how few were visible within the British Psychological Society as an organization. And I organized in 1983 and 1984, for the Social Psychology Section, which was the group that I was working with closely at the time, two symposia on feminist psychology. And in the course of doing that and running them and meeting other women, came to realize that there was not much of an institutional space for women in psychology and women's concerns and women's research and so on. And that kind of led to the beginnings of my feminism, or at least the rapid development of my feminism - I like to think it was a seed in there already somewhere - in organizing for and with women in psychology.

JY: And did you find that there was a sort of community that developed around you at that point of other feminist psychologist?

SW: Yes. I mean that was one of the things that was so delightful, that as soon as there was a sort of rallying point, feminists came out of the woodwork in all directions. In 1984, a group of four of us, myself, Paula Nicolson, Alison Thomas and Mathilde [02:52] de Jong [now Idema] first talked about the possibility of establishing what we then called a "Feminist Section" in the British Psychological Society. So that was a year before a group of, I think, 12 postgraduate students actually started to put together a proposal for such a Section. But, yes. It was also the time which I first met feminist psychologists from the USA. So Rhoda Unger came over to the second symposium and was able to fill me in on the history of women and psychology in the United States and the relationship between AWP [Association for Women in Psychology] and Division 35 of the American

Psychological Association. There was a sense that elsewhere in the world there was already a community. We were just 15 years behind in Britain.

JY: So that gave you another push forward perhaps?

SW: Yeah, absolutely. Yes, yes.

JY: Can we backtrack briefly to talk about how you first got interested in Psychology and became a psychologist?

SW: In an incredibly mundane way. As a teenager I was looking for part-time work and it so happened that the guy who lived next door was a psychologist. He was actually an occupational psychologist and had a small consulting company in London. And I stapled paperwork for him. I read the papers and thought "Oh this is interesting" and decided I wanted to study psychology in university.

JY: And when would that have been?

SW: I was an undergraduate from 1972 to 1975, so I guess late 60s or early 70s.

JY: Very interesting, and so it was a little later on I guess after you finished your graduate work, your post-graduate work, that you became interested in the feminist aspect.

SW: Yeah.

JY: Okay

SW: Yeah, I mean I think that the psychology degree I did at Leicester University was a very mainstream, traditional sort of degree. Very heavily experimental-based, very much within the positivist paradigm, quantitative methods only. And it was doing post-graduate work that I started to criticize some of those assumptions and think about other ways of doing research.

JY: Okay, so to jump back a bit to the founding of the Psychology of Women Section. How did that come about?

SW: It came about following the post-graduate conference in 1985. A group of us started working to put together a proposal for a Section and we submitted that in late 1985. And it was turned down by the Council of the British Psychological Society. It was the first time in its history that a Section proposal had ever been rejected. [05:33]

JY: And what was the rationale for turning it down?

SW: I think the essence of it was that there is no recognized area of psychology that is about women [laughter]. This is just a women's group, it is a political organization in disguise, masquerading as something scientific.

JY: And you persevered on.

SW: Yes, it took another two years before we actually got the Section approved in 1987 and we learned one hell of a lot in those two years. We learnt to cultivate powerful allies. We learnt how to write appropriate scientific rhetoric for the proposal. One of the things I did was to look internationally at what kind of struggles had happened in the States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the English-speaking countries basically. And discovered there were terrific parallels - that everywhere these sorts of arguments have been used every time women began to try to organize within psychology. So I was publishing stuff looking at the rhetoric of these organizations and how they actually used that rhetoric as a form of institutional power to make sure women's organizations didn't happen or if they did they were kind of marginalized in some way that really meant they would have little effect.

JY: Were you yourself involved with any other organizations outside of the UK? With some of the US organizations or sort of just drawing inspiration for the UK?

SW: I was at the time regularly going to conferences overseas. So I went to AWP for quite a few years, a couple of times to Division 35. I went to the Australian and New Zealand conferences. I met some of the women who lived through the struggles in the other countries, particularly Rhoda Unger was enormously supportive, and later Mary Crawford, and in Australia, Una Gault, who sadly died 2 to 3 years ago, who was really the senior feminist in psychology in Australia and widely loved and respected.

JY: Wonderful to have that sort of broad network of support.

SW: Yes. That was an inspiration to be able to draw on.

JY: In terms of the situation in the UK, did you have mentors who inspired you and your work?

SW: Not really, I mean this was something that I was reflecting on as I was thinking about this interview. There was a sense in which we were almost the first generation of feminist psychologists where you could say it is a cohort. So you could look back and [08:30] think of particular individuals who made early steps, so I am thinking of Janet Sayers, Jane Chetwynd, Oonagh Hartnett, they've all done things on sex roles or women's biology or you know, things that were almost precursors to what we were trying to do, which laid the ground, but we were first time a critical mass of feminists got together to create change.

JY: And around the time of the founding of the Section, was that also when *Feminism & Psychology* was initiated as a journal?

SW: That was later, that was not until 1991, so it was four years later. There was quite a lot of heated debate about whether it should be a Section journal or independent. And I

always felt that it needed to be independent because there were very strict institutional requirements to be a British Psychological Society journal in terms of who published it, what you could put in it, and so on. And I just thought that it would constrain the feminist politics; that we really wouldn't be able to do the sort of things we wanted to do within the organization. But at the same time, it was a kind of a trade-off with legitimacy, and wanting that institutional legitimacy as well.

JY: Absolutely. And how did you find the process of editing the journal?

SW: Very hard work. When I look back, and think I did it for 17 years, I think "How?" [laughter] It was an enormous part of my life. I mean it was enormously exciting at the beginning, because we had a terrific first editorial group. So I worked with Susan Condor, Jennie Williams, Margaret Wetherell, and Chris Griffin. We were the founding editorial group, and we had a much broader advisory group as well. And you know, it just, there was so much excitement and energy bouncing around, and then when the first issue came out it was like giving birth, I suppose.

JY: Yeah and the first, I would take it, publication for feminism and psychology in UK of that kind?

SW: Yes, well the publishers were very keen that we should say international, because obviously we looked at *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, and we got the sense that that was located in the APA [American Psychological Association]. And if we had done the journal within the BPS [British Psychological Society], it would have looked rather like that. So it was possible to provide a platform for more radical work internationally. Though I think we were initially seen as the British journal, gradually that's changed. And now we are seen as thoroughly international.

JY: Very interesting.

SW: Of course the editorship has moved from the UK to New Zealand then South Africa, a mix of South Africa and the UK and the US, the current team. So it has [12:00] kind of underlined the international status.

JY: And retains a bit of radical position?

SW: Yeah, very much so. Yes, yes, you know it's been a generational thing. Younger feminists are now heavily involved, which is great because it is moving in new directions and staying vital.

JY: So you are okay with handing off the editorship?

SW: Absolutely yes, yes. I mean I should've probably done it *sooner*. I did it for as long as I got a kick out of it. Then I thought, time to move on.

JY: So outside of the Section of psychology and women in the BPS have you been involved in any other feminist or psychology-based organizations?

SW: Not heavily, but I would say that it hasn't been only feminism that influenced my work. I've also drawn a lot of inspiration and a lot of support from critical psychology more broadly. So I think that, within the UK and continental Europe, there is a tradition of critical thinking that has actually attracted significant numbers of psychologists, and there has been a critical psychology movement that has been active since the 1970s onwards. So that's been one group that I have been involved with and offshoots of it, like the critical health psychology group. And then I think I have been very fortunate at Loughborough, where I've been for 21 years now, that I'm based in an interdisciplinary social science department. So it's been possible to draw not only on psychology, but sociology, social policy, criminology, communication and media studies. So I've tended to do work that is kind of interdisciplinary and has a critical edge, as well as being feminist.

JY: Do you find that the critical work is of a piece with your feminist orientation?

SW: Yeah, I would say that.

JY: Tell me a bit about the trajectory of your career. I'm wondering about the kind of work that you started off doing.

SW: Right, um, well I guess the early years were very heavily focused on institutional issues. So looking at the marginalization of women in organizations, mainly but not exclusively psychological organizations. And a lot of my energies, rather than actually doing research, were putting in place institutional structures, the journal, a book series. Before that, I helped found the Psychology of Women Section and then the Lesbian and Gay Section, which became the Psychology of Sexualities [15:01] Section. So there was a lot of institutional activity. And my research was kind of ticking along in the background. But then I did get increasingly involved in health and women's health issues. I spent some years working in the area of breast cancer, driven largely by the fact that there was so much medical research out there, there was relatively little work that started with women's experience, asking them what it was like to have a breast cancer diagnosis, to live with breast cancer, so that was one trajectory. And I had a series of enthusiastic, talented graduate students, who worked on areas of health and body image and so on. So Julie Fish did a project on lesbian health, particularly cervical screening - pap smears I believe they are called in North America. And Virginia Braun did a project on the vagina, and Merran Toerien, who is a lecturer now at the University of York, did a project on body hair and body hair removal. So there were health-related projects and projects very much concerned with appearance, body image, women's feeling about their bodies.

JY: One of the things I know that you've done work on is focus groups as a feminist method and I wonder if you could talk a bit about that?

SW: Yes, I mean the same time as I was setting up these various institutions, I got to thinking, well, “What is feminist theory? What is feminist methodology? Can I make some interventions in these sorts of areas?” And that fitted quite well with the fact that I was arriving at Loughborough where people were doing qualitative research, particularly discourse analysis. And I got particularly interested in focus groups as a method because they seemed like an approach that would be suited to incorporating a variety of different feminist concerns. So for example, egalitarianism in research, the researcher not holding all the power and instead sharing it among the members of the group. Something that was kind of comfortable, not too alien, not too threatening, where women could sit around and talk roughly equivalently to an ordinary everyday conversation. And something that would enable people to interact as we do in everyday life and bounce ideas of each other and tell stories and share experiences. So that was what really attracted me to focus groups. And then I was of course into the challenge of “How do you analyze that data that we’ve collected?” So that was where initially the discourse analysis, that I was becoming familiar with at Loughborough, came in. Once I got dissatisfied with that I went and retrained as a conversation analyst at UCLA with Manny Schegloff, and started using conversation analysis to analyze focus group data.

JY: And it seems to have been over the course of your career a shift away from quantitative methods to these more qualitative methods.

SW: Yeah, very much so.

JY: And is that because you find them more appealing or more suited to the kinds of questions you want to ask, or is it more of a rejection of quantitative methods as an approach?

SW: I wouldn't say it's a rejection of quantitative methods because I think [19:17] they can be enormously powerful and an essential part of feminist inquiry for the right kind of questions. But I think you touched on it when you said more suited to the kind of questions I wanted to investigate. On the whole they were, because the questions I was interested in were about women's experience and women's priorities and qualitative methods just seemed much more fitted for those kinds of questions.

JY: Was it a difficult transition in terms of methodology for you?

SW: No, not really. In a sense I had a supportive research community at Loughborough, and also I think that in the UK there is a much stronger tradition of qualitative inquiry. And that is kind of continuing to go from strength to strength. I think it is much harder in North America where psychology is much more quantitative and sort of mainstream empirical work. I get a sense that qualitative methods are still seen as fairly radical and marginalized in a way that is no longer the case here. I mean it was in the early days, but they are relatively respectable now.

JY: Wonderful. Maybe I'll ask you about - so I knew you've gone through all these institutional efforts to establish feminist psychology, and wondering if you were involved in any sort of activism or feminist movements?

SW: I think really the earliest activism was the marriage action Celia and I did which we'll talk about separately.

JY: So it really did come a little later?

SW: Yes. I think as I said, I became a feminist through the professional context, I was so enmeshed in that that there wasn't much time to get back to grassroots and stuff which in some ways I regret now. But it's not too late.

JY: Yep, absolutely not. So I noticed over the course of your career that you spent time in the US, in Canada, in New Zealand, I wonder if you would talk a bit about how those experiences have contributed to your work?

SW: All of them in different kinds of ways really. Partly because they happened at different stages of my career. So I have had two periods of time in New Zealand, for instance. And one of them was working with Hilary Lapsley at University of Waikato. And she is somebody you should get on your project, she'd be great. And she was located really at the interface of psychology and women's studies, so what my time there did was connect me into women's studies in a way that I hadn't been before. And it got me to think about well, "What does psychology has to contribute to women's [22:50] studies, and how might that play out?" And the other period of time in New Zealand was working with Ann Weatherall at Victoria University of Wellington. And that was after I got into conversation analysis. So we were actually doing a fairly technical project looking at conversational repair - that's when people address problems in speaking, hearing or understanding talk. How do they do that? We were looking at the technology for doing it. So that was New Zealand. Um, Canada, yes that was fantastic, I had two years at Simon Fraser University and just loved it, it was wonderful. It was such an opportunity. They've got this fabulous post that is called Ruth Wynn Woodward endowed professorship, which came from a legacy from a local feminist activist, for an academic or an activist or both to come for two years and basically have a very light teaching load and do whatever they do in the Canadian context.

JY: Wonderful.

SW: So that was brilliant - I mean what can I say about it, well one thing it did for me, it being Canada, it actually reignited my pleasure in teaching because I found the Canadian students were way, way more engaged than the British students I had been teaching. I just found them such a delight to teach, so I really enjoyed the teaching aspect.

JY: Wonderful.

SW: And then I got to know quite a lot of people in the women's health movement, so mostly grassroots feminists who were doing things about reproductive rights and breast cancer activism and I organized a big international conference on gender, sexuality, and health. So I tried to bring together people who were working in the area of health, possibly in relation to gender, but not in relation to sexuality, and people who were working in sexuality and health, but not thinking about gender issues as well. To get those communities to meld a bit. So that was great fun. And I also did lots of outdoorsy things. I learned to cross-country ski. I learned to kayak.

JY: You got to enjoy your time there.

SW: Absolutely, fabulous, yes.

JY: Wonderful.

SW: That was great, and the States, the only sustained period of time I spent there (although being in lots of conferences there) was when I had a sabbatical year training in conversation analysis at UCLA, so that was pretty focused in on that work.

JY: I'm wondering if there is a piece of work and an accomplishment in your career that you are particularly proud of?

SW: I guess it would have to be *Feminism & Psychology*. You know I [25:55] look back and think "What's my contribution to feminist psychology?" It's founding the journal and the journal continuing to go on from strength to strength. That's the thing I would most like to be remembered for, definitely. And it was an enormous pleasure in 2013 to get the Distinguished Leadership Award for feminist psychology from the Committee on Women in Psychology for the journal.

JY: Oh wonderful.

SW: I really appreciated that and I know all the successive editorial teams did too.

JY: A wonderful legacy to leave behind definitely.

SW: Yeah.

JY: I am wondering a bit about how you navigated the personal and the professional demands in your life? So I know that you've collaborated with your wife obviously throughout your career, but more broadly how you've navigated those two worlds?

SW: I think I would say it's never been a problem. They've been thoroughly intertwined. And that is one of the pleasures and privileges of having a wife who is also an academic, who is also a feminist, who is also a lesbian, is that it is easy to navigate those things. We both give absolute priority to our work and it infuses all areas of our life, but you know

we work hard and we play hard. And I don't think there is any resentment on either side of how we navigate those potential tensions that are just really not there.

JY: So shared priorities?

SW: Yes. Shared priorities. Shared values. Good recipe for happiness.

JY: Always, yeah. Um, so also to ask a broad question about what inroads do you think feminism has made in psychology?

SW: I think enormous inroads. It has forced psychology to actually confront some of its biases and some of its preoccupations. So I think it's kind of chipped away at a very traditional discipline that thought it knew what it was, and has forced it to be more self-reflective and more critical and to open up spaces for wider groups of people to be more inclusive and to involve a much more diverse sets of methods of inquiry. So that's really the key thing. [28:57]

JY: And hopefully that will continue going forward.

SW: Yes, I hope so, definitely.

JY: What advice would you give to young feminists entering psychology today?

SW: Think very hard about whether this is really what you want to do. If you want to change the world, there are other places that will be more comfortable to do it or where you'll find you have a more, I was going to say, an easier ride, a more challenging context but with more support than you will in psychology. It still feels that if you go into psychology as a discipline you are going to be constrained to some extent by a set of expectations, a set of structures, a set of practices that are inextricably bound up with it being psychology. So question one: do you want to go into academic life at all? Would you be better off expending your effort in a more grassroots context? Question two: Is psychology the right discipline? What about the other social sciences? What about an interdisciplinary context? If you still say yes, you want to pursue psychology, then find yourself some allies, people who see things your way. It's a lonely furrow to plough if you are isolated, you really do need people in there with you.

JY: But still lots of work to be done in feminist psychology today?

SW: Oh yes, I think so. I think there always will be, not just because there is a lot more reforming of the mainstream discipline to be done, but also because new problems arise. Each generation inflects even common issues with a different set of priorities and a different way of taking things forward. I was thinking for instance of the huge rise of social media, and the sorts of possibilities and challenges that raises for young feminists. So if you looking at something like bullying and you started to put cyber bullying into the picture, then the whole issue gets hugely broadened and redefined and it throws up a whole load of new challenges.

JY: I've asked you about the role of mentors in terms of your own career, and I'm wondering about your own role as a mentor and how you see that as having played out?

SW: I think the key things I would say is my mentorship of graduate students, they have been very successful themselves. Most have university posts and are now mentoring their own students. I also did some mentoring after opening up the publishing opportunities through *Feminism & Psychology* and book series that I also edited, *Gender and Psychology: Feminist Perspectives*. From the outset, part of the remit for *Feminism & Psychology* was to encourage submissions from people who were new to the publishing process and also to give constructive feedback. [32:29] So we hoped that young feminists who were submitting work would have a positive first experience of the whole business of reviewing and revising their work and I think that we did some good work in that respect on *Feminism & Psychology*. Yeah, I mean apart from that, being as responsive as possible to students who get in touch with me and being as responsible as possible to requests to go and give talks, I want to be supportive and helpful.

JY: And continuing relationships with your former students?

SW: Yes, very much so. Yes, they are all in touch.

JY: I am wondering about the connections you see between psychology of women, feminist psychology, and your work on psychology of sexuality, the psychology of lesbians and gays and how that that has connected for you across your work?

SW: I need to think about that one. I think for most part they have been and continue to be quite separate, which is sort of sad but perhaps inevitable. People put their energies in the area that matters the most to them. One of the things that I've been pleased to see is that the things that *Feminism & Psychology* has published have to some extent drawn the two fields together. So there has been fairly wide coverage of lesbian issues, and beyond that, other non-heterosexual sexualities. There has recently been a special issue on trans issues, so I think psychology of women and feminist psychology is becoming more inclusive and taking more seriously issues of intersectionality. But, partly for institutional reasons and partly for reasons of people's energies and where they are going to deploy them and where communities are, there's still quite a bit of separation.

JY: And it sounds like the ideal would be more integration.

SW: I think so, yes because I think both have a lot to learn from each other. It could be mutually beneficial.

JY: Absolutely, so is there anything I haven't asked you about that you would like to speak about?

SW: Yes, I'd like to say a bit more about my recent research, which would be unreasonable for you to know about because it hasn't been published yet.

JY: Please tell me more! [36:07]

SW: I mentioned that I retrained in conversation analysis (CA). That was in 2002 and for a while I was quite excited by it as a technical field. I was mostly doing some pure CA work, like the work on conversational repair with Ann Weatherall, but in recent years I've started to think how could it usefully be deployed in the real world and can it be used for some political purposes to actually change the world. I think the answer is yes, but a qualified yes, in a sense that it's still a very technical field to learn and it's very time consuming and labour intensive to do, so it's not great where people want quick answers to difficult questions. And it obviously is not suitable for all research questions anyway.

The area in which I've been specializing for about 3 years now is communication on telephone helplines. And working with mostly small charities, to see if I can help them improve their practices in terms of their helpline services. So I started this work with a charity called *Compassion in Dying*, which is basically seeking to inform people about their rights at the end of life. And also to give them information and support about documenting their end of life wishes, so either through an Advance Decision to Refuse Treatment or through a Lasting Power of Attorney for Health and Welfare. So I was able to get them to record about 200 of their telephone calls, and then I analyzed those and was able to give them feedback on areas in which they could improve their practice, which was quite exciting to do as work. And you know very useful for them. I've been continuing that work with two other charities, one is called *Unlock*, it's for people coming out of the criminal justice system and dealing with the kind of problems they have in getting rehabilitated back into society. A very small charity, just run by about four people and volunteers. And I'm working on analyzing that data now, and then there is a project with the charity *Dementia UK*, which is probably the one I'm most excited about at the moment. They run a helpline for carers of people with dementia. It's staffed by trained [dementia] nurses, they are called Admiral Nurses, and I'm looking at what kinds of special skills they got which enable them to do that work. But I'm also interested in, and they're interested in, bringing together my interest in end of life issues with my interests in dementia. So how can people recently diagnosed with dementia be encouraged, at an appropriate time, to think about what they want to have in the future before it's too late for them to be able appreciate what's going on and to make decisions about the end of their life.

JY: Very interesting, it sounds like your more recent work is very much going towards applied issues.

SW: Yes, yes. That's fair to say.

JY: And that's a more recent orientation in your work, I take it?

SW: Yes it is. I mean it is driven by a number of different factors. One is the institutional factor that in British academic life now the buzzword is "impact". So where doing things in the real world and for real world organizations just like charities was once seen as

politics, now it is seen as impact. So it is now a good thing, rather than a bad thing. And that should be really good for feminists to actually get on and do stuff in the world instead of feeling it has to be in a more narrow academic confine. And I think partly because I feel like I've had a lot of years in my career doing things within organizations, and according to institutional specifications, and as I get towards the end of my academic career I probably have the privilege and the freedom to do more of what I want and what really interests me. I don't have to worry about being accountable, which is brilliant, a luxury that certainly younger academics can't really afford.

JY: That sounds like really engaging work, really rewarding work ultimately as well.

SW: Yes it is.

END TIME: 41:21

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