

Reading the Life Narrative of Valerie French, the First Woman to Sign the Western Australian Bar Roll

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Abstract: This paper explores the experience of leadership in the life narrative of the trailblazing Western Australian lawyer, Valerie French. In 1975 Valerie was the first woman to sign the Western Australian Bar Roll, and became the first woman barrister practising in the west coast legal fraternity. Until her retirement in 2009 from the Western Australian judiciary, Valerie's professional appointments and career trajectory continued to lead the entry of women into the WA legal profession. In 2010, Valerie's own narrative of her life in the law was recorded as part of the 'Trailblazing Women and the Law Project' led by the ANU College of Law. In this narrative we hear, for the first time, the story of her success and her 'leadership' experience. After detailing her story we turn to consider the implications of the overwhelming emphasis placed on external support and 'chance' by this legal pioneer to explain her professional life.

Keywords: Valerie French, women lawyers, women judges, autobiography, judicial biography, oral history, legal history, women and leadership

Introduction

This paper explores the experience of leadership in the life narrative of the trailblazing Western Australian lawyer, Valerie French. In 1975, Valerie French was the first woman to sign the Western Australian Bar Roll, and became the first woman barrister practising in the insulated west coast legal fraternity. Until her retirement in 2009 from the Western Australian judiciary, Valerie's professional appointments and career trajectory continued to lead the entry of women into the state's legal profession.¹ Beyond her impact on the profession as a 'first' at the Bar, her substantive legal practice has also influenced Australian law and legal policy, particularly in the field of criminal justice.

In 2010, Valerie French's own narrative of her life in the law was recorded as part of the 'Trailblazing Women and the Law Project'. The project, led by Professor Kim Rubenstein and Dr Heather Roberts from the Australian National University (ANU) College of Law in partnership with the National Library of Australia (NLA), aims to provide the first publicly accessible, national, oral history of Australia's pioneer women lawyers over several generations. Valerie's narrative was the first recorded in the series and her account of her own life—a life we can construct from public sources as one of leadership and pioneering—reveals a much more complicated sense of self and experience of 'trailblazing' than dominant discourses of leadership would have it, or the public record can portray. While the facts of a leader's curriculum vitae and the events of their successes may be publicly accessible, oral history provides us with a unique opportunity to engage with the background processes behind these successes and hear a lived experience of the events.

The previously unknown elements of Valerie's life history that emerge in the oral history setting are one focus of this paper. Her own personal biography, her family history, personal influences and explanation of how she, through chance and social connection, 'accidentally' came to be at the forefront of women's entry into the legal profession in WA are important elements of understanding who Valerie is, and how her successes were made. However, as one begins to look at Valerie's story of her own success, a second kind of insight emerges from her explicit refusal to attribute any conscious intent to her 'trailblazing' career achievements. Her deflection of strategy and a traditional leadership image are the second focus of this paper. These features are not simply relevant to understanding Val's life, but also gesture at the importance of expanding our understanding of the ways women remember, consider and represent leadership, and to considering the nature of pioneer women's consciousnesses at the legal frontier.

This paper is divided into four parts. The first part gives a brief description of the 'Trailblazing Women and the Law Project' and the exciting role for oral history in research into legal history, women and the law. The second part sketches Valerie's basic biography by drawing on public records of her legal career² and from the memories and personal details she disclosed in her oral history. In the third part, we move purely into the realm of Val's story and focus on the way she, in her public narrative, has assembled these biographical facts into a meaningful explanation of her leadership and professional pioneering. In the final part, we ask what this story reveals about her self-perception as a leader and, beyond this, the role and representation of women leaders in Australia.

The Trailblazing Women and the Law Project

Making Room for the Stories of Women Lawyers

During 2010, the authors were part of the pilot phase of the Trailblazing Women and the Law Project as research assistant and co-investigator with Dr Heather Roberts, respectively. The project is a partnership between the NLA and the ANU College of Law to create a vast archive of 100 oral history interviews with trailblazing women lawyers from across the country, the profession and over several generations. In addition to recording these life narratives, it aims to analyse their experiences through innovative conceptual links between oral history, biography, citizenship and law. Ultimately, these stories will be showcased in the NLA's collection, online through the Australian Women's Register and in a biographical monograph to deliver what is hoped will be an outstanding national, cultural and historical resource.

A separate monograph will also be produced analysing these women's narratives to reflect upon the continuing barriers to and experiences of women's civic participation, on the place of oral history in legal research and on issues to do with citizenship and biography. By recording and analysing these unheard narratives, the project aims not only to understand trailblazing further but also to inspire young women to work towards an equality of citizenship in their professional and personal lives. In using the term citizenship, we are thinking of the practice of law in its many varied possible expressions, as embodied by solicitors, barristers and judges in public policy and law and in business and law, by government lawyers at a domestic and international level and by parliamentary drafters, legal researchers and academics. Each of these roles exists as an important part of public life and 'civic activity', fitting within an understanding of citizenship as public civic participation.

Three interviews have now been conducted at the NLA, and the interviewees represent the diversity we are seeking to reveal of women's experiences in the law. The first, the subject of this paper, was Valerie French, who has now retired from public life and the judiciary. The second interviewee was Eve Mahlab, who, although 'retired' from her legal recruitment and then business life, is still, at 73, an active public citizen through the work she is currently undertaking on women and philanthropy. The third interview was with Megan Davis, the first Indigenous Australian person to be appointed by the Australian government to a United Nations (UN) body. In April 2011, Megan was appointed to the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, an advisory body to the UN Economic and Social Council that advises the UN on indigenous issues related to economic and social development, culture, the

environment, education, health and human rights. Megan is 35 and her inclusion not only represents our desire for diversity in terms of age and race, but also, in conjunction with French and Mahlab, our aim to represent different geographic and lawyering experiences in Australia. In these three initial interviews we have moved across legal communities in Western Australia, Victoria and New South Wales.

Oral History and Legal Research

By seeking out the stories of these pioneer experiences in the recorded memories of the women themselves, the project also aims to establish and extend the use of oral history within legal research. Many of the women we will interview, while perhaps well known within their particular professional field, are not well-known figures in any written record. Indeed, many ‘trailblazers’ are young or in career positions that do not attract the general eye of historical writing. These women’s obscurity and the absence of pioneer women lawyers from legal history are not, however, ‘natural’. As feminist historiography has well established, in a world of mythmaking dominated by men, the agency of women is often unnoticed or unreported.³ Perhaps in the legal profession particularly, a profession that has itself been exceptionally dominated by men, women’s stories of leadership and pioneering, although remarkable, have been forgone for other easier stories.

The chance to, as Shulamit Reinharz writes, capture people’s ‘ideas, thoughts and memories in their own words’⁴ offers an apt method of uncovering and representing these previously silenced events. As Louis Starr explains, oral history has the capacity to ‘preserve life stories [and] fill in the lacunae in one field of learning after another, by eliciting testimony from many on a single topic’.⁵ As a form of testimony, these recordings can also, as Paula Hamilton argues, affect the existing norms of collective, national, consciousnesses.⁶ The inherently subjective nature of storytelling—ironically the aspect of oral history most criticised within mainstream legal scholarship⁷—also provides us, as is clear in the case of Valerie French, with a rich resource for reading beyond the literal text.

Biographical Detail

Valerie was born on 22 February 1949 at the War Memorial Hospital in Sydney to Jim Lumsden and Thelma Lovell. Her father’s family had emigrated from Scotland to Australia and her mother’s family descended through her mother’s side from Irish immigrants and through her father’s from convicts. She was the second child and daughter in their family and her sister was three years old when she was born. Eleven years later, Val’s eldest brother was born and he was soon followed by another brother, so the children

were separated into two sets of siblings. While Val is close to her older sister, this twinning of children in her family produced an affinity between the siblings born second in the set. As she explains:

Valerie French: I'm very close to him, because he's the other redhead, so there's always this bond, you know.

Kim Rubenstein: Yes, lovely.

Valerie French: And the youngest of the two, I've got an old-, you know, that sort of ...

Kim Rubenstein: Yes, each of you were the younger of the two.

Valerie French: Yep. Yeah.⁸

In 1956, when Valerie was seven, her family moved to Perth, where her father had been appointed as a lecturer in the University of Western Australia Psychology Department. Of the move to the west coast, she remembers jointly a sense of courage on her family's part and the impact of the distance from her Sydney family base. In Perth, she attended Loreto Convent, with one year at school in Princeton in 1962 and another year in an American high school in Bangkok as her family travelled with her father's university work.

In 1967, at the age of eighteen, she started law school at the University of Western Australia where women comprised just 10 per cent of the school population. In 1971, she graduated with an LLB and, although the total number of women had increased by the time of her graduation, the school's population had risen in tandem and women remained a small minority in the college population. She completed her articles immediately and was admitted as a Barrister and Solicitor of the Supreme Court of Western Australia in 1973. After spending a year overseas working casually, she returned in 1975, aged 26, intending initially to take a place in the then innovative legal aid offices proposed by the Whitlam government.

However, after what, to her 26-year-old self, felt too long to begin the promised position, she withdrew her application and began practice as a barrister at the Independent Bar in Western Australia instead. As she remembers it,

I bumped into someone who said, "Why don't you go to the bar?" ... I said, "Oh, I won't get any work. I haven't had any experience". They said, "Oh, you can just get work doing adjournments". So, and then I discovered that the bar was, I think, 35 men, no women, and I, by that stage, was single, thinking, well that's a nice sort of working environment. So I, with one week's dole cheque in my pocket, and a,

a very sort of somewhat reluctant undertaking from my father that ... he'd sort of ... stand by me ... he gave me the name of his bank manager, so I went and got a, an overdraft.⁹

She was the first woman to join the Western Australia bar, opening chambers in the Perth's central business district.

A year later, Valerie married Robert French and the following year, 1977, she left full-time legal practice to have a family of three sons. Unusually, however, Valerie continued to work in part-time legal roles while her sons were at home. She took on locum work, was employed as a part-time lecturer in legal studies, duty counsel with the Western Australia law society and then, in 1981, as the legal chairman of the Social Security Appeals Tribunal. She later became a part-time Children's Court magistrate.

When her youngest son began kindergarten in 1987, Valerie returned to full-time work at the bar. She worked predominantly in commercial and taxation litigation and, for one to two days a week, she also continued her work on the Children's Court. Working at the Children's Court increased the financial consistency of her barrister's earnings. As she remembers,

Robert didn't have making vast amounts of money as, as, as part of his game plan, so I think that probably affected very much to how, how my career developed ... And I'm sure that if, as I said, he'd gone on to be a, a wealthy senior partner in a law firm and a wealthy silk at the bar, I probably would have stayed at home and brought up six children.¹⁰

Ultimately though, when she was offered a position away from the bar as a senior advisor in the firm, Blake Waldron and Dawson, Valerie left the bar intending to secure a regular salary. However, for Valerie, an independent worker with three primary-school age children, the commercial law firm experience, with its regular flow of weekend work and management hierarchy, was not ideal. As she remembers:

It wasn't a successful move for me in the sense that I found working in a big firm very difficult. I'd always worked for myself at the bar. I found it hard to be a team player. I don't think it was successful from their point of view [either]. They probably expected me to come in and act like a partner and bring in work. Well I, that's not what I was in a position to do ... I simply wasn't in a ... position to put in, to work the hours that would've been required for me to meet my costs. I wasn't ...

able to stay really late, you know, I, I still had kids and, you know, dinner and homework and after school sports and things.¹¹

When her oldest son was about to start high school, Valerie again stepped into a new field and applied for a position as magistrate in the Perth Court of Petty Sessions. After her work at the bar and appointment at Blake Waldron Dawson, the Court of Petty Sessions was not seen as a glamorous choice, but to her concerned colleagues she explained, 'I've got three reasons—they are 12, 9 and 7'.¹² Entering the judiciary as a permanent judge made, as Val remembers, 'a huge difference to us'.¹³ In terms of a balance between her work and family life, she remembers the relief she felt at completing a 9 to 5 work week. In a professional sense as well, her return to the courtroom, this time as a judge, allowed her the independence and exciting immediacy she had originally appreciated as a litigator.

From the Court of Petty Sessions, Val was appointed into the District Court,¹⁴ where she joined Antoinette Kennedy, who had earlier that year become the first woman appointed to the District Court, and Mary Ann Yeats. At the end of 1998, Val was, as District Court judge, appointed president of the Western Australian Children's Court. At the time, media attention and public engagement with the work of the Children's Court—a court for the trial of underage offenders—was high and, for Val, this appointment was the 'highpoint' in her time as a judge.¹⁵ Whereas the previous two presidents had suffered recurrent media persecution during high-profile trials, Val pioneered a new openness with the press about the court's work and she received a much 'better reception'.¹⁶ As she explains of the media: 'I mean, they're, they're human beings too, if you treat them reasonably well and, and don't try to pretend that you're, you know, hiding behind something, they will often be less likely to do you in'.¹⁷

After her Children's Court appointment expired, Val returned to the District Court and, in 2006, was appointed full-time chair of the Parole Board. While at the Parole Board,¹⁸ Val again led the entry of women into the role and the development of a new style of practice. As she explains:

I mean, you talk with prisoners and prisoners are probably the most vulnerable people that you ever have anything to do with. And you're in a position of great power. And I think it's very important, you know, when we were doing interviews with prison-, prisoners ... just to make sure that you did the best you could to try to make them feel that they had an opportunity to put forward their side ... and that you did the best you could to try to explain what it was that was happening to them.¹⁹

In response, she pioneered a parole process where prisoner applicants were given a ‘prior hearing’ via video-link, clear explanations of the review process and reasons for the board’s decisions. Val’s approach has now been wound back with the new review board’s conservative interpretation of the *Sentence Administration Act 2003* (WA) and their procedural responsibilities.²⁰ Nevertheless, her approach as president remains a watermark for an applicant-focused practice in criminal justice. While still technically a District Court judge, she remained effectively full time at the Parole Board until she retired on her 60th birthday in 2009, after her husband, Robert French, was appointed chief justice of the High Court.

Recalling Her Own Life

‘I have all these stories of all these people being so supportive’

Valerie overwhelmingly locates the ‘cause’ of her success outside her own actions and intentions. In her narrative, the biographical details of her life are meaningfully grafted together by detailing, first, the influence of other people who supported her in her various roles and, second, the good fortune of being the right person in the right place to gain appointment. As she herself reflects, ‘I have all these stories of all these people being so supportive’.²¹ In remembering her undergraduate career, for example, Val considers herself to have been distracted and kept on track largely by having her father to literally run to in the midst of examination stress and a second-year tutor, Val Kerruish, who showed her she ‘really had to pull her socks up’.²² Perhaps her most potent story of undergraduate influence is raised by the memory of her dean of law, Professor Payne, talking her back into the room after she walked out midway through a critical examination. As she tells it:

If I hadn’t bumped into him, I probably wouldn’t have ever completed law. I would’ve left. I would’ve ... and I would’ve failed the year, because you didn’t, we didn’t have quite the flexibility that degrees seem to have now, of being able to carry units over. It was that you either passed or you failed. And I know I would’ve not gone back. I would’ve just gone and done something else.²³

The impact of others, who supported, encouraged and facilitated her leadership, continued throughout her career. When she left university, she was articulated to her brother-in-law, Bevan Lawrence, in a small practice where her gender was not controversial. When she began at the bar, Graham McDonald, a close friend, allowed her to ‘camp in his office’ in Perth’s barrister’s

chambers, giving Val an ability to see clients on her slim budget. Subsequently she shared a room with Roger Macknay to reduce overheads. If either of their clients arrived, the other quickly shifted upstairs to the library until the appointment was over. She also became acquainted with the clutch of senior barristers in Perth and they passed work to her, ensuring she had enough to cover her costs. In time, too, her relationship with Robert French meant that she was able to continue as a lawyer in his firm for three days a week after she left the bar during her pregnancy, even after her obvious pregnancy made lawyering in her chambers culturally difficult. When she returned to the bar after having children, Sheila McClemans, one of Perth's first woman lawyers, was a strong role model for Val. She also 'became great friends' with Kim Rooney, a young barrister who was 'forging a, a very successful career at the bar'.²⁴ As she remembers, Kim was 'tremendously supportive' and referred 'bits and pieces of work' to her.²⁵

'It was an accident really, there was a shortage ... and Rob said ...'

While these important relationships ensured her professional sustenance, Valerie explains her extraordinary career appointments as matters of chance. She repeatedly describes how being in the right place at the right time unintentionally led her to be at the forefront of changes to the legal profession in Western Australia. She tells us, for example, 'when I finished law school and was looking for articles in 1971, 1972, there was a shortage of lawyers in Perth. That, probably more than anything else, made it very easy for women to get jobs'.²⁶ In this climate, a small 'accidental' step taken in frustration at the tardiness of the Whitlam bureaucracy also led her to be the first woman barrister in Western Australia. Again, when she became chairman of the Social Security Appeals Tribunal, there was,

a shortage of, of, of people to do that sort of thing then too. See lately, or certainly years after people were falling over themselves to get those sorts of jobs. Then there weren't many practitioners who wanted to do it. And I had the right experience, and, and I think frankly they, they liked appointing women in those days, and I was ... there weren't many women around who could do it.²⁷

Her first part-time work at the Children's Court 'kind of happened by accident'²⁸ as well, and, when she became president, she explains she took on what was 'seen as a poisoned chalice'.²⁹

Val also attributes her appointment as magistrate and District Court judge to chance and 'being there'. Of her magistrate's role, she says 'I was by that stage reasonably senior ... and there was hardly anyone applying for

magistrates' jobs in those days'.³⁰ Her appointment to the District Court similarly 'just came out of the blue'.³¹ As Val puts it:

I happened to be there, I was relatively senior. So I think they wanted to appoint a woman and there weren't many women around of sufficient seniority in ... who'd, who'd done enough appearance work, had enough forensic experience. So I think I was very lucky to get appointed and, you know, just happened to be there at the right, the right time.

In a similar way, even her choices to apply for these positions were often the product of a chance breakfast-time conversation between her and Rob about the classifieds. As she explains, 'he would look at something in the paper, "Oh, you could do that". And somehow, I don't ... I, you know, I don't mean he was pushy, but he would see this as something, oh what a great opportunity'.³² In particular, she remembers when the Children's Court role became available,

Andy was only, oh you know, four months old, or five months old or something, and I already had a good part time job, didn't really want another one. But Bob said, "Oh, you'd, you'd really like this one" and I'd be, "Oh". But you know, the opportunity was there so I applied for it.³³

Reconsidering the Absent Leader in the Life Narrative of Valerie French

Valerie's description of her character as a leader or trailblazing identity is peculiarly absent from her account of her life. While she has obviously been a leader, in the sense of 'being the first' woman barrister or 'the protagonist' of the Western Australian parole reforms, she explains these facts as a product of the circumstances she found herself in, rather than the product of intention or her identity. Her only explicit reference to a connection between her personal qualities and her professional practice arises when she discusses the impact of her family's ethic of care on her everyday practice as a commercial litigator, judge and Parole Board member.³⁴ In part, her repeated ushering away of an image of her life as a professional pioneer is consistent with the peripheral importance she tells us her work has had to her sense of self. As she reflects,

my sort of identity as an individual's never centred on my position. I've never seen myself as, as, as, as being a judge, or being a magistrate, or

a barrister. And so I don't, you know, my, my, my job doesn't equate to my sort of ... sense of self.³⁵

In this way then, explaining her trailblazing with primary reference to the events and people around her, rather than to her own innate qualities, is in keeping with her larger life narrative.

The Critical Importance of Professional Networks in Legal Cultures

Valerie's focus on the interplay of professional connection and chance also resonates strongly with research conducted in Australia into women in professional legal cultures. In a series of anonymous interviews conducted with women lawyers at the Victorian bar, Rosemary Hunter and Helen McElvie repeatedly uncovered a story from women lawyers linking their isolation from the existing homosocial networks at the bar to their failure to succeed professionally.³⁶ In Val's unusual situation, her personal connections first to her brother-in-law during articles, then to her friend, Graham McDonald, in her first months at the bar, and later to her husband, Robert French, and friends Sheila McClemons and Kim Rooney *are* an essential element in the story of her success.

Her connections to 'all those people who were so supportive' also specifically helped her navigate the very difficult terrain of pregnancy in the legal profession and the impact of 'going part time'. As Hunter argues, within the relatively isolated bar community, the obvious physical changes to women's bodies during pregnancy, their absence from the bar's heavy social calendar while on leave and their modified working hours on return position them outside the existing male norms underwriting the bar's culture.³⁷ In many cases, visible pregnancy at work and part-time work hours effectively signalled the end of many women's legal professional lives.

Yet, in Val's case, the potential trouble for women arising from the gendered norms within the bar culture were minimised by her personal relationships with her husband, Robert, and her friends, like Kim Rooney. While, like other pregnant women, Val left her workplace part-way through her pregnancy, she then, *unlike* other women, moved to working in her husband Robert's firm. During her leave from professional life at the bar, she was able, critically, to stay in touch with the social culture of the bar. As she recounts, being married to a fellow lawyer,

meant that even though I was sort of out of it, doing the part-time work for many years, I would still turn up to Bar Association social things, Law Society things, so I still knew people and knew everybody,

because I was married to Rob. I think it would've been much harder professionally for me if I, if I hadn't been married to someone who was in the, in the same profession, and also someone who was very well known like Rob.³⁸

Reconsidering Moments of Strategy and Leadership

However, there are other elements in Val's story that gesture at a more complicated sense of leadership and self in her professional and personal life. For example, while describing Sheila McClemans as a role model, Val also outlines the way she took care of Sheila's practice while she was ill.³⁹ While Sheila's leadership is highlighted in this story, Sheila's decision to approach Val for help, and her acceptance, also suggests an alternative view of Valerie from others at the bar (at the very least) as a leader.

The absence of any explicit career intent, or an equation between her job and sense of self, also seems more complicated within the context of her entire narrative. Alongside her explanation of her career trajectory as the product of an accidental admixture of difficult, unwanted positions, natural seniority and the chance matching of her willingness and the political climate, she also describes her distress and active strategising after learning she had not been reappointed to the Social Security Tribunal. In this recollection, she tells us:

I can remember going up to the supermarket and I had two, you know, toddlers and a baby, and I was pushing the trolley around, I actually had tears running down my face. I can remember thinking, "oh, this is it, this is all, this is what I've got". And, and I adored the children, but I thought, "this is, this is all my world is now, the kids and the supermarket".

And I was just so upset, because I'd assumed that I would be reappointed. And I went home and I probably ... would never ... did something I would never have done before, I actually rang up Kim Beazley, 'cause he was at that stage in, in parliament, and I said, "Kim", I said, "I've heard of jobs for the boys, but I thought I was one of the boys".⁴⁰

Ultimately, though, her chance appointments and the support of other people in her career is the way Val makes sense of her life, for us, in the interview.

Leadership in the Public Narratives of Women Leaders

How, then, are we to make sense of the dissonance between Valerie's representation of her professional life and these other moments? Certainly,

part of the underlying complexity in her account can be understood as simply the consequence of her own vision of her life. We can say, particularly in the case of oral history, that the narrator's lived perspective of their life will quite understandably shape the emphases in their narrative. This is certainly the case for Val who, when pressed explicitly on her sense of herself as a role model, explained:

I think it's hard to see yourself as a role model, because it's like you-, you're around, you're looking for role models everywhere else, and suddenly you go, what? You know, all the policemen are getting younger, and the judges are getting younger, I'm the role model. No, you don't see yourself like that.⁴¹

It is less easy, however, to understand the excision of her own agency in her career as a matter of perspective alone. It is ironic, at the very least, that, in the context of an oral history, known for its capacity to (re)present women as historical agents in their own right, every moment of change in Valerie's professional life is framed as an accident. The extent to which accident is the fundamental thread in her career development, despite moments like her call to Kim Beazley, raises questions about the representation and experience of 'leadership' in its many guises in women professionals' lives. In particular, the centrality of 'being the right person at the right time' in presenting her life story speaks strongly to Jill Ker Conway's analysis of other pioneer women's autobiographical writing. As Conway writes:

pioneer women professionals were silent about their ambitions and recounted their lives as though their success just happened to them, rather like the soprano's chance meeting with the tenor in the first act of an opera. So the woman professional, actually a new and potentially revolutionary social type, told her story as a philanthropic romance: she seems to have chanced upon the causes which elicit a lifetime commitment from her. She never acknowledges strategizing about how to advance the case; she is as surprised as anyone else when success is at hand.⁴²

While, in their private diaries and letters, the women in Conway's analysis revealed deliberate political ambitions, these motivations were replaced in their public writing with surprise at their good fortune. Drawing from these narratives, Conway suggests the reason why, as a pioneer woman, 'you don't see yourself like that'⁴³ is a matter of 'censorship for public self-presentation' and not the product of perspective alone.⁴⁴

While self-censorship is one way of understanding the representation of Val's pioneer experience, Jane Wilkinson and Jill Blackmore's interviews with women leaders in academia highlight the way women have 'negotiated the frequent mismatch that [arises] between ... societal discourses and media representations ... and the individual women's subjective experiences of leadership'.⁴⁵ Their research suggests that, in some women's experiences, the dominant discourses of, for example, 'working hard to make it' are in fact discordant with their realities. In this sense, turning to chance is perhaps not simply a matter of censorship but part of an active negotiation of their subjectivity within the existing constraints of leadership narratives, even oral history ones.

Conclusion

While life stories can illuminate the exceptional career trajectories of women leaders, they also necessarily take us into the difficulties of representing women and leadership itself. In the case of Valerie French, the question of how exactly to define her explanations of support, chance, accident and fortune remains unanswered. However, the insight we gain into the importance of personal and professional networks *and* her clear avoidance of a 'leadership' identity highlights the importance of making room for the public telling of biographical stories by women pioneers. In their biographical detail, these stories contribute to our understanding of *how* women leaders succeed, are inhibited and experience their lives. Together, these individual pictures of leadership and pioneering may also reveal trends of success and difficulty on which future policy and change can be based. We do not know if, as Conway's work suggests, Valerie's narrative is typical of trailblazing women lawyers, but collecting the stories of leading women together promises to extend both our substantive knowledge of pioneer experience and the limits of our analytical parameters.

¹ Valerie French shared this pioneer experience in Western Australia with a group of women lawyers, including Antoinette Kennedy, who was the first woman appointed to the WA District Court. The Trailblazing Women Lawyers Project will also interview other women from this group, acknowledging that the picture of a lone woman at the frontier is not an accurate one.

² The authors are grateful for the work undertaken by Elizabeth Chan, who worked with Professor Rubenstein and Dr Roberts as an ANU Summer Scholar in 2009–2010 in identifying the public documents about Valerie French.

³ Sue Morgan, 'Theorising Feminist History: A Thirty-year Retrospective', *Women's History Review*, 18, no. 3 (2009): 381.

- ⁴ Shulamit Reinharz, *Feminist Methods in Social Research* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 126.
- ⁵ Louis Starr, 'Oral History', in *Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*, eds David K. Dunaway and Willa K. Baum (Walnut Creek, AltaMira Press, 1996), 39, 40.
- ⁶ Paula Hamilton and Linda Shopes, 'Introduction', in *Oral History and Public Memories*, eds Paula Hamilton and Linda Shopes (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008), xii.
- ⁷ This criticism of oral history as an historical resource is explored in Alistair Thomson, 'Four Paradigm Transformations in Oral History', *Oral History Review* 4, no. 1 (2006): 49, 54.
- ⁸ Oral History Interview with Valerie French, National Library of Australia, 24 May 2010, 99. Page number references apply to the written transcript of the interview, available at the National Library of Australia.
- ⁹ Oral History Interview with Valerie French, 39.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 45–6.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 54–5.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 56.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁴ The WA District Court is the equivalent of the County Court in Victoria.
- ¹⁵ Oral History Interview with Valerie French, 70.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 88.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 88–9.
- ¹⁸ Now the Prisoners Review Board.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 89.
- ²⁰ As Narelle Johnson, the current president of the board, has argued, 'I studied the provisions of the Act and my interpretation of Section 115A Sub-section 7 of the Act, which is the review provision, was that a request for review had to be in writing. And it says specifically "A request must be in writing, state the grounds for it, and include any submissions that the applicant wants to make."' So I drew a legal interpretation, that in fact prisoners weren't entitled to have a video linkup for a review application'. In Damien Carrick and Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 'WA's Prisoner Review Board', *The Law Report*, 27 July 2010. Transcript accessed online at <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/lawreport/stories/2010/2963988.htm> (accessed 22 January 2011).
- ²¹ Oral History Interview with Valerie French, 26.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 23.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 23–4.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 53.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 53.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 22.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 48.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 80.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 70.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 55.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 68.

³² Ibid., 48.

³³ Ibid., 83.

³⁴ Ibid., 87–90.

³⁵ Ibid., 77.

³⁶ This study was commissioned by the Victorian Bar Council. For the original study report, see: Rosemary Hunter and Helen McKelvie, *Equality of Opportunity for Women at the Victorian Bar* (Melbourne: Victorian Bar Council, 1998).

³⁷ Rosemary Hunter, 'Women Barristers and Gender Difference' in *Women in the World's Legal Professions*, eds Ulrike Schultz and Gisela Shaw (Oxford: Hart, 2003), 103.

³⁸ Oral History Interview with Valerie French, 53.

³⁹ Ibid., 62.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 49.

⁴¹ Ibid., 82.

⁴² Jill Ker Conway, *When Memory Speaks: Reflections on Autobiography* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1998), 15–16.

⁴³ Oral History Interview with Valerie French, 82.

⁴⁴ Conway, 16.

⁴⁵ Jane Wilkinson and Jill Blackmore, 'Re-presenting Women and Leadership: A Methodological Journey', *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 21, no. 2 (2008): 123.