



## POWES is pronounced “feminist”: Negotiating academic and activist boundaries in the talk of UK feminist psychologists

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# POWES is pronounced “feminist”: Negotiating academic and activist boundaries in the talk of UK feminist psychologists


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## Abstract

The Psychology of Women and Equalities Section (POWES) of the British Psychological Society (BPS) accounts for much of the feminist action in British psychology and beyond. In this qualitative study, we use discursively informed thematic analysis to examine a set of eleven in-depth interviews to explore the everyday experiences of feminists within academic spaces in and around the discipline of psychology in the United Kingdom. Three research questions addressing the boundary between activism and academia; the provision of support; and differing approaches to knowledge production were investigated. Our findings highlight the role of POWES as a feminist community as well as the conceptual importance of notions of home, work, and fun. Moreover, the paper examines the ways traditional conceptions of scientific rigour continue to haunt feminist spaces, as does the invisibility of emotional labour. Overall, our findings indicate that the place of feminist academic communities remains vital to sustain critical thought and action: having an intellectual “home” is pivotal to the survival of feminist psychology as well as feminists in psychology.

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**Keywords**

activism, POWES, feminist psychology, UK psychology, feminist community

This article reports the findings of a study exploring the quotidian experiences of feminists within academic spaces in and around psychology in the United Kingdom. The research explores the ways participants made sense of their experiences of belonging within an explicitly feminist professional organisation for psychologists – the Psychology of Women and Equalities Section (POWES) of the British Psychological Society (BPS). The BPS, the largest organisation for UK psychologists, was founded in 1901, only nine years after its counterpart in the United States. POWES (originally, POWS, Psychology of Women Section), however, founded in 1987, was a relative late-comer (Burman, 1990) in comparison to similar organisations in the United States, such as the Association for Women in Psychology (AWP), founded in 1969, or the Society for the Psychology of Women (Division 35), established in 1973. Nevertheless, it was a hard-fought battle to create the Section. At the time, mainstream psychology in Britain, as elsewhere, tended to polarise what it understood as “science” and what it considered “politics”. The former was ostensibly concerned with the production of “objective” scholarship, while the latter was perceived as ideological and biased (Wilkinson, 1991, 1999). Indeed, it was on the grounds that such a section would inevitably be political that early initiatives were rejected by the BPS (Burman, 1990). The irony that this judgement was, in itself, a political one was not lost on those petitioning the BPS. Given that, for feminist psychology, politics are explicitly and inevitably entangled in the study and practice of psychology, it is unsurprising that the relationships between POWES, the BPS and mainstream psychology more broadly have always been troubled (Weisstein, 1968; Wilkinson & Burns, 1990) and that these tensions persist in the discourse around POWES in relation to psychology as a discipline (Capdevila et al., 2019).

Even when POWS was founded, the term “psychology of women” was already understood as a euphemism for feminist activism (Wilkinson, 1999; Wilkinson & Burns, 1990). As such, the “psychology of women” has always been a contested term (see Burman, 2011; Capdevila & Lazard, 2015), that has served at times as a Trojan horse taking feminist scholarship into mainstream psychology. Over the years, there was much debate around the possibility of renaming the Section within BPS-mandated limitations (e.g., the word “feminist” was not allowed). Eventually, in December 2017, in the run-up to the Section’s 30th anniversary, the name was officially changed, including the term “Equalities” to better reflect the critical role of intersectionality. POWS became POWES and, accordingly, the journal associated with POWS was renamed the *Psychology of Women and Equalities Review*, abbreviating to *POWER* – publicly referencing a greater political commitment.

**Feminism within psychology**

The difficult relationship between feminism and psychology is rooted in a long, complex history shaped by multiple concepts of gender, gendered roles and gender relations

(Crawford & Marecek, 1989; Rutherford et al., 2010; Squire, 1989; Wilkinson, 1990), together with sexist practices that served to obscure women's engagement with the discipline (Milar, 2000). Whilst the place of both psychologies and feminisms has changed in many ways within the discipline and wider culture in recent decades (Eagly et al., 2012; Rutherford et al., 2011), some key issues remain salient. Notably, those feminist approaches more closely aligned with traditional positivism have enjoyed a more comfortable relationship with the discipline (Eagly & Riger, 2014; Marecek, 1995).

Rutherford and Pettit's (2015) critical history of feminism and psychology speaks to the difficulties of integrating feminist theories and epistemologies into established practices of psychology, noting the widespread adoption of empiricist methodologies as a means of bridging the two disciplinary traditions. The legacies of positivist approaches in academia remain associated with concepts of rigour (see also Hubbard & Bharj, 2019; Rees, 2011; Shields, 1994; Squire, 1989) and this association lingers even within feminist arenas of psychology. Having struggled to gain traction in psychology, alternative feminist epistemologies, commonly associated with qualitative research methods and the explicit valuing of lived experiences, continue to be marginalised in psychology more widely (Eagly & Riger, 2014).

The complexities of the relationships between feminisms and psychologies are perhaps best understood through Rutherford and Pettit's (2015) articulation of "feminism and/in/as psychology". The "and" represents the tensions between the political and the discipline; the "in" refers to the areas in which feminists have worked within psychology; and the "as" relates to the shared ground of both and the ways both have been used in conjunction. This conceptualisation allows for recognition of the multiple forms of relationship between the two. One site for this recognition has been the integration of feminist organising into the disciplinary structures of psychology internationally. Such feminist organising, along with research and teaching, was described by Shields in 1994 as "dazzling" but, alas, as having had "a surprisingly muted impact on scientific psychology as a whole" (p. 93).

Nevertheless, this organising has had substantial impact on feminist psychologists themselves. Austin et al.'s (2006) study focusing on Canadian feminist psychology reported that establishing professional associations, like the Section on Women and Psychology (1976, SWAP – originally the Interest Group on Women in Psychology) of the Canadian Psychological Association, was essential for promoting change. Radtke (2011) has further argued, in the Canadian context, that continued engagement with such organisations and conferences remained important to maintain this agenda. We also draw attention to more creative and historically focused works which have recently begun to disrupt mainstream notions of how rigorous and prestigious projects look. *Psychology's Feminist Voices*, curated by Prof. Alexandra Rutherford and her team ([www.feministvoices.com](http://www.feministvoices.com)), captures a wealth of oral history in feminist psychology, and has, in many ways, transformed our ability to read around, learn about and evidence our past. Similarly, *Transformational Moments in Feminist Psychology* curated by Stephanie Shields (2015, <https://www.apadivisions.org/division-35/news-events/news/2014/transformational-moments>) aims to collect the stories of feminist psychologists, focusing on turning points in the history of feminist psychology.

In thinking about the histories of feminism and psychology, we are reminded of Ahmed's (2017) principles of living a feminist life, which include: "I am not willing to get over histories that are not over" (p. 262). Ahmed articulates an enactment of feminism, emphasising the importance of a feminist community which includes others who "recognize the dynamics because they too have been there, in that place, that difficult place" (p. 244). This resonates with Gill's (2009) contention that despite a wealth of work on reflexivity, the actual everyday gendered experiences of academics have largely gone without critical attention. It is this feminist life, the everyday lived experiences of feminist psychologists, that we aimed to capture in this present study. Thus, in this article we are particularly interested in the relationship of feminism "in" psychology, that is, the narratives of feminists themselves, in considering the boundaries in and around psychology and feminism and how these are articulated and experienced in the quotidian experiences of those involved with POWES.

## The present study

This study consists of interviews conducted with a diverse group of 11 individuals involved with POWES following the Section's 30th anniversary in 2017. Informed by the findings of an online survey which aimed to capture the everyday experiences of participants with different degrees of engagement in POWES (Capdevila et al., 2019), three research questions were explored through semi-structured interviews:

- How is the boundary between academia and activism negotiated? (e.g., practising feminism within this context)
- How is support experienced and managed? (e.g., academic mentorship, emotional support)
- How are reflexive and adversarial approaches in academia valued? (e.g., how are feminist informed approaches to knowledge production managed and negotiated in relation to more dominant traditional approaches?)

The empirically derived research questions allowed us to further explore the experiences of feminist activism in the academy by shifting the analytic focus to a more deductive one whilst managing a thematic approach to the data. Interviews followed a similar structure to the original survey, asking about knowledge and engagement with different areas of POWES (journal, social media, prizes, writing retreats, and annual conference). It is worth noting that while we asked about all aspects of POWES, participants most often spoke about the conference. The questions were designed to elicit considerations and experiences of POWES in the past, present, and future. Crucially, participants were also asked questions which allowed for further elaboration such as: "When you think of POWES, what do you think of?" (see Appendix A for interview schedule).

In an effort to be both transparent and reflexive (see Lazard & McAvoy, 2020), we note that all of the researchers have been members of POWES. All three are white, female academics working in a UK context. One researcher, an immigrant to the United Kingdom, has been involved with the organisation for over 20 years. Of the

other two researchers, one is English and the other Welsh. The former became involved having applied for the post-graduate prize several years prior to the research project, and the latter became involved in the process of this research. The third researcher (and first author) conducted the interviews. As she was initially new to the Section, the research team felt it would allow participants to be more open.

## Method

### *Participants*

Eleven of the 56 survey participants responded to our invitation to participate in interviews. Of these 11 participants, eight were women, two were men, and one did not identify their gender. Seven participants were official POWES members and one was a former member. All were involved with POWES in some way – primarily through conference attendance and the POWES Facebook group. Participants ranged in academic career stages and had varied levels of involvement with the Section. They included six with experience of POWES committee work as well as some who had recently joined, including four early-career researchers. Those with committee experience were not necessarily those with longer careers; there were a number of early and mid-stage career academics, and one who was post-retirement. The majority of participants were white, though they varied with respect to cultural background, geography, age, career stage, class, generation, sexuality, and gender.

Participants for the original survey study were recruited using formal and informal links to POWES. The recruitment notice was posted on official POWES social media accounts and on the “Psychology of Women Discussion Group” Facebook page, and some participants were specifically invited via email by the authors. The study adhered to BPS ethical guidelines, having received ethical approval from the two universities which employed the authors (at the time). Participants were not paid.

### *Procedure*

All interview participants were provided with a Participant Information Sheet and a Consent Form in advance of the interview. Ten online interviews were conducted via Skype by the first author, and one was conducted in person by two of the co-authors. The interviews ranged in length from 15 minutes to 45 minutes, with an average of 28 minutes. All were audio recorded and followed a semi-structured interview format (see Appendix A). The interviews were transcribed verbatim and anonymised.

### *Data analysis*

Based on the findings of the survey study (Capdevila et al., 2019), the researchers developed the deductive and directional research questions to explore specific elements within the interview data. After data collection, all three authors familiarised themselves with the interviews in their entirety, both independently and collectively. We adopted a

discursively informed thematic approach based broadly on Braun and Clarke (2006; Capdevila et al., 2019) and underpinned by a critical feminist epistemology (Biglia & Martí, 2017). Once familiar with the data, we each coded for one research question separately and then shared our analysis using NVivo. Following several in-depth discussions, we agreed on the themes for each research question.

## Findings

### *How is the boundary between academia and activism negotiated? (e.g., practising feminism within this context)*

*POWES is inherently feminist.* Participants in our research were consistently clear that POWES should be about feminism – there was strong resistance to the idea that the Section simply represents “the psychology of women”. They articulated a sense that while there are challenges, there are no strict boundaries between psychology and feminism. The Section provides opportunities to *do* feminism in academia when other avenues for such action might be unavailable.

I01: I think being on the committee gives you a space in which to do feminist work in your discipline, um, which you might not necessarily get to do, er, you know, at departmental level.

The belief that POWES was feminist was presented as both historic and current. The history of the Section was regularly cited as evidence of its feminist roots and ongoing reputation as a feminist group.

I04: the reason it’s called the “Psychology of Women” is that they simply weren’t prepared to have a feminist Section.

I09: the thing that bothers me the most is knowing that we can’t call ourselves Feminist Psychology Section because it’s quote-unquote too political.

As indicated in the introduction, the feminist literature in psychology is rich with considerations around the use of the term “psychology of women” (see, for instance, Capdevila & Lazard, 2015; Kahn & Yoder, 1989; Milar, 2000; Parlee, 1975; Rutherford & Granek, 2010), which is both widespread and contentious. As this heritage might predict, participants implied that while no negotiations were necessary between their understandings of their own academic work in POWES and feminist activism more broadly, these were necessary to manage the name of the Section. Moreover, the idea that being “too political” should in some way be a problem was consistently derided. Note the use of “quote-unquote” here to trivialise the concern. The name itself, arguably, functions as a boundary object (Star, 1988) between the Section and the broader BPS, an “arrangement that allow[s] different groups to work together

without consensus” (Star, 2010, p. 602). Despite the (compulsory) apolitical character of the name, participants indicated that a political and social change agenda is key to the group. These tensions, between political principles and organisational requirements, have long been documented in analogous organisations, such as the AWP (Tiefer, 1991).

*A Feminist Community.* The space occupied by POWES, both at the conference and online, was presented as being “warm and friendly” as well as virtuous and aspirational by working to “make the world a better place”. These notions underpin the affinities between this form of academia and activism.

I06: very warm and friendly place which also has a political edge and . . . those within it, many tried to do something to make the world a better place, or to add in to certain debates in an informed and critical way.

Despite its clear political and feminist identity, POWES was consistently constructed as accepting everyone. This apparent contradiction was discursively managed across the data as “unique”.

I10: I’ll tell you what I think is unique about it, it’s not cliquey . . . But I think POWS is inclusive.

The Section is therefore presented as quite friendly, while at the same time it is distinguished from other “friendly” conferences where the ingroup is a closed (feminist) one. Inclusivity is clearly linked to a political sensibility, one that is aware of broader intersecting oppressions including and beyond gender.

I02: POWS members . . . of course they have a great knowledge on sexism, but also an appreciation or an openness to intersecting oppressions. Which I don’t see in the other societies.

The constitution of POWES is supported through collective “great knowledge” and its recognition of intersectional feminist approaches. Through this, POWES becomes a feminist community that is oppositional to established power. Yet, while considerations of intersectional identities and inclusivity more broadly were mentioned regularly, specific terms or instances were rarer. For example, race was referenced twice; once by a participant highlighting the predominantly white membership of POWES and her desire to see POWES become a place with a more diverse membership where more women of colour could feel able to get involved. The other reference to race was a criticism of the “White Lives Matter” movements. Queerness was cited several times by two interviewees and another highlighted potential issues with the term “Psychology of Women”. They indicated that this has the potential to imply POWES is only suitable for cis women when really it’s gender inclusive and “obviously there are brilliant trans researchers in POWS”.

Intimately entangled in this construction of POWES is affect – positive emotional engagement with the Section was consistent across sources. Participant I06 described themselves in these words: “I am a member of POWS, I love being a member of



POWS”, and I01 similarly claimed: “I love POWS, and, um, I wouldn’t be the person I am now without it.” As Segal (2017) has cogently argued, there is a collective joy to radical engagement that, whilst fleeting, can give rise to “new types of political perceptions and possibilities” (p. 260). This sentiment, along with an acknowledgement, rather than rejection, of affect – and particularly positive affect – pervaded the narratives.

In terms of negotiating the boundary between psychology and feminist activism, our participants presented POWES as a space that was, at its core, invested in feminist ideology and the enactment of feminist politics. In presenting POWES discursively as a politically feminist organisation there was little recognition that as an official psychology organisation POWES may hold institutional power. Our previous work also demonstrates that members often indicated a challenging relationship with the BPS (Capdevila et al., 2019), so institutional distancing can be seen in how POWES is discursively positioned. The BPS was also often cited as the reason why POWES was not able to be *more* inclusive (e.g., memberships rates, pay walls, rejecting the “feminist” name; see Capdevila et al., 2019). POWES was therefore distanced from institutional power and portrayed as embodying feminist praxis. Far from re-inscribing boundaries between academic psychology and feminist activism, this was presented as a relatively rare opportunity to enact academic activism.

### *How is support experienced and managed? (e.g., academic mentorship, emotional support)*

*A supportive home.* POWES’ supportive culture was described as a deliberate and conscious decision, which continues to be celebrated and shared:

I06: There was one conference which was quite antagonistic and unfriendly, and I and others decided that we would, as we advanced in our careers, um, and members of POWS, would do what we could to not let that happen again, and it hasn’t.

From these accounts, it is clear that this culture of support has been managed and maintained through shared responsibility. There is a genuine sense of love towards the Section and gratitude for its atmosphere, with our interviewees highlighting a desire to ensure its sustainability.

I10: I think on the whole people are still like generous to everybody . . . people actually trying to make sure that people are pleased to be members of POWS and get something out of it.

I01: I personally don’t think that I have a right to say what happens with POWS because POWS is all of us . . . I love the fact that it’s all of us, and I wouldn’t change that for anything and that’s what it is, so no I wouldn’t change a thing. It’s all of us together.

The responsibility for the supportive POWES culture is therefore allocated to everyone. One participant theorised what might happen if an attendee did not follow the culture of POWES:

I09: Um, I don't think there's ever anybody who, um, is awkward, or um like, stuck-up, or, you know, tries to talk people down, nobody would do that, I think if anybody did do that it would be somebody that wouldn't ordinarily come to POWS and they probably wouldn't come back.

Such conceptualisations of togetherness and community, wherein participants referred to "members" and "POWES" as a collective, was not predicated on whether people were paying members of the Section.

The support that individuals felt from being a part of POWES was evident across all transcripts. It was experienced as a core feature of POWES, particularly around the conference and its online Facebook group.

Interviewer: when you think of POWS, what do you think of?

I09: Um... hm... probably the people. Um, and just the community of POWS, like POWS members more widely, like the people who come to the conference, the people who come to the retreat, the people who are always posting, er, on the group and so on, and people being supportive and sharing things, and not tearing each other down but building each other up

I08: Certainly POWS for me has been a place for establishing, not just networks, but friendships, um, and which are really sustaining and supporting.

I05: I've always felt, is that, you know, whilst it has some very, you know, old academics there, who have been there since, um, POWS was being set up, there's a real buzz around nurturing the new academics.

I01: It's just the most supportive space to be in as a researcher, um, and you do need it, it's like, you know, the reason people go on about it is because it's so necessary, you need support.

The supportive atmosphere was also highlighted in terms in POWES' active encouragement of early career researchers. In Interview 4, a retired participant spoke explicitly about support for students as an ongoing emphasis within the POWES community.

I04: It's very welcoming, it's very, strongly attempts to be non-hierarchical, um, it's got, you know, really quite strong, um, values around equity and around promoting early-career researchers, which is quite different from the kinds of very hierarchical, um, conferences that a lot of, a lot of the ones are.

I04: I think one of the things POWS does in an incredibly good way is, it enables students, um, who are doing their PhD, in quite a hostile environment in some places, to come to somewhere where they're, they're valued and they're made, you know, they feel important and they feel, um, respected and things like that, and I think the prize is a part of that.

POWES was thus presented as a place of safety where not only were those early in their careers protected against hostile environments, but where they were respected and valued.

POWES was frequently viewed as an arena for recuperation. The assertion that POWES provides a space which feels like “home” corresponds to the “niceness” of POWES as well as its feminist identity. The Section was positioned as a contrast to work-places in which some participants often felt isolated.

I01: I was immediately made to feel welcome and included ... it feels like going home every year if that makes sense.

I08: That was very much part of how I felt at the conferences, you know, that I felt quite at home and that there are other people who shared, you know, similar concerns and worked in similar ways.

Like “home”, POWES is presented as a place to commune and relax. Participants described POWES as relief from work, a type of “retreat” or “summer camp”, with the sense of “home” reinforced by participants’ references to affect (as mentioned above) and support. Yet, “home” can be a site of recuperation *and* a site of invisible gendered work, and POWES was constructed in similar ways.

*Work (and/or?) fun.* POWES is positioned as critical to, but separate from, academic work.

I05: POWS has been great for me and my career [as an early career researcher] in as much as I have had some fantastic mentors, you know, none of them formal, often over the dinner table, or over breakfast, or, you know, the end of a talk where I’ve spoken to people, kept in touch with people that after the conference, in between conferences.

I08: I think there is a kind of quite a strong informal mentoring that works within POWS, you know it’s not a formal system, but there is that kind of sense of, you know, getting advice from each other.

References to support and mentoring leave a key question as to who is doing this work and how is it being managed. Participants did not locate the source of the work-based encouragement, feedback and advice. Only one participant made any comment about the hard work that must go into these activities. The absence of an agent doing the work in POWES is reminiscent of the earlier parallels with home. Home may be a site for belonging and support, but it is also the location for considerable work, both physical and emotional, most of which remains unrecognised, uncompensated and conspicuously gendered (see Sallee et al., 2016).

This juxtaposition of POWES as a site of both retreat *and* work was possibly complicated by related accounts of “fun”. The contrast between the fun and work-based discourses was particularly notable in the accounts of those who were POWES past or present committee members.

I10: Oh yes, yes, I mean it was great fun. And it was fun but also very serious.

I09: Um, fun and also, um, a fair bit of work. Mainly fun, um, I think, I feel really involved in sort of where the Section is going, as like, doing committee membership stuff so ... it's nice being able to work with a small group of people who are really committed to the aims and goals of POWS.

I06: I loved it. Ha! ... I found it stimulating, fun, um, I made good friends, I, I learnt a lot, and, um, I found it a really good committee to work with because there's a sense of really good collegiate spirit. ... It's a committee I've really enjoyed working on ... This sense that people really wanted to do positive stuff to move forwards and that was, you know, stimulating and exciting and fun.

Being on the committee was therefore framed as simultaneously hard work and fun.

The positioning of POWES as both within and outside of work might contribute to feelings of recuperation, but also functions to make ongoing labour less visible. This is particularly relevant in light of contexts in which invisible emotional labour often falls to women (Tunguz, 2016). Not to mention that this ongoing emotional labour which is unrecognised by formal academic systems of evaluation can over time become wearing and lead to burnout (Rickett & Morris, 2021).

Despite the positioning of POWES as a safe "homey" environment in which to enact feminism, it remains situated within the formal workings of academia and many career-based considerations apply. Notwithstanding the persistent constructions of the space as being outside of the workplace, considerable instrumental and emotional labour is expended. As Enke (2007) outlines, maintaining ongoing feminist community action has many challenges, and participants identified sustaining the positive atmosphere of POWES as particularly important. This appears to be largely conducted via the discursive constructions of POWES itself, as a deliberately inclusive and welcoming feminist space. Substantial investment has gone into creating the atmosphere, and everyone in attendance is considered implicitly responsible. Such responsibility is taken seriously by the committee and appears to be passed down as new committee members are recruited (for example, the incoming chair and past chair reside on the committee). This work is highly valued and is presented as being at the heart of the Section. There is a kind of accountability – that is, the accountability to be kind. It is not irrelevant that this labour is not generally valued in university structures and rarely appears in promotion criteria. The invisibility of the labour that underpins the support provided in feminist spaces resonates strongly with existing feminist critiques of academia, whereby women's work disappears from the historical record. Of course, feminist psychology has a rich literature documenting this practice (e.g., Furumoto & Scarborough, 1986; Morawski & Agronick, 1991). So we turn our attention to the exploration of the production of academic knowledge and how specific approaches become (de)valued within traditional academic contexts.

*How are reflexive and adversarial approaches in academia valued? (e.g., how are feminist-informed approaches to knowledge production managed and negotiated in relation to more dominant traditional approaches?)*

*Too nice to be smart? And other dichotomies.* Participants were clear in describing POWES as a unique space for academic and intellectual endeavours.

I01: ... gives you a space in which to do feminist work in your discipline.

I03: ... people who are so well-respected in their fields and are amazing scholars and incredibly successful.

I04: Um, I think of it as a fantastic space, in which to focus specifically on feminist approaches to psychology, in a way that that's very difficult to do in other contexts.

In this sense POWES maintains the productive aspect of a traditional academic space providing quintessential academic experiences.

I01: ... at least understanding, um, where your work is located ... understanding that Sue Wilkinson is sitting two seats away from me, like who I've cited probably thousands of times. It's like understanding your heritage, I guess.

I09: She tweeted, it was really sweet, with like the GIF of the like constant looking around, looking confused, with like "when you realise you're in the same room as your reference list". You've got, you know, all these influential people there and it's like no, you've just hit the nail on the head, that's, that's what it feels like, it's really nice.

In these accounts, participants locate themselves clearly within an academic space and within the existing intellectual and scholarly tradition. The use of the term "space" by both ourselves and the participants indicated the broader sense in which POWES is conceptualised. Enke (2007) explores how feminist movements have historically interacted with various types of space and identified "self-proclaimed feminist institutions" as having a "consistently explicit political mission" (2007, p. 18). We would argue that POWES is this type of feminist space because of its intentional attention to altering traditional social and academic hierarchies and its aim of providing social and intellectual feminist spaces (online and offline). POWES fills a perceived space, that is, a gap, in the boundaries between psychology and feminism, but it is also more than a mere conference, organisation or Facebook group. It is conceptualised as a community betwixt these positions. While POWES appears to bring together a feminist community dedicated to notions of support *and* an investment in a critical scholarly community, the tensions between these were notable.

In 1995, Erica Burman was asked to speak on the history of POWES at the annual conference. Her critical review of the Section caused some controversy. In a later consideration of the event (2011, p. 220), Burman reflected that:

One significant impact of that event was that the POWS committee subsequently prioritised making the conference a comfortable and supportive place for participants, which it remains to this day, *albeit perhaps at the expense of steering clear of debates that could ignite conflict.* (emphasis added)

Attentive to this interpretation of events, we consider this expressed dilemma between critique and conformity within our data.

In comparison to the externally focused political critique discussed previously, there was concern that the nurturing environment of POWES makes it all too comfortable. For instance, Participant IO4, a retired academic, stated:

IO4: I think the POWS conference is utterly brilliant in many ways. You know, the whole way in which it is nurturing and things like that, is fantastic, and it is incredibly welcoming, and is a fabulous place for people, you know, students to come and give their first paper and things like that. Um, there is part of me that feels that ... sometimes it's slightly too cosy.

Interviewer: OK

IO4: Um ... you know, it is necessary, equally, to have debates and discussions with each other. And, you know, there have been some in POWS, you know, and stuff like that, but I, I worry a little bit that it's got too nice. If that makes any sense? I don't think I'm the only person who thinks that, and I certainly know people who used to go to POWS who stopped going because they feel it's lost its intellectual edge.

Another participant, a man who was a very early career academic, asserted:

IO5: ... perhaps POWS, and I mean this in the nicest possible way, but it's a little bit too nice, it's, it's very very very safe, um, and I'm not sure if that potentially damages our academic credibility.

IO5: I think there are other people with a similar opinion who maybe just won't voice it.

We would highlight here the discursive dichotomisation of "cosy", "nice", "nurturing", "safe" and "welcoming" on the one hand, and "conflict", "debates" and "discussions" on the other. Favouring of the former over the latter is presented as potentially leading to loss of an intellectual edge, or as damaging academic credibility. In each case it is raised almost apologetically. The use of "there is a part of me" also reproduces this division and this participant is cautious about this claim; the issue is raised almost as an aside. In the above extracts, both speakers generalise their concerns to others to

augment persuasiveness and, potentially, to distance themselves from what might be interpreted as disloyalty.

There is no question that “nice” was a common descriptor in our interviews (used 67 times across all transcripts). This discursive construction, however, reflects the common assumption that nice girls are not smart girls. In the extract below, the dichotomy is presented as encouraging development versus being intellectually challenged. Participant 8, a woman who did not provide her career stage, expressed it this way:

I08: .... It’s kind of that element between, you know, a conference space being something which is supportive and developmental, but also something which will stretch everybody kind of intellectually, and I’m not sure that it will do that all of the time.

Again, the participant is hedging and tentative, indicating their concern that the comment may not be welcomed by the interviewer. The construction of these dichotomies is interesting, perhaps especially in a feminist community, as they mirror conceptualisations of academic prestige, which are often gendered along multiple axes (Rees, 2011). Such discursive framing of supportive/friendly approaches *versus* intellectually rigorous approaches is of course also related to power. Traditional adversarial approaches are often presented as being more “objective” (see Hubbard & Bharj, 2019). In presenting themselves (albeit hesitantly) as being in line with these approaches, participants are discursively borrowing from the idea that such a position makes them appear more “objective”, despite feminist critiques of such an alignment.

*Reflection or confrontation?* Despite the expressed concern that the Section might be lacking confrontation and debate, our data include many examples of the value of reflexive approaches to knowledge production. The importance of the opportunity to reflect critically was regularly noted, and it is this reflection that is presented as the intellectual contribution:

I05: ... I think the conference is an important part of POWS [...] I think that, that one focus to actually look critically and reflect critically on all of our work is quite important for POWS, and POWS’ identity.

Given this pattern in the data, and in spite of attempting to actively resist gendered approaches within academia, this deliberately supportive feminist community continues to measure itself against a highly masculinised, historic academic tradition (Gill et al., 2017). While both debate and reflection have long and respected traditions within the history of knowledge production, they also resonate strongly with long standing, and commonly gendered, conceptual dichotomies such as active/passive, with women commonly assigned to the latter. The construction of women as passive and, more importantly, the requirement to be more active underpins neoliberal models of feminism which encourage behaviours such as “power posing” (Carney et al., 2010) or “leaning in” (Sandberg, 2013). These explicitly embodied strategies aim to advance feminism through the use of “the master’s tools” more akin, we would argue, to the tradition of the “psychology of women” than the explicitly feminist psychology the Section claims to pursue.

## Discussion

Our study confirmed that the boundaries between feminist activism and academic psychology, and activism and academia more broadly, can be difficult to negotiate. Our participants were able to navigate these by staking claim to POWES as distinctly feminist. Feminist politics were centred, and the history of the Section was often cited to support the claim that feminist politics have always been at its core. POWES was also treated as a feminist *community*, often contrasted with the BPS, other more traditional sections, and psychology itself as a discipline. Our findings thus corroborate previous studies, such as Austin et al.'s (2006), which found feminist community was built from a shared experience and awareness of feminism being misunderstood and marginalised within mainstream psychology. POWES, like many feminist organisations (e.g., AWP, Tiefer, 1991), exists in “loyal opposition” to mainstream psychology, with the mainstream criticised in hopes of re-shaping rather than abandoning it (Marecek, 1995).

Nurturing, support and community were central threads in all interviews, but these also highlighted the invisible nature of such emotional labour. Whilst it was valued, the agents of this work were often unrecognised (see Capdevila et al., 2019). Rickett and Morris's (2021) research demonstrates that (working-class) female academics often find themselves “mopping up the tears in the academy”. While POWES was conceptualised as an inclusive and welcoming space, little attention was paid to specifics around how intersectional feminisms were enacted. More recent changes, however, have made such action clearer. For example, POWES has incorporated a specific “Spotlight on Inequalities” prize within their annual student prizes, which previously focused on race, and in 2022 focused on class. This recently established prize was created with the aim of providing a “spotlight” on other forms of inequalities and intersections of oppression.

Difficulty in negotiating the dichotomy between work/academia and home/fun was highlighted and further complicated by the conceptualisations of what rigorous psychology might “look like”. Adversarial approaches to knowledge production, historically entrenched as they are in academic notions of rigour, were discursively naturalised and “unmarked”, whereas the more supportive, reflexive, and experientially positive approaches dominant in POWES were troubled and “marked” (see Haraway, 1988). Reflexive versus adversarial approaches to doing psychology were polarised, with the latter presented, albeit hesitantly and apologetically, as the more rigorous. This presentation develops the findings of Eagly and Riger (2014) and Rees (2011) regarding the resistance to new epistemologies championed by many feminist psychologists by illustrating the means by which the positionality of feminism within psychology continues to be a challenge, even in actively feminist communities.

## Conclusion

Our aim here was to explore the everyday experiences of feminist psychologists within the context of POWES' 30th anniversary celebrations. Drawing as it did on these celebrations and a self-selected sample of participants, it is possible that it represents a particularly positive perspective on the Section and the wider agenda of feminist psychology.



We too are members of the community under study. Our agenda, to highlight the need to value and support such organisations at a time when their relative academic merit is in question (see Verloo & Paternotte, 2018), is also explicit. We would argue that, as insiders to this research in a variety of ways, we have been able to draw upon broader knowledges to contextualise our findings and interpret them here meaningfully.

Recent events have caused us to reflect on our analysis. The attention to history, the legacy and the deliberate decision to ensure POWES maintains an ethos of kindness all appear to have been crucial in the Section's endurance during the past few challenging years of the COVID-19 pandemic. The fact that POWES already had an active online community no doubt helped mitigate the impact. Moreover, in the UK there has been a troubling turn towards trans exclusionary feminism (underpinned by discussions of "academic freedom"; see Pearce, 2021), which is discordant with POWES' openly inclusive ethos. As a result, POWES now functions in a different context to the one which existed when we conducted this research. In order to ensure POWES' longevity and character, we would argue it is more important now than ever to be very explicit about its intersectional and inclusive feminist objectives and to do more to recognise the labour that goes into maintaining feminist communities. In this spirit, POWES has recently introduced a mentoring award. Moreover, it is important for POWES to continue to be wary of adversarial approaches to knowledge production. Tensions evidenced in our data demonstrate how pervasive the association between these approaches and concepts of rigour and intellectual prestige are, even in feminist organisations attempting to resist them.

As Shields (2015) emphasises, feminist psychologists rely on each other for inspiration and encouragement, regardless of professional status. It is clear that the distinct history of feminist psychology continues to have a significant presence, and this was acutely evident within the talk of feminist psychologists about POWES. In the past, feminist researchers have had to make choices about how to approach their research. The two most prevalent options were to either reshape positivism to include feminist epistemologies or to critique the conceptualisation of subjectivity as bias. In doing the first, researchers run the risk of muting their active political voices inherent in feminist action. In doing the second, they run the risk of being discounted by mainstream positivist psychology. In some ways these issues remain at the forefront in academia, but within feminist communities such as POWES, it is evident that a new kind of ethos predominates. Inclusive, supportive and nurturing spaces which remain intellectually stimulating and embed fun within working practice are at the core of what was most valued in POWES. We argue that the existence of feminist communities (whether or not they are named as such) continues to be vital over 30 years on: having an intellectual "home" is pivotal to the development and survival of feminist psychology and feminists in psychology.

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## Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Guide

### *Questions. Prompts.*

- **Are you a member of POWS, or have you been previously? How do you feel about being a member?** Have you ever been a committee member? What’s it like being a committee member? How do you feel about being a member of the BPS?
- **What do you think of [thoughts to change] / [the recent change in] the POWS name to Psychology of Women and Equalities Section?**

- **Are you involved with any other sections?** How are those different to POWS?
- **Have you ever attended the POWS conference?** How many have you been to and what feeling do you get from them? Have you presented at a POWS conference? What was that experience like?
- **Do you read the section journal - the *POWS Review*?** Have you published in the *POWS Review*? What was that experience like? Have you ever been involved with *POWS Review* as an editor or advisor?
- **What do you think of the POWS Prize?** Have you ever submitted or won the POWS Prize? What did you think of the experience?
- **Have you ever attended the POWS writing retreat?** What do you think of the writing retreats? What was your experience of attending?
- **What was your first experiences of POWS?**
- **When you think of POWS, what do you think of?**
- **Would you change anything about POWS?**
- **Is there anything else you would like to say about POWS?**

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**Lois Donnelly** is currently pursuing her PhD at the University of Worcester, UK, on the use of special measures to protect victims/survivors of intimate partner abuse in Family Courts in England and Wales. Her areas of interest are gender violences, sexual objectification, gender inequality and activism, and the history of feminist psychology. She has a particular interest in the nexus between research and policy-making and completed a Fellowship at the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology. She is a committee member of POWES.

**Katherine Hubbard**, PhD, is a Senior Lecturer (Department of Sociology, University of Surrey). Her research and teaching are interdisciplinary, including sociological, psychological and historical components. She specialises in queer feminist approaches, histories of psychology, and gender and sexuality studies. She adopts a particular queer feminist and critical perspective with a distinctive affirmative and inclusive approach. Her most notable work to date includes her 2019 article with Dr David Griffiths published in *American Psychologist* and her monograph: *Queer Ink: A Blotted History Towards Liberation*. She is a member of Psychology's Feminist Voices and is a co-investigator on the FUTURESEX initiative.

**Rose Capdevila**, PhD, is a Professor of Psychology at the Open University (UK). Her research focuses on the construction and transgression of discursive boundaries around identity – in particular political and gender identities. She has recently been conducting research on gender and digital spaces as well as the history of feminist psychology in the UK. She was chair of POWES in 2020–21 and is a former co-editor of *Feminism & Psychology*. Rose co-edits the book series *Feminist Companions to Psychology* and was co-editor of the award-winning *Handbook of International Feminisms: Perspectives on Psychology, Women, Culture, and Rights*.