The Not So Curious Case of the Designer Vagina

Medicalization is a general trend that has affected multiple domains of everyday existence, including sex. Men’s genital function, and women's sexual desire and arousal have been key and highly public targets for the development of biomedical—often pharmaceutical—'solutions'. Women's genitals have also been targeted, but from a surgical perspective. The cluster of interventions clustered under the broad 'designer vagina' umbrella are framed as sexual interventions—either through offering an improved sexual experience or through preparing the vulva for sex ('improving' the 'aesthetics' of vulva to create a more 'desirable' form). This talk will explore the emergence, practice, promotion and broader implications of female genital cosmetic surgery through the lens of medicalization, to demonstrate both what is unique, and what is not, in this particular case.

Biography
Virginia Braun is a Senior Lecturer in the Psychology Department at the University of Auckland in New Zealand. Her research focuses on an examination of the relationship between the social, the scientific and the individual, in relation to bodies, sexuality and health. She examines the influence of culture and society on individual choices, thoughts, feelings and behaviours, as well as on broader issues like public health policy and practice. Her research is specifically influenced by feminist, social constructionist, and discursive theory and practice, and tends to employ qualitative methodologies. Virginia is currently engaged in three main projects related to (women’s) health, sexuality, the body, and popular culture: These projects are ‘the social contexts of STI transmission’, ‘female genital cosmetic surgery’, and ‘sexuality in higher education’. Her previous research has been on ‘sexual coercion among gay and bisexual men’, ‘sex in long-term relationships’, ‘the vagina’, cervical cancer (prevention policy), and safer heterosex. In addition, she has a strong interest in qualitative research methodology and is working with Dr Victoria Clarke (University of the West of England, UK) on a book on qualitative research methods (for Sage). Within the Department of Psychology at Auckland she is a member of the Gender & Critical Psychology Group (GCPG), and co-chair of the Department's Maori and Pacific Liaison Committee. She is currently co-editor of the journal Feminism & Psychology.