



The work of therapy

Drawing on her recent Radio 4 series, therapist *Susie Orbach* explores how therapy works its magic on client and practitioner *Illustration by Elis Wilk*



In 2015 BBC Radio 4 commissioned Susie Orbach to deliver a series of 15-minute programmes about the process of therapy. With director Ian Rickson and producer Kevin Dawson, she created a series of programmes in which actors were briefed to become characters who were in therapy with her; all she had was a short paragraph describing their backstory. The programmes were broadcast weekly in February 2016, and repeated in July. This is an edited extract from her new book, *In Therapy: how conversations with psychotherapists really work*, based on the series and published in November. BACP is inviting members to spend an 'Evening with Susie Orbach' on 16 March 2017, in the Barbican, central London, and by live webcast. See p71 for details or visit www.bacp.co.uk/events

The work of therapy is hidden and often invisible. People wonder what goes on in the room. Are therapists like the cabbie or hairdresser on to whom secrets are poured? Are we like the priest who hears confession? Does therapy create a dependent relationship? Is it all just psychobabble and self-justification? Is it a way of absolving oneself of guilt and responsibility?

It is some of these things and none of them. In therapy, the opinions of the cabbie or hairdresser are absent. The quiet attention of the priest may be present, but it is only the starting point. Dependency may exist for a period of time. Strange-sounding phrases may be intermittently developed between the therapy couple. Guilt and responsibility get taken out of their rigid boxes, examined and, instead of being absolved, they may turn into other feelings or get reshaped.

Therapy, like any specialist work, can seem odd to an onlooker. It has been my aim as a psychotherapist, when outside of the consulting room, to show what is so fascinating and potentially life changing about the process and to apply the insights of therapy to the wider world. I've wanted to show that therapy is a different way

of talking and a different way of hearing. Therapy is as much a listening cure as it is a talking cure. The fact of being heard and of hearing one's words in a space in which they aren't necessarily interrupted or soothed but just hang, means they can reverberate. The individual (or the couple or the family) hears whether the words that have emerged are the right words. They are brought face to face with what lives inside of them but is hard to say. Like words chosen for a poem, the clutter of daily language is eviscerated. The words might need to be refined, or they might shock the individual by being unexpected. Whatever they are, they carry a new weight.

Slips of the tongue of course can have significance, but beyond that, and in a more ordinary sense, one discovers as one talks the things that are difficult, the feelings that are rushed over, ignored or avoided. The words that resound, the silences, the ellipses, false starts, interruptions and hesitations that feature widely in the therapy upend the conventions of ordinary conversation.

The patient, client, analysand (all unsatisfactory terms, from my point of view, and thus I tend to use them interchangeably) enters the room. How she or he does it, whether she

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looks at the therapist or down at the floor or smiles or uses the same opening words, such as ‘What a week,’ are all artefacts of the therapeutic encounter, as is the therapist’s quiet welcome. Delight, a hug as a hello, a soothing arm around a back, common in friendship, are absent. In its place, the therapist conveys an intense interest in seeing their client. Her or his ears, heart and body are open to what will unfold in the session, a session marked by time boundaries and usually occurring in the same place.

Therapy, psychoanalysis, is a collaborative venture. Two people – analysand and analyst, patient or client and therapist – sit in a room together. It is a democratic process. The analysand initially drives the session because of what they bring and the way they set the conversation and the pace. As the relationship develops, the language that is created, the pauses, the reflections, the interjections of the therapist, will be particular to each therapy relationship. The rules of therapy are there to create the conditions for the work of therapy to occur. They do not impose a similar shape or feel on each therapeutic couple.

Resonance and rhythm

Each individual who comes for help craves acceptance, even though they may be diffident, or even tetchy. Knowing that craving provides me with the motivation to get underneath and behind the cruelties and difficulties that I am hearing about, some of which will be thrown at me unexpectedly. How can I be useful? What am I being asked to do? Who am I a proxy for? What will enable my patient to clear the space around them and consider something from a different perspective? How can I parse their feelings so

that they increase their emotional repertoire rather than repeatedly play the same no longer productive song?

Such are the demands of the consulting room and what gets stirred up in the therapist.

The psychoanalytic session always has had a strong aesthetic for me. It is a practice, like the work of painting, or writing, or composing, or dancing, or working on a scientific problem. It requires knowledge that constantly refreshes itself. It requires expertise, and it requires an ear to shape, feel and touch the heart of the issues so that they can be revisioned.

At the same time, there is a physical aesthetic, by which I mean the resonance and rhythm of a session, how noisy it is, the weight of the silences, the relationship between therapeutic dialogue and reflectiveness, the way the bodies in the room move forward and back into the shared space in response to intensity.

What constitutes the aesthetic of psychoanalytic therapy is harder to pin down. The aesthetic is not to do with harmony, because it can be decidedly unharmonious. I think it is probably to do with the struggle for truth. A provisional truth to be sure, but an honesty to engage in a venture that presents itself like a mess of rubbish, with no coherence except for its capacity to make the individual feel helpless and hopeless. Through a process of clearing and examining, what needs repairing, what needs sorting, what needs protecting, what needs discarding, what needs nurturing, and in what order these things can be done, constitutes an aesthetic. Marked by rhythm and timbre, by the idiom established in each analyst–analysand couple, and by the

spacing, something beautiful evolves at both a psychological and spiritual level.

Therapy is a deep practice. It searches for veracity. One truth can open to another, which may shade what is first understood. The intricate constructions of the human mind shift during the course of therapy. Being a participant observer to the changing of internal structures and of the expansion of feelings is very satisfying. Seeing how defences are used, and how they can be worked around and in time dissolve, has a beauty that is perhaps akin to the mathematician or physicist’s experience of finding an equation elegant.

I find the particulars of learning how an individual’s internal world works fascinating. We are always learning. We all split parts of experience off. We all forget. We all protect ourselves against certain ideas and feelings. We do this because, if we remembered and felt everything, there wouldn’t be much psychic space for the present. While psychoanalysts theorise our ways of understanding mind management, the work of brain scientists and neuropsychologists is dovetailing with what we discover in the consulting room. As we understand the compelling nature of the pull to repeat what may ill serve us, so the neuroscientists are attempting to plot the ways in which the mind prunes and shapes experience through repeated actions and beliefs. All three disciplines confirm the evidence that the essence of the human is the consequence of our long learning outside the womb. We don’t arrive knowing how to walk and talk and think and feel. We apprehend how to do so in the context of the relationships that receive us. Those relationships, embedded in time and place and economic circumstances,

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then structure our mind, our feelings, our brains, our desires, our behaviours and the way we are embodied.

Therapy takes so very long because the structures of mind we develop in infancy, childhood and adolescence are quasimaterial structures. They are who we are and, although the human mind and brain have great plasticity, desired change can be very difficult. Psychoanalytic therapy, with its emphasis on looking behind our defence structures to the beliefs and feelings that can appear dangerous or unknown, involves the therapist serving as an external anchor (hence the caricature of being overly dependent on the analyst) while the work of deconstructing and reconstructing follows. In therapy you don't just learn a new language to add to your repertoire, you relinquish unhelpful parts of the mother tongue and weave them together with the knowledge of a new grammar. The curiosity a therapist has towards the analysand's structures designate us as anthropologists of the mind. Each individual mind embodies complex understandings of social relationships – the interplay between self – what is allowed and what is sequestered and what to do with what isn't allowed. To know an individual is to know some of their time in history, in place, in class, gender, caste, race and the society and family constellation they have emerged from. An individual is the outcome of her engagement with others from birth (and, some would argue, the womb) onwards.

As we unlearn and remake, so we impact on those we are close with. We all know this in a matter-of-fact way: a bully can intimidate; an easy, confident person can make us feel included and capable; a puffed-up show-off can make us feel competitive. Our minds are both

resilient and flexible. We can explain Stockholm syndrome or the affection built up for an abuser by the mind's capacity to make accommodations to need. In therapy, however, the way one mind has an impact on another becomes part of the subject of the therapy. This makes for an intensity and truth-seeking that forms part of the aesthetic.

Do we all need therapy?

So what difference does therapy make? Why should someone come? Does everyone need to come?

For me the answer is no. Therapy is one kind of vector into that wonderful adventure, an examined life. It is an intimate and delicate route but makes little sense unless one is in psychological trouble. Yes, we can all benefit from becoming emotionally literate, and social programmes that help expectant parents, educators, doctors, nurses and so on expand their own emotional knowledge are effective ways to enable us to know ourselves, to connect well with other(s) and be alright in our own skin.

For others, art, literature, bonding through sport, political or spiritual activity, satisfying enough work and so on will provide meaning. But it is an arduous struggle in a time of political cruelty that wreaks extreme economic and social division while despoiling our environment and creating divisions inside of us.

Symptoms of distress in our society are exacerbated by changes in global culture and the development of rampant consumerism, which is itself a pointer to the horrors of ordinary needs for connection and contribution not met. We are invited to participate in society by taking up identity markers such as brands and viewing ourselves as a brand.

A sense of belonging is fostered by purchasing, but its falsity fails to satisfy. So, too, are fundamentalist modes of thought, whether they are xenophobias, nationalisms, racisms or gender hatreds. In fundamentalist modes of thought, only a narrow band of feelings can be tolerated, and solutions to injustices are expressed through adherence to political, sectarian or religious party lines, which have a hard time with complexity. They abhor internal dissent, while thriving on external disagreement. What consumerism and fundamentalism both highlight is the human desperation to belong. This is not pathological; the desperation to belong is what makes us human. When we belong, we can feel safe being separate. If we can't, the expression we find for it when it goes awry can be deadly.

So therapy for everyone? Again, I say no. But to therapeutic ideas entering the social discourse, I say yes. We don't and can't fully know ourselves. That is a conceit to protect us from feeling vulnerable and helpless. Much of what we do and how we go about it is unconscious. Therapeutic ideas can't make us fully conscious, but they can make us less arrogant and more humble in a generous manner about what it means to be human and to live. ■

Susie Orbach is a psychotherapist, psychoanalyst, writer and social critic. She lives in London and lectures extensively.

In *Therapy: how conversations with psychotherapists really work* is published by Profile Books and the Wellcome Collection (ISBN 978-1781257531, £8.99). Therapy Today readers can buy it for £6 (p&p free in the UK). Go to <https://profilebooks.com> and enter the code THERAPY6 at checkout.

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