

# In Therapy

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# In Therapy

How conversations with psychotherapists  
really work

Susie Orbach

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PROFILE BOOKS

First published in Great Britain in 2016 by  
PROFILE BOOKS LTD  
3 Holford Yard  
Bevin Way  
London WC1X 9HD  
*www.profilebooks.com*

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1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Typeset in Photina by MacGuru Ltd

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays, St Ives plc

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 78125 753 1  
eISBN 978 1 78283 311 6



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# Preface

Welcome to the consulting room. What follows is a play script – the verbatim notes of therapy sessions, initially made for the radio, with the addition of my commentary about what I was thinking and feeling during the making of them. I also include some general observations about psychological and social phenomena.

Writing about clinical work and what actually occurs in the therapy is hampered by the confidentiality of the therapy relationship. It makes transcripts of actual sessions all night impossible. I have tried to solve the problem of how to invite the reader into the feel of what occurs by using actors to give a sense of the taste and flavour of an encounter. The therapy encounter defies conventional back and forth conversation as it searches to meet the hurts and burdens of the one who is seeking help.

The play script that has emerged conveys the feel of the consulting room. These encounters were not in any way scripted. They are the embodiment of what the characters expressed; characters who come to the therapy in search of understanding and relief from their anguish, confusions and problems. Therapists don't so much solve such issues as attempt to open

up new doors – emotional, intellectual, physical – for the individual, couple or family, to expand their notions of the roots and interplay of their difficulties so that they can intervene with themselves and with others differently. By listening intently to the narrative and the feelings, and hearing the contradictions that are felt by the individual, therapy tries to situate the person as an agent who can become interested in why she or he acts and feels the way they do and how they can develop a growing emotional complexity.

Like literature, psychoanalysis reveals the commonality of human experience by drilling into the particularities of the individual. The way an individual imagines and projects, the way the individual reads and misreads situations speaks to us in our own private struggles. A highly personal and specific story unfolds to reveal common human themes. Consider the man who disavows his girlfriend when in public but has no difficulty being privately intimate. The woman feels hurt and insecure. She becomes tongue-tied and disappears into herself as though indeed she does not exist for him. She sits waiting to be rescued. Taking this a step deeper, we discover that the man is acutely anxious although he is not aware of it. Greeting friends at a bar is a performance for him, not an easy pleasure. He steals himself to do it. He was brought up to play the piano in public from an early age – a talent he has since foregone – and learned the tricks of being on show. But it cost him emotionally. He felt unprotected going into public, wanted to hold his mother or father's hand, but came to feel ashamed of his need. He drops his girlfriend, like he felt dropped, and armours

himself in performance mode. His girlfriend carries his insecurity for him and it has a salience for her because growing up she felt her mother's attention desert her when her much elder brother, father and grandfather came home from work. She's accustomed to being dropped yet finds its unbearable. Her shame about wanting to be included seals her mouth. She can't find a way in with her boyfriend just as she couldn't at dinner time with her father, grandfather and brother. Her intimate relationship with her boyfriend is hidden as was her closeness with her mother.

The emotional trope this couple share is confusion about dependency and need. They enact their disappointments with each other. As we unpick what drives each of their behaviours we come across the human search for secure attachment and recognition and the ways in which that search becomes derailed. We know about this. It's why we cry at the movies when the lovers come together. We understand that longing. We feel that longing. We may crave that belonging. The specific tells the general. And so it is with psychotherapy. Each story tells us about the individual or the couple while it tells us about ourselves. We want to know about others' struggles because we want to know more deeply about ourselves and the project of being human.

# The Making of the Programme

This is not a text book. My aim in making the programmes out of which this book came was to get as near to the experience of the consulting room as I could. In previous books, *Fat is a Feminist Issue*, *Understanding Women*, *What Do Women Want*, *Bittersweet* and *Bodies*, I wrote about what I was discovering about longings, conflicts, and confusions and used vignettes to describe and theorise the process of therapy and the theory that Luise Eichenbaum and I were developing.

In *The Impossibility of Sex*, I wrote a set of imaginary cases told from the point of view of a fictionalised version of myself. I wanted to convey the craft of the working therapist breathing, sweating, challenged, while thinking and feeling her patient's dilemmas. Kevin Dawson, the Producer, had read it, pitched it to the BBC and they offered us a series of 15-minute programmes for BBC Radio 4 about the process of therapy. I knew I didn't want to script something; that would not show how therapy actually goes. I had recently done a couple of mini therapy type sessions with actors in a Wallace Shawn play directed by Ian Rickson. They and a series of sessions done earlier with Kate Bland for Cast Iron Radio and for an initiative by Jordan McKenzie for The Gay Men's Choir, had taken the therapy out of the



consulting room without abandoning the conventions of the therapeutic session. I knew Ian's genius with actors (we had occasionally worked together in the rehearsal room over the years when he was doing a new production) and I hoped that he would be able to choose and prepare actors to take part in a series in which they become characters who are in therapy with me.

The three of us met for what was to be a first for all of us. Kevin had little knowledge of therapy but knew how to produce, Ian could choose actors who were strong on improvisation and I had to stay as true to my craft as I could with the wrinkle that I would pretend to know the people coming to talk with me in my consulting room.

People who have listened to the radio programmes have imagined that I carefully drew out a list of specifications for the characters. Not so. That wouldn't have felt real to me. People are always more surprising and layered than a description can be and the unfolding of that is one of the great joys for therapists in the consulting room. I suggested very little to Kevin and Ian in our meetings beyond the barest of outlines. I said I wanted to see a couple whose difficulties might be linked to patterns in their parent's relationships. I suggested a woman in her forties who might have emigrated early on in her life. A 60-year-old trade unionist whose second marriage had broken down and who was feeling desperate. A young woman in her late twenties or early thirties who appeared to have everything but felt nothing. A first session with someone whose work life had not panned out.

From these rudiments, chosen for no particular reason except to give the range of a therapist's working day (although less various than a working week's practice), Kevin and Ian worked up a backstory which they then brought to me to check for authenticity. I knew that pretty much whatever they came up with would be alright because fiction, while less dense than the facts of an ordinary life, can nevertheless show so much more about a life than a simple narration in non-fiction. Thus I wasn't worried about authenticity. I knew it would or could be.

With barely three agreed sentences on each character, Ian worked with the actors to embody and grow these personae. I was reluctant to use actors whose voices were familiar on radio as I didn't want to draw the listeners' attention away from the therapy process. When Liz White playing Louise walked in to do the couples session, I had a faint sense of recognition. Later, I realised it was she who was giving birth in *Call the Midwife* the night before on TV. Peter Wright playing John is an actor with tremendous presence who I'd seen on stage several times but in roles with enough variety that I couldn't quite place him, and that was a guide. Noma Dumezweni had not yet been cast in Harry Potter, and Noo Kirby playing Harriet, Nat Martello White playing Richard and Sinead Matthews playing Jo were highly accomplished on the stage too, thus known to a smaller not radio audience. All six are superb actors but not so starry that the audience would be focused on their other roles or personalities.

The set-up to record was clean and simple. Perhaps not so from

the Sound Engineer, Gareth Isles', point of view. I wore an unobtrusive wireless lapel mike as did my 'patient', we recorded in my consulting room, with me sitting in the same chair as I habitually do, and two rooms away, Gareth created an extensive recording studio. Kevin wanted to ensure the sound would be good enough to pick up nuances of breath, sighs, tears or whatever was to emerge.

Before the session started, when the actor was being miked up and getting a final prep from Ian at a local Café Nero, Kevin and I would talk about who was coming to see me that hour. I tried to familiarise myself with their backstory from a paragraph that Ian had given me.

The doorbell rings, and the person comes up the stairs and is instructed to walk into my room – save for Sinead Matthews who is playing Jo and needs to be shown where to go. I greet and welcome them. There they find two large beige leather chairs, a brown leather sofa with blue cushions, a blue Caucasian rug by a large window overlooking a garden, and many, many books.

They sit on the sofa and talk, or not, as would be the case in any session, and then at about the twenty or twenty-five-minute level, the length of half a session, I bring it to an end. We both walk out of the consulting room and into the ersatz studio where Ian, Kevin and Gareth are sitting with cans on their heads.

We debrief, the actor goes off and we do the next session.

In the following week, having listened to the recording and

worked out how to edit down to the prerequisite 15-minute broadcast in a way that retains the integrity of the session including the pauses, we meet to do finer cuts and voice-over. Therapy is not entertainment, like a mini radio play or serial whose conventions we have absorbed. It can crackle with intensity but it can be laboured or sound incoherent. We wanted to keep the feel of all of that and I believe we did.

Therapy has its own dramas. We make different kinds of patterns and linkages in the therapy room. Sometimes there will be a startling interpretation which will thrill a radio audience by its unexpected capacity to change the direction of how someone feels and perceives things. Equally, listening into therapy would turn out to be quite unusual radio. The individual is looking for the words she wants to say, the patterns that need to be made or the emotions that need to be undammed. It's not neat and it doesn't follow a straightforward narrative. In any given session insight might happen but sometimes the job of the therapist is to sit and hear and absorb and make oneself available for moments of connection. It can be anti-drama. The focus when cutting the programmes was to be faithful enough to the process of therapy.

I didn't set out in this series to show what happens when misunderstandings occur but of course they are inevitable. Therapy will sometimes engender misunderstanding and when this occurs, the therapist tries to address it. We use the therapy relationship a bit like a laboratory. When something goes amiss between therapist and client or words or intentions of either's are misinterpreted, that becomes part of the work

of therapy. We call this process an enactment and in the sessions, we see several examples of this, most notably with Jo. The question then became, how to keep enough of the 'enactment' in the programme so the listener might understand how the therapist deals with it.

From rough cuts, we went into a studio to do a series of explanatory voice-overs. Kevin wanted these outside of the therapy room and in a studio in order to create a different soundscape. These were conducted in a conversational way and spliced in. Ian's genius was to prep the actors, but in doing so, he was of course having to think about how to direct me, without appearing to. I am not an actor. In talking about it subsequently he said he did so by ramping up the number of tricky things the improvisations would throw at me so that I was in a heightened state. In this way he created mini psychological conundrums for me to respond to.

Despite the artifice, these mini sessions convey the flavour and feel of the therapy room. Together the three of us and the individual actors had found a way to mimic the aesthetic arc that would end up on the radio.

Richard and  
Louise