



**Psychology's Feminist Voices Oral History Project
Interview with Susie Orbach**

*Interviewed by Lois Donnelly over Zoom™
June 15, 2022*

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Psychology's Feminist Voices Oral History Project

Interview with Susie Orbach

Interviewed by Lois Donnelly

Conducted over the Zoom online platform
June 15, 2022

Interviewer: I'm Lois Donnelly interviewing Susie Orbach on 15 June 2022 over Zoom and we're discussing their life and career in the context of feminism and its history within psychology. So first of all then could you just tell me a little bit about yourself, so maybe in terms of, you know, the trajectory of your career and the topics of your work and that kind of thing?

Susie Orbach: Well, I don't really think of it as a career, and I think maybe that's because I'm sort of premodern figure in the terms of today's vocabulary and therefore you're going to have to ask me questions rather than me being able to give you an account. I became interested in psychology, the mind, the body, how we're constituted, how we come to be who we are most intensely I suppose through feminism and trying to understand the structures inside of us that incline us to not act in our own best interest. So while fighting for equality and when I came into feminism it was second wave feminism so it was on the heels of the civil rights movement and black power and the struggle to get America to leave Vietnam, so feminism came out of these very vibrant huge social struggles.

And I was part of the first Women's Studies programme that existed in the world and as a student began teaching in it immediately because that's how open it was. This was in a working class college and what I noticed about all of us who were there was our own hesitations about taking up power or taking up our positions or feeling we all had to move in step at the same time, or being threatened by structures of competition or envy or jealousy or not being able to say when one was hurt or misunderstood.

So I think that's what got me into thinking well, actually, patriarchy isn't just outside there and structures in how we're brought up in terms of schooling etc. it actually makes the mind that girls and boys - we had those gendered categories then - have to accommodate to the ways in which their lives, their thoughts, their imaginations, their longings, their desires, are structured both by their class position, their geography, their gender, their race and their general background.

And that led me to sort of looking at being very interested in okay, well, who studies subjectivity; the question of how one becomes a subject? So that led me to being interested in psychoanalysis but not through its sort of crude - as it had become at that point - theory on women or practice towards women but about the idea that what you're understanding as a human subject. That has turned out to have been a long-term interest. We're now 50 years later, more even, and I'm still really interested in how we get minds, how we get bodies, why we think the way we do, what makes change possible, what it's like to be a clinician where you're watching change as it happens and looking at it as a kind of potential research tool.

I don't know, is that good enough as an opener?

Interviewer: Yeah, no, that's lovely. And sort of going back to that kind of feminism then, can you recall when that identity or interest in feminism kind of started and what-

Susie Orbach: Well, it was the early 70s, very early 70s. I didn't quite understand what feminism was because I think for many women of my generation we thought that things like talking about babies was kind of less than, so it took feminism to challenge that and say wait, we're interested in everything, we're interested in the making of human beings and the making of bonds and how they happen and why was... you know, every... so it was very early 70s and I should say that my best friends were made at that time and we're still in daily contact even though we're on different continents.

Interviewer: Brilliant. Amazing. Yeah, so was it kind of mainly once you got to start on that Women's Studies, that kind of came into your work or was it before that?

[0:05:58]

Susie Orbach: Well, I think what happened was that there was Women's Studies. I'd done lots of other things before but at Women's Studies we said let's talk about women and the law, let's talk about women in film, let's talk about women in literature, women in history, women in science, let's talk about women's bodies, and so on. And one of the things about feminism is that it wasn't principally organised in universities, it was just mushrooming everywhere.

I went to a thing called the Alternate U in New York where I was living at the time and there were courses on everything which you could just go to or you could just teach. So there were seminars on Marxism and feminism or consumerism, or Marcuse, and then there was one on women's bodies and I joined that. And together we began to look as a group, why women were tortured in their bodies, what was going on with the food industry, with iconography, with the women as represented as either Madonna's or whores, how we'd taken that on for ourselves, how we were never okay.

I thought it was a kind of limited small interest, but it turned into a very big interest, I mean not my dominant interest in the sense that I've written widely... very, very widely and not just about women's bodies and women's minds and their relationship to each other but it grabbed me enough to think I should become a therapist and so that's what happened, I became a therapist.

Interviewer: Oh, that's so interesting, yeah. Okay, brilliant. Yeah, so was that your first kind of attraction to psychology as a discipline would you say then at that-

Susie Orbach: Well, I mean it was quite interesting because I wasn't drawn... I thought about doing a PhD in psychology but in those days the programmes weren't exactly what I wanted, they were too conventional and so were most of the programmes around. Obviously if you read literature you're interested in people, right? But I was more sociological, if you like, rather than on the side of psychology. Pretty quickly we started a feminist therapist training group and a bunch of us trained together or almost simultaneously, and we began to look at what people had said about women, both the papers that were classics and ones that weren't, and I should say that at the Women's Studies programme one of the lecturers was Phyllis Chesler who'd written about women and madness so she was a window into the psychology.

But, yes, I guess that was the beginning of it but we were so interested in ourselves and we were in therapy and we were in self-help groups and we were in everything so the whole thing just became an intense... I guess like any scientist who's caught up in their work, you know, you're in the lab all the time really, you're examining everything, you're thinking everything, you're trying to accumulate knowledge and in the process of course, you're actively and passively being transformed.

Interviewer: Yeah, absolutely. So who were those people that you trained with then and are you still in touch with any of them?

Susie Orbach: Yeah, yeah, I mean two of them are my best friends but the people that-

Interviewer: Oh.

Susie Orbach: Yeah, I mean I went to Stony Brook, the Health Sciences Center, they had a fantastic modern programme and out of that came several people who were associated with the Women's Therapy Center Institute in New York so it was a...

Interviewer: Brilliant, yes.

Susie Orbach: But we didn't really have forefathers or foremothers, I think that's the thing, because it was such a new movement, although there were papers that we could read and there was a particularly important collection for me which was Jean Strouse's *Women in Psychoanalysis* which was a collection of papers and there was Frantz Fanon writing about how racism was internalised so it would be "Black Skin, White Masks" and it was a mission to translate these ideas into contemporary women and men. Like many of our generation we were collectively self-inventive rather than having mentorship, although in time, places that would not have regarded what we were doing as kind of kosher and okay, then came to learn from the Women's Therapy Center but that took a while to happen.

[0:11:48]

Interviewer: Yeah, that's really interesting, so kind of creating things with your peers in a way and kind of creating that from nothing, yeah, that's so interesting. Yeah, so as you were saying that kind of feminism was almost in the air at that time.

Susie Orbach: It's what we breathed, yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah. And so how did that come together with your work? Was that very kind of natural in that sense or...?

Susie Orbach: Yeah, because I think we... because we were starting from ground zero. For example, how interesting that we have contempt for conversations about mothers and babies, I'm just trying to draw a link to what I said before, given that most women do parenting or did in those days, we came to ask what is that relationship? What is the parental or the mother figure doing? *What is mothering as a psychological and sociological attachment?* What is that relationship doing in the creation of both the mother but also the developing baby and child? So we began to see that the mother is not really considered much of a subject, she's the baby's object or the adult's object or the failing object if you like or the one who's got it wrong. But what about her own development? What's happened to that? That was a chief concern for us. Looking at her development and the impact of that.

Interviewer: Yeah, absolutely.

Susie Orbach: So the book that Luise and I wrote called *Understanding Women* which was towards a new psychol- I can't remember the subtitle but anyway – isn't that appalling – was about trying to look at this very structure of how does the baby develop into a girl, a woman? And then what happens in the therapy in a woman to woman therapy? So that was our first contribution really.

Interviewer: Yeah, that's really interesting. And I was just wondering how you might describe kind of what psychoanalysis was like as you're talking about kind of maybe the conventional type.

Susie Orbach: Oh the conventional psychoanalysis I mean, you know, I'd go to the Tavistock for example for a seminar, this is probably after *FIFI*, *Fat is a Feminist Issue* was published and, you know, I was invited to go and I'd listen in to so the interpretations that were given and I was just flabbergasted because it wasn't that Tavistock had above its door, 'This place discriminates against women' it didn't say that, but every interpretation was about the women needs too much, she's too clingy, she's overly dependent, she needs to separate. And that for me was an absolutely fascinating example of conventional psychoanalysis which had designated a woman's needs as being dangerous rather than a feminist's interpretation which is well, why are her needs considered so dangerous? Is it because she isn't allowed to recognise them? They're not met? She has to live with unmet needs and therefore they come out in very unhappy ways? It may look like she has an overcommitment to being dependent but actually maybe it's because her dependency needs are not in the frame and she's always providing that for every body else?

So conventional psychoanalysis would talk about empty nest syndrome as this shameful thing as though a woman's life was over or women's depression. It was the time of Brown's studies so there was quite a lot about social depression and women coming up which was not in psychoanalysis but in psychology.

[0:16:32]

Interviewer: Right, yeah.

Susie Orbach: And it was very interesting that we would... I remember at the Women's Therapy Center there was a woman who came out of the local, I mental hospital and she said, "Oh, it was lovely there", "I was looked after, it was warm. I was fed, I didn't have to look after everybody else." Now that's a really interesting insight into women's experience of finding their identity through giving to others all the time and then being scolded by psychoanalysis if you like for being over giving because you want something in return and feeling so empty and hungry and lost inside of yourself.

Interviewer: Yeah, that's really interesting.

Susie Orbach: I bet you're still teaching bits of that.

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah. I'm sure it's changed a lot but maybe not enough, yes. So then you kind of started... so you were saying that that was kind of early 1970s-

Susie Orbach: Well, we started the Women's Therapy Center in '76.

Interviewer: '76, yes, so I'll just come back to kind of... well, no, maybe I'll touch on that now actually, so obviously you founded that so maybe do you want-

Susie Orbach: Well, I founded it with Luise Eichenbaum who I think maybe is being interviewed for this, I'm not sure.

Interviewer: Yeah, she has, yeah, she's already been interviewed and, yeah, it's a great one. So do you want to maybe tell me a bit about kind of how that started and-

Susie Orbach: You know, I don't even think it's that interesting, it was we came to England, I'm English, we thought because Juliette Mitchell had written Psychoanalysis and Women we thought oh, they'd be a really big therapy scene here, there wasn't.

Interviewer: Interesting.

Susie Orbach: And there was a group called Red Therapy that were really interesting, there were various voluntary initiatives but therapy was kind of behind a closed door and goodness knows how you'd find it and so we just said okay, let's start a Women's Therapy Centre. We didn't know what we were doing, we had no funding. We had a couple of rooms in my basement because I bought a house at that point or at least the bank had, you know, helped me buy a house and we made a leaflet and within two weeks we were flooded with people wanting to come for therapy.

Interviewer: Gosh.

Susie Orbach: And we had to ask other women to join us so that was Margaret Green and Sally Berry, both of whom I'm still very close to, and it mushroomed from then. And I think what was really important about what we did apart from being open access was actually it was the day of the telephone and we would answer the phones and from that we would know what people wanted. At that point we didn't have an administrator who would direct people, we were like okay. We were answering the telephones and a woman might say you know, I don't know how to have an orgasm and I want a women's group to help me with that, or I don't know if I'm... I've come from Belfast and I think I'm a lesbian and I... or I've had a baby but I think it might have been from somebody in the family, so there were all those kinds of things. So immediately our perspective was just so opened up, it wasn't

like you have to apply to a therapy centre and you have to have a diagnosis, it's just raw need and desire I guess at that point which we could respond to up to a point.

[0:20:46]

Interviewer: Yeah, so did that become too much at any point?

Susie Orbach: Well, I think it did because we were youngsters and we didn't know what we were doing but it was fine, it was lovely. I mean we were exhausted but whereas Luise and I were willing to go and talk all of wherever and we were asked to speak, the other people who joined us were not eager to do that. And, you know, as it grew obviously we had meetings to try to get other people to do that but I think what was really more important was sustaining then stopped - all of which we've written about in Understanding Women - is that we had two groups for ourselves the people who worked at the therapy centre, one was to discuss themes that were coming up in the work. We would discuss them through personal experience as well as through what we were hearing clinically, so that was one group, once a week that everybody attended so six, eight, ten of us, however many there were attended.

And then the other staff time was a group supervision, again everybody had to attend, in which we would present the people we were working with, but we had to go through doing as well as by talking about our own identification with that person; how we saw ourselves in them. So that we kept very clearly in our minds that these were not objects to be worked on or interpreted but these were women like us in the process of evolving. Not that that would be something we'd be sharing in our sessions, but we would be thinking about that and the impact that the women we were seeing had on us and the countertransference that it evoked in us or if it didn't, so it was separate to the normal supervision that we had. It was a collective reflection on how it was affecting us. So I think those were two really important things in our development and in the strength of the centre.

Interviewer: Yeah, absolutely, that sounds really important and interesting within that work. And so is that what you reflected on a lot in understanding women?

Susie Orbach: Yes, absolutely, and, yes, we did. But I still think about it. I mean I've been working on my own for years since but I still find the ideas from then really important, you know, and when I get together with Luise Eichenbaum and Carol Bloom who I co-founded the Women's Therapy Center Institute within New York and the other people who were there, we will still talk about all these issues obviously. I mean not these issues from then, the issues as we see them today because we're ageing women now so although we see people across the age spectrum, we obviously have a different take on things.

Interviewer: Yeah, so, yeah, understanding that experience as part of the work and-

Susie Orbach: And we've changed as therapists because I think we never wanted to be... we wanted to have our boundaries but we didn't want to be cold removed therapists who didn't say where they were going on holiday for example. I just don't believe in that stuff, I believe being absolutely present in the session as much as you can be, it wasn't sharing personal information per se, but being polite, and then the session closes. So we took our ways of practice not entirely from the domain that we were coming from if you like.

Interviewer: Yes, absolutely. And so, yeah, I suppose was it those kind of things that maybe make therapy feminist for you or, you know, what might make therapy feminist as oppose to not feminist?

Susie Orbach: Well, everything we took up, every issue we took up we would take up with... we wouldn't be hearing it in probably the way that a regular therapist would. I mean when a woman talked about feeling she didn't know who she was if she was in a relationship but then she didn't know who she was without one, those were feminist concerns. I mean we wouldn't label it as feminist because, you know, you're not doing propaganda in a therapy session, that's not what you're doing, you're listening. But you were thinking about well, what is it that makes it possible for her to feel she exists in one way in this way but not in another and what's... so analytically I'd be thinking about that in terms of the structure of a feminised mind and defence structure. I could take any session and analyse it if you like from that perspective, I could also analyse it from other perspectives, so I don't think it's... I don't know

how to answer your question really because that's just who I am, it's just integrated into me, it's not like a, "Oh, let's put feminism on top of this", it was inside of it.

[0:26:45]

Interviewer: Yeah, no, that makes sense, absolutely. Great, so then you, as you mentioned, you moved to New York and kind of started another training institute over there.

Susie Orbach: Oh yeah, it was just a training institute because there's loads of therapists in New York. We didn't see the need to open a therapy centre, but we did think we needed to inject something that was feminist and relational into... and particularly that some thinking from British object relations which seemed to us to offer something about the internal world that was useful; I'm talking about the work of Fairbairn and Guntrip at this point.

And so we started off really quite modestly with a lecture series at the New York Academy of Sciences where we invited people to give talks like Harriet Lerner for example who was at Topeka in Kansas at the Menninger, and gave talks ourselves. People came from all over North America and we did that for an audience of whoever wanted to come and then out of that we did short groups for women to train to understand how to work with women in therapy and then how to work with women in their bodies etc. and so a whole set of developments happened. I then returned to England so that was left for Luise and Carol to join with other people, I mean I kept going back but not... I had children at that point so at that point I was really working privately which was a shame for me but it was what I could manage if I wanted to have a family.

Interviewer: Yeah, that makes sense. And that's a really interesting distinction between kind of Britain and the US in terms of therapy and stuff like that, was that strange?

Susie Orbach: I guess it was strange, yeah, it was strange and I didn't know if I was staying here, I was going... I mean the whole thing was strange and it's been strange to... I mean I wrote Hunger Strike I guess when I was pregnant, about anorexia as a metaphor for our time and I guess I was really surprised that ideas that we had we were just continually pumping them into the public domain if you like. And people were like, "Oh, this is really interesting", "This is really..." - I don't know, like therapeutic thinking was not in the public domain but people were interested in it.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Susie Orbach: And, you know, we were working on things that have come round again like how to have saner jobs, you know, how to have what is now called a work/life balance, how to raise children who are emotionally illiterate, all the kind of things that are on the agenda now.

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah, I don't know if it's odd that it's still kind of still talking about those things many years later but, yes.

Susie Orbach: With a different inflection obviously but nevertheless, yes.

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah. And so did you feel ever kind of any tension between that conventional psychoanalysis approach and your more feminist one?

Susie Orbach: Only if I went to conferences and, you know, I mean if I was invited to speak or go to a conference people would suddenly give you a case and they would interpret it and I'd think, no, I don't agree with that.

Interviewer: Okay, yeah.

Susie Orbach: That's not what I would think if that woman was sitting in the room with me, I would not be thinking that or if that man was sitting with me, so I'd feel tension then and very passionate about it. There were loads of attempts to get relational psychoanalysis to acknowledge feminism and some of the women who used to come to the talks that we gave in NYC, became part of the relational community in North America. There was tension with people but I always feel that, I always feel intellection

tension is an interesting moment. I'm always curious about how and why we think the things we think and, you know, if I hear something on attachment theory or I hear something on the Oedipus Complex or those kind of things I'm always thinking, well, how do we understand that? How do I understand that? What's the texture of that that makes sense to me? Rather than, "Oh, that's a great idea let's take that onboard." Does that make sense?

[0:32:23]

Interviewer: Yeah, definitely. Great. So, yeah, in terms of the kind of particular pieces of your work then I was wondering if there was any one particular accomplishment or something that you were really proud of, that you were kind of most proud of? No? Nothing comes to mind.

Susie Orbach: No, no, I mean I could read something I wrote during COVID for the Guardian and think oh that's really good, gosh I wrote that, or I could think that about... I'm still interested in everything so I don't know how to pick something out, you know, there's no point in my saying, well, I think *Between Women* was really important because yes, it's important but I wouldn't... no, I wouldn't, I wouldn't.

Interviewer: Okay, yeah, that's fine. So in terms of I was kind of thinking about some areas of your work and I was thinking that as you touched on before, some of your work was around kind of bodies and disordered eating and I was just wondering, you know, one of your earliest books was *Fat is a Feminist Issue* and I was wondering how that work kind of developed, how it started and how it developed maybe throughout your later books around similar topics.

Susie Orbach: Well, I think how it developed is that I then wrote *Hunger Strike*, I then wrote *On Eating* which was a sort of distillation of the practice of it rather than the theories behind it and then I wrote *Bodies* which I've basically rewrote a few years ago because I began to see very profoundly that although the theory in *FIFI* is eating problems or issues with fat or thin as ideas arise out of dealing with distress in the mind which is expressed in the body. What *Bodies* does is take the thesis and turns it upside down and says mothers are now because of their own history of eating and the kind of pressure on them from the culture to be a certain way, that the bodies they bring to parenting at the most intimate level (from the fact that, you know, they're exercising from the minute they've had a baby and worrying about their own bodies.) - I'm being crude - but the whole emphasis or the world position on moving towards Caesareans and all of this kind of thing is actually making the body a site of such distress that the body itself that the mother is bringing to the infant is a body that maybe quite troubled.

And so the origins of troubled bodies comes from that very early relationship. This is not to blame mothers. This is how culture, how what we believe, what we know, is passed down. Whereas I would have said in *FIFI* the origins of troubled bodies was troubled minds, Now I would say body difficulties are trumping troubled minds and making troubled minds. So I think that's how it's evolved, and *Bodies* is really a book which tries to look at the way bodies are made and how they've become an actual production for women and for men, but mainly for women and how bodies continue to be the site of personal assault, an assault of women and also a weapon in war. Rape is a weapon of war. No wonder therefore bodies are deeply insecure for women. If you grow up with an insecure body it's very hard to get beyond it and an eating problem or a cutting problem is the response to that basic feeling you have a body that is unstable. As for *Bodies* as a book, I like it a lot, I like the things it explores.

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah-

Susie Orbach: And I'm still interested in *Bodies* because I think every day I mean, you know, whether I read about the pollution that's caused by the industries that clothe us, right? The environmental degradation that comes as a result of fast fashion or luxury fashion, you know, or what it means that those are such huge industries now, they're not small, you know, they're absolutely ginormous. You go into Selfridges and it continues to expand its make up department, you know, so that tiny tots have make up ranges to old ladies who are supposed to fix our bodies until we're... I mean, you know, it's... and the way that cosmetic surgery apps that are targeting at little girls so that they learn to remake their bodies as though they are totally malleable and not something you live from, so that's how the work's developed, it continues to intrigue me, interest me, enrage me.

[0:38:09]

Interviewer: Yes, yeah. And how do you think that shift has happened then from the first co-theorising to the one in Bodies?

Susie Orbach: Well, I think what's happened is that it's so profitable to make women feel bad about their bodies that let's make older women and younger women and girls and boys and men, I just think it's an industry in which you can come at it every angle and make money whether it's in the food industry or whether it's in the diet industry, which is of course part of the food industry, whether it's in the so called health industry where you sell remedies, whether it's in the cutting up your body part of industry.

And as I've said the fashion industry, so I think it's being able to see what's happening in the economy, looking at economic figures to see the growth of certain industries and tie those to people's experience that's been important for me as a theorist. It doesn't mean I sit in a session and say, "Well, you know, the reason you feel this is because..." I mean I'm just not like that. I'm dealing with people's anguish and distress and pain and sorrows and angers and grief and despair in sessions, I'm not dealing... as I said, I'm not telling them, "Well, you know?"

Interviewer: Yeah, that's an interesting kind of separation I suppose between those two areas.

Susie Orbach: Yes, but they're two different things and I think the only reason that I write is that you learn so much in the consulting room that is so precious and valuable, interesting, that you want to... that I wanted to share it in a wider way and contextualise it in a wider way.

Interviewer: Yes.

Susie Orbach: So that's I think how I deal with the differences, if that makes sense.

Interviewer: Yeah, and I suppose you see patterns from the things that you talk about with clients that then you can apply to patterns that are happening more kind of a societal level and at an economic level and those kind of things as you were saying, yeah, okay. So I also wanted to touch on some other work that you've done as kind of consultants for various organisations so I know you were involved with the Dove Campaign for real beauty and I was just wondering if we could talk a little bit about kind of what those kind of projects are like?

Susie Orbach: Well, that came about because I was really fed up with going to government all the time trying to persuade them that actually women's bodies matter, women's minds matter, you know, the first 1,000 days, all to do with that and not really getting anywhere until the coalition government came in because they had two feminist minister, Lynne Featherstone and Jo Swinson. Anyway, and I took it up with governments, they had summits which I was the key note at on women's bodies but they didn't follow through on anything. And I kept thinking if I could only get to a progressive advertising company or a company that makes women's beauty products I could say to them why don't you do this? It would be a good message.

As it was somebody who was the sort of top honcho at the Advertising Agency for Dove came to me and said, "Is it true that advertising oppresses women?" And I said, "Well, as a matter of fact, yes." "And how do they do it?" And I said, "Well, why don't you go make a little film and ask their lovely daughters of your chief-executives or whatever how they feel about their bodies and then go show it to Unilever".

[0:42:45]

Interviewer: Gosh.

Susie Orbach: And they showed it to Unilever and Unilever agreed. And there was a woman at the head of the brand and Silvia, I think, Lagnado and Mel at Ogilvy and they presented this film and said Dove, which is not exactly a beauty company but is sort of was a beauty... you know, it's not a like cosmetic company, we could make a difference. And they got a lot of money from Unilever to try to

remake the whole outlook of the brand and that's how I got involved. So they did a tremendous amount of... as well as all the ads which, you know, I was saying if you show a variety of bodies and of women engaged and they're not always looking to camera and they're not always... I mean there's so much I could talk about in terms of that, but we don't really have enough time.

But it was also the work they did behind the scenes with workshops for girls which Girl Guides did throughout the world to try to change girls' experience of engagement and confidence and being able to find other ways to express themselves than through transforming their bodies. So that was a very long project.

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah, I can imagine, a lot to do.

Susie Orbach: And now I look at ads for all sorts of things and I think, "Oh, they've got big women and dark women and light women and..." so it did work. It didn't stop women being preoccupied with their bodies however because people were still being sold stuff.

Interviewer: Yes, yeah, that's really interesting so, yeah, even in my lifetime I've noticed such a change with advertisements and stuff but, yeah, it's interesting how that maybe doesn't, yeah, as you say stop people being preoccupied-

Susie Orbach: No, I mean you need something much... you need to help... you know, one of the big initiatives I've worked on and has never happened is – it's Jo Swinson who was the minister as well as Lynne Featherstone – yeah, you know, I've produced with my colleague Holli Rubin, a government paper which is about how to train midwives and health visitors to help mums, expectant mums, with their own body eating problems so they don't pass it on to the next generation.

So that was a paper called Two for the Price of One. I have never been able to get that programme in anywhere and it's just a training programme for midwives so they feel more confident instead of just putting mothers on weighing machines and telling them not to go to be obese I mean which is just completely crazy, it doesn't do anything. I mean we did some training at NCT and the preoccupation of the mothers of the people that NCT counsellors we working with were just desperate to get back into their jeans immediately after they had their baby rather than actually, this is a period when you need to surrender to your body because actually you're learning how to be in a postpartum body with your baby etc. etc.

So I continue to be frustrated, I put it that way because you can't just do the advertising, you need to do it at the infant, mother level, at the preschool level and at the school level and things like the BMI are such a disaster, they just pathologized the whole situation.

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah, so there needs to be more practical things happening at that societal level as well.

Susie Orbach: And also teachers, you know, most teachers are messed up about their bodies, they're just projecting that all the time too.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Susie Orbach: So, you know, it's a big work and it's never going to be done unfortunately.

[0:47:16]

Interviewer: Okay, great. So switching gears a little bit then, I wanted to talk a bit more about your involvement with feminist activism throughout your life and what you've been involved with, if anything?

Susie Orbach: Gosh, I don't know. I know that I was part of a group against sexual harassment (WASH), that was in the mid 80s where some of us... I was a therapist, a couple of people, trade union people, I mean, lawyers etc. then I was involved for many years with a group called Endangered Bodies/Anybody (www.any-body.org) where we looked at and tried to produce, material that we thought was useful



for kids and for schools and had loads of demonstrations and gave evidence in parliament etc. etc. so there's loads of things that I've done out of activism. Now I'm just, you know, an old lady really.

Interviewer: Not at all, not at all. Brilliant, yeah, okay. So you're also part of the British Psychological Society, is that correct?

Susie Orbach: No.

Interviewer: Okay. Have you ever been- Sorry.

Susie Orbach: I've been invited to give talks but, no, I'm part of the British Psychoanalytic Council, yeah.

Interviewer: Have you ever been involved with the Psychology Of Women and Equalities Section of the BPS?

Susie Orbach: Sadly not.

Interviewer: No, okay. Lovely, thank you.

Susie Orbach: I mean I've probably been to a meeting 100 years ago but not...

Interviewer: Yeah, nothing comes to mind about-

Susie Orbach: Well, I think I've addressed certain meetings of it but I don't... no, I haven't been involved as a... because I'm not a psychologist by training.

Interviewer: Yes, yeah, yeah, of course. Okay. Have you been involved with any other kind of feminist organisations then in maybe there are sections of the psychoanalytic council, something that... or any other feminist but academic or therapeutic-

Susie Orbach: Not formally, no, not formally. I mean Anybody (www.anybody.org) took up a lot of time, right, and a practice, and... no, apart from that, no.

Interviewer: That's fine.

Susie Orbach: I mean, you know, I'm also a writer so, no.

Interviewer: Yeah, there's a lot always going on, things to balance. Lovely. So I suppose I wanted to ask a bit more broadly in terms of feminism and psychoanalysis, what impact do you think feminism has had then on psychoanalysis and therapy?

Susie Orbach: So I think it's humanised it hugely, it's made it much more relational, it's de-pathologized the fact that you might actually care for and be on the side of your patient/clients while you're holding the position of being the therapist. I think it's brought issues of vulnerability as a progressive idea, of dependency as something that's inevitable and is human, of the difficulties of change. I think it's had a huge unrecognised impact, in fact Luise and I wrote a paper about that many years ago, the Unrecognised Contribution of Feminism to Psychoanalysis which we gave at a UN sponsored or a UNESCO sponsored conference in Peru. So I think that... it is unrecognised but it is nevertheless huge. I mean within couple work where you look at the couple differently, I think the heterosexual couples or you look at gay couples, I mean I think it's absolutely huge and if I had lots of time I'd be writing more about it but I don't.

[0:52:05]

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah. And do you think there's more to go? Do you think there could be kind of other things that could change about that?

Susie Orbach: Well, it could be... yeah, I mean you can design a whole curriculum around it but not from a negative point of view but from a positive point of view really, you know, if you're looking at this, well, what are you looking at? If you're looking at a couple or a family, how are you looking at the internal power



distributions, the literal power distributions, the what is being conveyed etc. etc.? So there's loads, yeah, of course there's loads to do.

Interviewer: Yeah, loads more still to, yeah, still to work on. And I suppose we're reaching the end actually of my-

Susie Orbach: Great (laughter), I mean I'm sorry, I don't mean to be rude. It's lovely talking with you but, you know, it's tiring talking about oneself so much.

Interviewer: It is, yeah, absolutely. So my last question really is whether you'd give or what advice you might give to feminists or activists entering the field now?

Susie Orbach: Well, having a political perspective which is what you're talking about, having a mindset which can grow and change and be affected and is just really important and being curious and keeping up with... really keeping up with what's going on both in the world around you, you know? And that means not just that the Ukraine or Afghanistan and climate change but really understanding how things like that aeroplane sitting there waiting for people to go to Rwanda, affects people in your practice. I mean everything affects us and I think having a really wide perspective as well as whatever your interests are, really helps you to be curious and get to know the person that you're sitting with. I know it sounds a bit mad to say go wide but I think going wide in your own head so that you can do the intricate work of 'how do they dare risk your caring for them' is really interesting. Maybe that's just who I am.

Interviewer: Yeah, that's brilliant, some really good advice.

Susie Orbach: You know, there's always more to learn, that's what I feel but it's the most wonderful thing, the most wonderful job to have this discipline of sitting with people and letting them hear themselves and letting you hear them.

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah, absolutely, it's so important.

Susie Orbach: Because, you know, therapy is a talking cure but it's also a listening cure.

Interviewer: I like that, it's nice (laughter). Yeah, okay. So is there anything else that maybe we haven't mentioned that you'd like to touch on around-

Susie Orbach: Well, only one thing as I sort of... I had a lot of fun doing the in therapy series on the radio.

Interviewer: Ooh yes.

Susie Orbach: Which was I don't know if you know the history of it but it wasn't scripted at all it was... the actors talk to the director who invented the story and so they came in and I just didn't know what I was getting, which was I've got maybe a paragraph and I found that a really interesting... I was trying to give the real feeling of what it's like in the therapy room but obviously because of confidentiality I don't think we can really have real people so any time I've ever written I've either invented the people like in *Impossibility of Sex* which was stories from therapy but the only uninvented person is me, the storyteller. And in in therapy the radio series and the books, it's very much about showing how it feels in the room by creating the ordinary drama and boringness and everything in between that is in therapy. So the director and I, Ian Rickson, devised this method so that we could bring the surprise of what happens in therapy and then, you know, make it into 15 minute episodes which is what we did which means that there are mistakes because you can't edit them out, you know. And I found that was a really interesting project to show people what it's like to be having a therapy conversation so I loved doing that.

0:57:19]

Interviewer: Yeah, did that feel like a really real experience for you then as a... did it feel like a real therapy session for you?

Susie Orbach: Absolutely.

Susie Orbach

Interviewer: Yeah, that's really interesting.

Susie Orbach: And the director would have lots of tricks going on, which I didn't know, they'd tell the person to leave some kind of emotional bomb in the room and I didn't know that, I didn't know somebody was supposed to arrive late or lose their keys or have a crush on me or whatever, so all of those things made it like a real therapy so I loved doing that.

Interviewer: And do you think that had an impact on listeners?

Susie Orbach: I think it had a huge impact and the BBC were really great because they had lots of silences in it and they let those silences run.

Interviewer: Oh nice.

Susie Orbach: Yeah, huge impact but I know it's used in training programmes all the time, you know, because you can criticise it or you can say, "Oh, I don't like what she did there" or, you know?

Interviewer: Yeah, that's a great way to kind of show people, yeah, as you say, a therapy session without it being kind of issues of confidentiality or anything.

Susie Orbach: Correct.

Interviewer: Yeah. Do you think maybe it made people feel happier, you know, maybe starting therapy, that kind of-

Susie Orbach: Absolutely, I mean the number of requests for therapy following it were just phenomenal I mean I just-

Interviewer: Oh really?

Susie Orbach: I mean, you know, the Women's Therapy Centre started it was very much in demand etc. etc. so it's not an unusual thing but it was just a huge number of people thinking,, "Oh, I want to be listened to like that", "I want to hear myself like that."

Interviewer: Gosh, yeah, that's really great. Lovely. Brilliant. Yeah, so I think that's it so, yeah. Just for the record, could you state your gender please?

Susie Orbach: Yeah, I'm a woman.

Interviewer: And your place and date of birth?

Susie Orbach: London, November 6th 1946.

[0:59:29]

Interviewer: Brilliant. And your occupation?

Susie Orbach: I'm a psychotherapist, psychoanalyst and a writer and an activist.

[End of Transcript]