

Psychology's Feminist Voices Oral History Project

Interview with Bonnie Burstow

Interviewed by Alexandra Rutherford

Toronto, ON

February 2, 2009

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BB: Bonnie Burstow

AR: Alexandra Rutherford

AR – I would like to start the tape by asking your full name, date and place of birth for the record.

BB – Ok, my full name is Dr. Bonnie Burstow. I was born in Winnipeg, Manitoba, March the 6th, 1945.

AR – Great, thank you! I start the interview the way I start most of our interviews which is to get you to tell us a little bit about how you became a feminist or identified as a feminist.

BB – All right, that is a tough one. Do you want me to start now?

AR – Yeah.

BB – That is a tough one because that was during '40s and '50s. Obviously I grew up in the pre-feminist era and as a thinking human being in that era I demonstrably did not fit in that. I was in a war with what society expected of me, with the assumption that if I went on a date with a guy, I was supposed to pretend that he was brighter and I was probably a great deal brighter, and so on. So, I grew up in a situation where there was a huge dissonance – I didn't have a name for it initially – between society and what felt ok to me and what made any sense to me. That said, you would have thought that I would have jumped into the feminist movement very quickly. I didn't. I entertained every aspects of feminism very quickly, but it took me a number of years before I really became what you might call "active." I think I would have to say it was the radical feminism that caught me. It was the emphasis on women as a being reduced to body and it was that wave of Kate Millett and later of course Catherine MacKinnon that was part of that early wave. Taking very seriously what MacKinnon later said – what was classism, Marxism, and sexism in feminism. Seeing that ultimately we could not have a world fit for human beings without some kinds of feminist revolution.

AR – Give me even more of a fine grained analysis of that in terms of your own life, was it a books you read? What kind of process got you into feminism?

BB – Well, sometimes it was the books I read, but it was a very gradual process of years. In the '60s I was reading Simon de Beauvoir, but that wouldn't have taken me there. If I could read everything it still wouldn't say "this is the most essential thing in my life." It doesn't today either, but it certainly got bigger. It was certainly seeing to women around me and finding that

mirrored, not in therapy literature because it really wasn't, but in feminist literature.

AR – Can you tell me about whether you were involved in radical feminist activism or just feminist activism at that point in the '60s?

BB – In the '60s I was not. I wouldn't say that I became involved in any feminist activism until somewhere in '70s. For one thing, I went to England in the late '60s and I was working on a doctorate in English. So I was really involved in other things, in strikes by the coal miners and other issues came to the fore, but that was never far from my consciousness and I when came back to Canada, I started to picking that up.

AR – Tell me about coming back to Canada and what threads you picked up and all that.

BB – When I came back to Canada, a feminist person existed that had not existed before in our cities, so I came back to a different Canada than I left. I also came back different geographically, I left from Winnipeg and I came back to Toronto. If I went back to Winnipeg, I would have been in real trouble, because the feminist stuff there was very low, comparatively speaking, whereas there were all sorts of feminist groups in Toronto. Now, I wasn't super active, but I did turn up to events to do things. So, it became part of my identity just like being a hippy was part of my identity. I had these different identities and they existed together.

Later on in the late '70s as I became a therapist –I started as a therapist in '78– feminism became even more important to me. Nothing was clearer to me: sexism that was deeply embedded in problems people brought whether they knew it or didn't know it. That was huge. The other thing was that the more and more the other movements I got involved in, while absolutely critical to me, the lack of a feminist perspective or enough of one started to bother me more and more. None of that took me out of the movements, but all of them made me continually go back to saying that feminism has to be injected. But nothing as much as therapy where I would look at the idiocy of the modalities that were being taught and that we were supposed to be practicing, I would have to say these are not only in many cases not helpful, and beside the point, that they are directly oppressive to women – especially all the family therapy stuff.

AR – I would like to really delve into the feminist therapy part of your career, but let me go back a little bit of what you said about being involved in other movements and seeing that gender and feminism were missing.

BB – It was missing. In anarchism there was a little bubble of it from the feminist anarchists, but they were a small grouping within the anarchist movement. There was enormous emphasis on prisoners and male prisoners in particular. Now I understand that; for very good reason prisons, which are important to me to, are enormous symbols of the deprivation of freedom. But all of this came without a feminist analysis. None of it came with what we really start doing about people we are trying to get out of jail that were women. A lot of these things put me at odds with everyone because I always wanted to push whatever group I was in. If I was in an anarchist group or Quakers, I was with the Quakers for a while, I wanted to bring in feminist analysis, but if I was with the feminists I couldn't stand the fact they wanted the longer sentences and so on.

So I very often found myself in the movements as a person to bring in the knowledge of some other group.

AR – Right, and working at the intersection?

BB – Yes, at the intersection of these different movements. It wasn't long ago when in PEI they were trying to do something around violence against battered women. They decided to do a call to all of the principle feminist therapists throughout the Canada, there were about eight of us, but they were horrified because I was the one person who wouldn't say "longer sentences." So, this continued to be an issue for me, but it surly does make sense for the new generation who do want to hold on to that complexity.

AR – Let me ask you about your personal experiences as a feminist and as a woman in this period of time and these other movements. What role did those experiences, if they did at all, play in your critique? Did you personally feel like, as a woman and or as a feminist woman, that you are getting short shrift within these movements?

BB – I did, and at the same time, I was well aware that I was less short shrifted than most women. I was always somebody a little harder to dismiss, but I certainly see other women are dismissed a lot easier and I was aware of that. I was aware that I was, in many movements, acceptable as long as I didn't bring in women. The price of the ticket was being quiet about something that one could not be quiet about and I was aware of that from very early on. So, there was certainly that that was driving me forward. If I look at which movements I have been most involved in, it is still anti-psychiatry, prison abolitionists. But, I have staked out my territory so much as a feminist and I try to bring these things so much into the feminist space and I've remained as this person at the cross roads.

AR – Well, tell me now about your development, your trajectory into feminist therapy.

BB – I took training...I already had three degrees before I started to become a therapist. I had been an English professor so I had a completely different trajectory. Actually that was funny being an English professor because this was the early '70s and I am teaching Jacoby and drama and trying to talk about feminist heroes in drama, so, I could see what I was doing. I was trying to use literature to smuggle in concepts that the literature would support, but there were a lot more direct ways of speaking about it. Then I started the shifting and eventually I did decide to become a therapist, which means I went back to university for two more degrees and that suited me just fine because if anything I am comfortable with being a scholar. I also knew I could always use scholarships for living and everything worked out very well.

AR – So, your two degrees are?

BB – Were at Toronto, OISE [Ontario Institute for Studies in Education]. One of them was ostensibly a counseling degree, it was adult education and counseling psychology, where these two programs came together to mount a special program. The other one was an adult education degree in which we took a whole bunch of courses in counseling at the same time. In this era, as

I took these courses and as I did internships, that I became so appalled because it was very clear to me that these were patriarchal. It is not like there was no value in them because in that era there was some nice humanist stuff around, but it was patriarchal humanist stuff.

I started practicing very soon. I started practicing after I got one degree, before I got the other. What I became aware of was that I could not practice the way I was being told to practice, that I had to practice as somebody with feminist knowledge and as somebody who knew many of these modalities were not good for women. Again, a lot of what was causing women these problems was patriarchy. A lot of things that were seen as problematic were reasonable ways for women to cope in a patriarchal traumatizing world. So, this became a huge mainstay that I could not practice the way that I was being taught. I was aware that I was setting myself as a very different kind of therapist. So, that is kind-of how it began and within a very short time, I was writing things. In a short time, I was doing workshops, presentations in all sort of different places and that became a life of its own.

Eventually, after about eleven to twelve years of that I wrote a book called *Radical Feminist Therapy* that became seen as a classic field. When I wrote the book, there wasn't a whole lot that I hadn't said in some way, but it gave me the chance to put it in a more concrete form. That was terribly important to me because what I could see was that there was really good writing in the past but – and this was a huge “but” for me – people would write about what was wrong with traditional therapy and what as feminist therapist one had to know, but they wouldn't say what that meant, and what it meant you did, and what you actually did was different, and so on. So, I really wanted to write a book that was a praxis oriented book that held together theory and practice. And then I kept going once I did that.

AR – Let me go back to when you were first coming to this analysis of the kind of things you were learning and seeing them so patriarchal and so at odds with feminism – was it in late '70s again?

BB – Yes, this was around 1977/78 and, as I said, it wasn't the worst era for counseling as gestalt therapy and TA therapies but they were still patriarchal and nothing more so than family therapy stuff.

AR – Tell me a little bit more in detail about that, the kind of stuff you were reading and finding very difficult to deal with, from a feminist perspective.

BB – Well, this was the big era for instance for systems theory, for family therapy. The number one thing you were always taught was that your client wasn't any of the people in the system. What you could see again and again, no matter what you had read, was that somehow, repeatedly, the mother of the family got sacrificed for the good of the system and that was the answer. So, what you could see ultimately – I won't say groups don't exist – human beings very much do exist and they can't be sacrifices for the sake of the system. You start to see that people are teaching this stuff as if it makes sense, as if it was, “two plus two equals four,” when it inherently did not make sense and it inherently trapped women.

AR – Tell me about how it got translated in that period into your practice, how did it start changing what you did?

BB – Well, right from the beginning of the time I practiced, I was a maverick so it was hard to say it changed. Right from the beginning, working with women who self-injured, I was using the words “coping skills” that no one else used it. I was using it in the ‘70s and it meant that I simply could not use the language that was out there. I couldn’t collude with the language that was out there. If I used a language that was compatible with feminism, then I had some hope of being a help to these clients.

AR – At that time were you self-identified as a feminist therapist?

BB – I was indeed, by 1979 I was using the term “feminist therapist” and that is a very early time to use it.

AR – It is, yes.

BB – So, a lot of my dialogues were with my colleagues and part of that dialogue was for sake of the conventional models, and pathologizing models, and so on. At the same time, I was unlike feminism that always had a critique of psychiatry, but didn’t reject psychiatry. I rejected psychiatry and that was another big part of my push to try and bring this new, growing field of feminist therapy to embrace anti-psychiatry. So, I ended up with very particular agendas within the feminist therapy and that was more successful at sometimes than others.

AR – I want to ask about anti-psychiatry, but let me ask first that what people’s reactions were to you at that point in the late ‘70s.

BB – There was an excitement about me in certain areas and other people dismissed me and that’s what you could expect. But, what I did find by the late ‘70s and early ‘80s was that I was being asked to speak all over the place. I was being asked to do workshops – I was asked how we work with women with altered realities because I was saying you can do this as opposed to drug them or tell them these were fantasies. What I found was that certain groups really gravitated to it. I went along well with certain groups such as the Women’s Counseling, Referral and Education Center, which was one of the early places in the city. We were on a wavelength. It is not like that we were agreeing with everything or even understood everything but essentially we saw each other as allies.

Later on, somewhere in the ‘80s I was brought on as the first consultant trying to help them to be more anti-psychiatry. So, there were groups I was working with and to a way lesser extent, with the TRCC [Toronto Rape Crisis Centre]; then more and more different women’s shelters throughout. That was the other thing that ended up with a whole lot of training for counselors and women’s shelters to show them how to work with women in these ways. I did a lot of traveling up north to Barrie, to various places, and what I found was that there were shelters in these places that desperately wanted this – they wanted their staff to work in more feminist ways and in anti-psychiatry and this was very interesting.

AR – Yes, definitely! Well, let me then ask if you could elaborate on what you see as the relationship between feminism and anti-psychiatry.

BB – I see psychiatry as inherently part of the patriarchy, so to me there isn't necessarily a relationship between the two. It is the rule of fathers and in very much at the expense of women and I am not saying men aren't treated badly. In fact, men are treated the way women are treated, but women are treated worse. Women essentially are diagnosed – and being “women” is seen as being disordered. You can see that in all sorts of ways. Women are disordered if they acted like women; women are disordered if they didn't act like women; and there was always this narrow little ground on which women could stand and not one was that was good for them. So, to me we also had a profession that was – besides curtailing people's freedom, locking them up – turning them to drug addicts. And the worst kind of drug addict takes drugs three times a day, you know multi drugs. I think if they had their drug of choice they would have done a lot better than on these drugs.

We saw a profession that was particularly preyed on women. Electroshock has always stood up to me as the epitome of this where in every era that electroshock has been given, two to three times as many women as men are given it despite the fact that women are more brain damaged by it. And now it is the treatment of choice for postpartum depression. So, when I look at these things, they are basic feminist issues. It means that alliance is needed because we need psychiatry not having this kind of hegemonic control over people and state control over people to have a better world. The feminist movement is the best situated movement to really moves that agenda. I am not saying that the psych-survivors movement isn't critical and these other movements aren't critical, but this is the movement with numbers and this is the gender that is particularly pathologized.

AR – And what are your reflections on how successful, or not, the feminist movement has been in addressing anti-psychiatry or in addressing psychiatry?

BB – I think we are in the bad period. A student of mine took my attention the other day in that the whole bunch of other feminist professionals, psychology professionals were coming and saying, “Why has electroshock got such a bad name?” That wouldn't even be possible twenty years ago. I think we are in a very bad place at the moment where people are questioning what should be a given and this is one of the pillars of patriarchy, you can't just let it be.

AR – What is your analysis of why feminists have almost been co-opted into that?

BB – I really don't know how that happened. What I do know is only a small part of the picture. Whenever the establishment gives you something you want, you are in danger of being co-opted. I think feminists were given something we wanted. For instance, if you go into a place like CAMH [Centre for Addiction and Mental Health], they will now all talk seriously about the fact that women have been violated and battered and sexually abused. We got that. We won that. So, it now looks to women like psychiatry is on-side. What they don't realize is that they still say, “There are borderline personality disorders,” and they still do exactly all the same things they

would do if they didn't say that. So, I think that kind of cooptation has very much happened. It is a severe problem because in some ways the damage has never been so great. Especially to women and other vulnerable groups. I looked at this two to three times ratio and I take a country like Australia where electroshock has tripled and where the big push now is [to use it on] children under four and this has to be women's issue.

AR – Yeah, and here in the North America as well, the increasing use of pharmaceutical intervention is for younger and younger people.

BB – Younger people and women devour the majority of our pharmaceuticals. This is simply the case. It is so strange, because all the group really has to do is to say, “Yes, there are all these other causal factors” and they can disempower the oppositions. If the oppositions to them are not really clear, if you are still doing the same things, then it is relevant that you are saying this. I think feminists have been co-opted in all sorts of ways by all sorts of movements. I gave the psychiatric examples, but feminism has been terribly co-opted in Canada by the criminal justice system. Well, I'll give an example. In the jails, Canada now has a reputation as the most feminist of all of the places for criminal justice systems because we have these wonderful feminist programs. So, it looks like that this has been a great success. But, if you take a look at what happens when they try to identify which women have been battered, and take battering very seriously. And when those women who have been battered come up for parole they are less likely to get it if they have been identified as “battered.” And so all of this has been used against women. What they have said is, “Well, obviously these women have been harmed and they are in danger of reoffending,” yet our reputation is of feminist criminal justice system.” That is the way I've seen these things working.

AR – Tell me how you got into prison work and working with the justice system.

BB – I always saw the world as having two negative responses to people they aren't happy with; that is either “They were bad,” in which they went to the criminal justice system or they said, “They were sick,” in which case they went to the psychiatric system. They are mirror images of each other, the mad and the bad. So, while I've done more work in the psychiatric system and I am terribly aware that these are interrelated systems. In fact, transcarceration systems where people often go between them. Even though the movements don't address each other, as a person I could not not address both of them, these are interlocked systems. So, part of fighting for a system where there are no bars on people's bodies or their minds is fighting both systems.

AR – Let me go back a little bit to your career.

BB – You know I don't think of it in that way, I was saying it to someone this morning that I am going to be asked about my career and I don't think of it in that way and I know that is the normal language. There is nothing wrong with the language we are using, but I am aware that I think of myself as somebody who was thrown into the world like everyone else and then ended up wanting to do and having chances to do some sorts of things. So, I take myself seriously but not that seriously.

AR – Ok, does career feel too compartmentalized?

BB – It feels like the focus is on me rather than what we are trying to do.

AR – Oh I see, right.

BB – So, it is too human centered as opposed to community centered, or whatever.

AR – Right, yeah, I know what you mean.

BB – But ask it anyway, I don't want to make you feel uncomfortable.

AR – No, what I was trying to go for – I was just trying to get there in my own articulation, but when we spoke about setting up this interview, you were clear that you didn't identify as a psychologist, tell me a little more about that.

BB – Well, for one thing, I am technically not a psychologist because I didn't do those undergraduate courses which you take in order to become a registered psychologist. So, in terms of the government, we are in a very regulated system that I am not going to say I am something that they would say I am not. That's not to say I don't believe in it. I think the other thing is that I have mixed feeling about psychology as a discipline. I have mixed feelings or less mixed feelings about social work. My training so far has been primarily in psychology, so it is not like I am saying that it was not helpful, but I do see psychology as something that progressively has become the handmaiden of psychiatry. One can break out of the individualistic modalities that it pushes you into. In fact, it does tend to look at the individual mind as if it is a monad. In that respect, I always preferred social work and I have taught social work too. I've always preferred social work because it lifts people up with the concepts that we are part of the society, we are part of social groups and so on.

AR – Yeah, I totally agree with you. Is there a way though for feminist psychologists or feminist psychology as a discipline to battle against this path that we seem to be inexorably following towards psychiatry?

BB – Well, there can, but it is very much of a vanguard action. Psychology is one of the earliest professions to professionalize. Social work has done it too, but psychology did it very early. I don't see how psychology would fight against its own professionalization, I don't see anyone doing that. All of my courses are cross-listed here between adult education and counseling psychology, but I have trouble...I have trouble. For the first year I went to the meetings on both sides of the department, adult education on one side and counseling psychology on the other side. I had trouble coming to these meetings because there was a norm, I could see the push, I could see people taking the push for professionalization. So, you see, universities where people want to make sure we have to have this course, and this thing here, so this and that group professionalizes. Many of my colleagues would see themselves as feminists, or are feminists, but the pull is incredible. So, I don't know if there is a point at which a profession has been so spoiled. By "spoiled" I mean ruined – that it can be, it may be....I mean I don't want to say that at the

moment about psychology I want to say that about psychiatry.

AR – Well, that gives me some hope, I mean I have a PhD in clinical psychology actually and I see my feminist colleagues and sometimes I wonder what is feminist about them.

BB – Yeah, because it becomes a label that describes a couple of things, but it is not a basic core thing about how you are in the world and what you are fighting for in the world. It becomes a professional stance. Feminism is not a professional stance. Feminism is a very existential stance and if it is not existential then it is not going to be done properly.

AR – Tell me a little bit about your life. You are a scholar, as you mentioned earlier, you are also an activist and a novelist. Tell me about how you have navigated being a scholar and an activist.

BB – With a great difficulty. In a universe where I had to choose, that would have been very hard to choose. I think I really would have a difficult time choosing because I really do enjoy being a scholar and I really identify as an activist. So I think I lucked out with OISE because I ended up in a department where people see activism and scholarship as possible together. So this has been a possibility for me and I know that for a lot of people it is not. Every course I've taught – with the exception of the research courses which I so rewrote that they bear no resemblance of research courses I inherited – I invented; they didn't exist before. So, I really go up to be able to create courses made for some who is a scholar, an activists, a particular, and all of those things combined. I've been able to hold on to all of who I am within this particular set– up. This has been a real privilege for me.

AR – Yeah, because you've had the autonomy to be able to do things the way you wanted to do them.

BB – I've had the autonomy and I've had students around who wanted it. So, it made a huge difference if your courses are very well attended and people are really excited about what you are doing. It is very hard for people to not say, "Let's continue on with what you are doing." I also had very good colleagues. In every way I ended up in a good place. The last place I taught, I also had very good colleagues. It was a long time ago, but I taught in the social work department at Carleton University and I was the replacement for Helen Levine and I imagine you must know who Helen is because she introduced the first course of feminist social work in Canada.

AR – Oh, I don't know that, that is wonderful.

BB – Yeah, she was terribly important. I think she may be dead by now so I don't think you can interview her, but she had to be one of the very early figures in feminist therapy and she was certainly one of the people who inspired me.

AR – Oh, wow!

BB – And to that point she was retiring when I stepped in there and here was a group, a social work faculty, quite a while ago now, who not only said that what they were doing was radical

social work but also was very clear that that meant taking feminism as seriously as classism and they were all feminists. They wouldn't hire somebody who didn't identify as a feminist. To me that was very exciting and of course they wanted my activism and they totally liked that I was anti-psychiatry. Well, I've never found a social work faculty [like that] ever again. That is fine, I am very happy in adult education because whether people understand anti-psychiatry or not, it parallels their idea of what world they want to live in. The last two places I've taught have been very sympathetic to the idea that activism and scholarship should go together and that has been very good. Here, I get to teach courses that are activist courses while at the same time being scholarship. For instance, I teach a course called, "Creative Empowerment Work with the Disenfranchised," which looks at how to organize communities, which advances the positions of various disenfranchised communities such as sex workers, homeless, and so on. So, that is not what a scholar ever gets to do, it just isn't. I am aware that I've been very fortunate.

AR – It is kind of an advantage that you managed to avoid psychology.

BB – Oh, I think so. There was no question that I consciously avoid it and I guess you know who Jeri Wine is.

AR – Yes

BB – Ok, Jeri Wine was head of psychology department here at one point and she was the first feminist on faculty in psychology here, and she was a huge name in feminist therapy and feminism here. She was only a few years older and it was only my fourth or fifth degree when I came here so, I did take classes and that was inspirational because here she was bringing this highly politicized thing within psychology. It didn't survive in psychology but it created a space that could take other places.

AR – I was going to ask you, actually, about mentors, you mentioned Helen Levine.

BB – I have to say that I am maybe one of the most unmentor-like person in that I don't take people as mentors. I see other people have gone on as people's mentors but I never did. I certainly did learn from them. I saw something, so, believe it or not I would have to say one figure that influenced me the most was not a woman it was Jean-Paul Sartre.

AR – Ok, interesting!

BB – So strongly influenced by him. We are all complex creatures.

AR – Sure! What is it exactly about Sartre? I mean obviously he is known for his views.

BB – Certainly that combination of scholarship and activism was part of it. How one lives one's life as a responsible person, what it authenticity means as a political person in the world. So, his take on existentialism particularly rang with mine. To me this was existentialism at its best. I did a degree in philosophy. When I was doing all of that existentialism was on the rise. This was the radical new thing, the way that post modernism has become for some people, not me, and Sartre

to me was the figure who stood out.

AR – I want to go back to your comment about post modernism, but before I do I noticed from your website actually that you teach qualitative methods, so, can you tell me that how that developed?

BB – It was an accident. I came back from Carleton because I couldn't stay there forever. There were certainly a lot of reasons to stay there forever, but I couldn't do my activism there.

AR – What got in the way of that?

BB – There wasn't an activist community the way there was an activist community in Toronto. There was almost no anti-psychiatry, there was almost no whole-bunch-of-things that were fundamental to what I saw myself stood in the world. Again, in terms of what I am doing and the good part of what I did and what I needed to do wasn't possible to do there.

AR – Because it is a smaller place? Or more conservative place?

BB – It is a smaller place. It is a more conventional place and lots of other reasons. The other figures that you would ally with weren't there. None of them were there, so this was quite critical. So, I left what was a very good job where everything would have been fine if I stayed. I came back to Toronto without a job and opened up a private practice again in Toronto. I eked private practice for a living and doing all of these workshops all over the place, writing my book in radical feminist therapy and doing all sorts of other things. Eventually one day, Angela Miles who is a feminist in Adult Ed...Something had happened to the head of the department who taught qualitative research course and couldn't teach it. Angela said, "I think Bonnie Burstow can teach it." Now I never taught Qualitative Research Methods and I had never taken a qualitative research course. I have a philosophic background and this was not going to be a problem. So, I said yes and I never stopped teaching it.

AR – Oh, amazing! Let me just flip the tape.

BB – So, I never stopped teaching it and of course it is not true that I never took a qualitative course. I had taken qualitative courses, but I'd never taught it. It was very exciting getting it up to a position where I could teach. It was very exciting pushing it into some of the more political modes of doing research whether it was eventually introducing institutional ethnography to it and so on. So, it was quite exciting. Also having a background in philosophy, this was applied epistemology. It was taking the scholarship and turning it into something active, which was always my comfort level. And that is how I ended up in this department.

AR – Right! Tell me about the private practice work. What have been the highs and lows of private practice and what kinds of private practice have you done?

BB – Well, I've mainly seen individuals, and I do a little bit of family work, also a little bit of people-in-conflict-with-other-people work especially when it's psych-survivors and when people

want to lock them up. So, I have done interventions where the family was in conflict with each other, with severe meaning to what that conflict might bring. A lot of what I did was individual work and then as much as I've done individual work, I've done a lot of consultation and supervision. About half of my stuff has always been consultation and supervision; sometimes more than half. For years and years, for instance, I was the consultant for Breakthrough (by years and years I mean fifteen years), which is a program that did three to five groups a year for childhood sexual abuse survivors and women within those various categories of abuse. So, I always had that as a main stay of what I was doing. I always had to take a balance. If I only saw clients, I would feel I was not shifting how other people practiced. It was terribly important that we shifted the practice. But if I didn't see clients, I lost touch with reality. I feel that as a teacher too and my sense is if I stopped having a practice, I wouldn't know what I was talking about. I would be giving politically correct answers or psychologically correct answers or whatever, but they wouldn't be true.

AR – They wouldn't be derived from your actual experience.

BB – They wouldn't be derived and I would touch with what is real.

AR – Right, well let me ask you about teaching. You have been a teacher and educator for a long time.

BB – In number of departments, film department, social work department, and psychology department.

AR – Do you want to comment on the changes that you've seen in the students that you've worked over the years?

BB – Well, I can't step outside of my situation. I see a very neat group of students and it may not be the time, it may be the location. The Adult Education Community Development program is famous throughout the world and people who want to Adult Ed, it is one of the three prime choices. We get stunningly interesting, sophisticated and, I would have to say, older than average students, many of who have already made huge marks on the world and know very much of what they want to do. So, I don't know if I could say out of that and make generalization to what happens to students because it may be a very peculiar situation of what students are that I've come in contact with, but I do see a difference. Every so often I see a difference that absolutely tickles me. One year when I was teaching Creative Empowerment with the Disenfranchised, which is one of my courses – and I should tell you that I am a big follower of Gandhi and I really like nonviolent resistance, but obviously as an anarchist I work with all sorts of people who don't like nonviolent resistance because anarchism is split on this issue.

One year, I would say 95% of all students in the class were anarchists and that would have been impossible twenty years ago. So, it was telling me something very interesting about changes among the young people. The other thing was that I was in the minority of one who believed in a nonviolent resistance, which didn't bother me because I was kind of tickled by it and it was a challenge for me. I enjoyed being in that situation. It was also telling me that times have changed

dramatically. Mostly in good ways. In the sense that here were people – and it is not like I agreed, I still believe in nonviolent resistance – who were trying to find their answers to some very difficult social problems and were rejecting answers that came to them and were trying to forge new ones. It is exciting even if their answers are not right. What really united me with the students was that they were rejecting the inherited wisdom. Here were people who did not think in traditional senses, who did not think in terms of traditional disciplines and those horrific things that the world, academia, and other groups imposed upon them and really thought like grassroots activists. To me, that was really exciting.

AR – Yeah, and that is kind of fundamental.

BB – To me that is fundamental that students are seeing that and students are pissed off that whole generations left them this mess. They want a better world and that is very exciting.

AR – It is! Especially inertia seems to be so prevalent. I mean just to have people be working for change, excited about change.

BB – Yes, and I do see enormous excitement about change with the students and much more so than in the twenty years leading up to this decade.

AR – Oh, interesting!

BB – Well, I don't think I've seen that degree of excitements since the '60s. It reminds me of something, but it is very differently flavored.

AR – Right! What is it about this moment then in your analysis?

BB – I think in some the ways the progress of globalization, things have gotten so bad that people want to breakout. They are rejecting all the structures that said this is how you breakout. It is not just rejecting the organizations of these establishments, they are rejecting the organizations of the alternatives. I think we saw that in Quebec City – this was organizing in a totally different way. Gone was the concept of a stable organization; this was a very decentred. In some degree it is a shift among youth, but in some degree it is just simply a shift because it is not just the good guys who have done the shift. If you take a look at bad guys on the ground, fascists no longer organize hierarchically, they are organizing exactly the ways these kids who are doing good things. So, we are seeing a whole shift in how formations happen and some of it is quite exciting to me.

AR – Right. Let me ask you about the comment you made earlier about post-modernism and can you tell me your relationship to post-modernism?

BB – Not much for it. Let me begin by saying I've colleagues who are allergic to post-modernism. I don't go that far. For one thing, some of the things that I've got from existentialism I see other people are getting from post-modernism; taking very seriously the particular as opposed to the universal and so on. Because I see the similarities I can place some value in it.

There are some certain post-modern figures like Foucault that are terribly important. That said, I have a very big worry that post-modernism undoes learning and co-opts feminism and so on. So, I've never positioned myself as a post-modernist and I am sure I won't. I am more comfortable positioning myself as a structuralist and everybody says they are post-structuralist because I want to make very certain that we are coherently addressing it. There was the other thing that I've found very difficult about post-structuralism and post-modernism and it is one of the reasons I left philosophy – I think that it created a language that was almost purposely inaccessible and I think post-modernism does that too. In the end you can't measure these things because exactly what they mean changes from one second to the next. I don't think we can advance that way. So, that said, I think the benefit of post-modernism is whatever seriously and I value that.

AR – Can you comment of post-feminism and I am not even sure what I mean by that term.

BB – It is inherently a concept that makes no sense to me. If we are living in patriarchal universe, I don't know what post-feminism could mean except that someone doesn't realize we are living in a patriarchal universe. I am also uneasy – and when I say “uneasy” I don't mean “highly critical” just uneasy, with the new buzz words in social work. The new social buzz words are anti-oppression words and of course I believe in anti-oppression, but somewhere in that term feminism falls out as if it is not being taken terribly seriously. So, to me I won't leave feminism and I don't want it hyphenated. I don't want it disappeared and at the same time I don't want feminism to be faced in anti-racist analysis. I want all of the 'isms in there to relate to the ways they are in life first and understand what we have to do.

AR – One of the buzz words in psychology, that limited universe, and we are reading a lot about it is intersectionality, talk about that.

BB – Yeah. It is better than the terms we had. When I was writing, the big term was “double and triple jeopardy” and so I used it. It is a lot better than those terms. When I read my stuff I wince. I see that, of course, it wasn't like double or triple; these things do intersect. So, I think it was a big movement forward in providing us with a metaphor for talking about things. People aren't oppressed now as a Black person, or as a woman; they are oppressed as a Black woman and if we cannot talk about these things together then we cannot understand the oppression. If we take them apart, we will make horrible mistakes. I remember during the Ray administration there was this big push to hire in the government sector to hire more women and more people of color and these were held separately, but they wanted to do the both things which was a good thing. So, they gave themselves a target that we should be raising the amount of women in the managerial positions in the public sector in the government sector and we should be raising the number of people of color. Sure enough they came up with a study that showed they had raised people of color as managers by twenty percent and they had raised women by twenty percent. Then one very bright researcher said what race was in women of color and there was none! Nothing could be clearer; the stupidity that comes from those old ways of thinking that we don't remember that they intersect and they have to be held together.

AR – Yeah. I want to ask you to maybe speak a bit more about the writing of your book, *Radical Feminist Therapy*.

BB – Well, I am never comfortable when I am not writing. I am not comfortable if I am not teaching or when I am not in activism or writing.

AR – So, you are busy!

BB – I am very busy! I started to write in a way that I write everything: without any idea of whether anyone would publish it; saying, “I will write a good book and then I will publish it” and I’ve always said that is certainly not the way you are told to do it. All I was aware of in the beginning was that it had to be consistent with the values that I believed in and it had to tell people how to put those into practice. So, it couldn’t leave people in a theoretical level of, “Here is feminism and here is therapy – now mix them together.” You are not going to get anything from that. So, with that in mind – and it had to be taken very seriously – it also had to break into, because I was writing in an era where White women were far too often taken as a norm; it had to take seriously that it couldn’t be done. So, those were kinds of the agendas. My mentors were still doing it and it was kind of difficult. So, with that in mind I just simply started writing chapters and every time I got into an area... Now as someone who wanted to prioritize violence against women it became very clear – the problems. Eating had to be a chapter, and working with psychiatrized women had to be a chapter. So, it also became a way for me to work with feminism and what role it played in writing the book.

In some of the stuff, people were so generous to me in their response. If I look at some of the stuff I said now, it is kind of embarrassing. So, I would talk about the culture in India, when there is a few hundred cultures in India, for instance. So, this is really embarrassing except it took me five years to write it and when I was writing it was the 1980s, but I continued writing it until I finished it and went for a publisher. For a while I wasn’t finding anyone and then at one point when I sent something to Sage they got in touch with me and said, “If someone has given you another offer, please hold on to it because we will bid against them.” So, I knew I was in an interesting position and I knew this was going to happen. I also knew Sage was a very respectable publisher. I hadn’t even considered them, I had other lists and they were in my third list of places to look. But, once I started looking into them they were a great publisher and I loved it.

AR – One of the ways that we hope these videos will be useful is for students who maybe will be using your book and to give them a sense of the behind the scenes story in a way. So, for the purpose of the tape even though people can read your book, can you give us some examples of how you tried to take theory and your values and translated it into what feminist therapists should do?

BB – Well, for instance in various sections, I would invent scenarios; saying a person is cutting and has no awareness of cutting and here’s what you might do about that. Having done lots of years of workshops were really helpful because in some cases I took scenarios right out of things that I already used and taught. So, there were very practical suggestions on a nitty-gritty level. I was particularly concerned that people would have some ideas what to do, not generally, but in the very issues where they were likely to lose their principles because they didn’t know what to

do. So, I particularly wanted to give very concrete ideas of how to understand the situations and how to deal with them. I particularly wanted to zero in on people, specifically women, where people would throw up their hands. I did a chapter on women considering ending their lives and I really needed to understand why this wasn't an acceptable position and what we can and can't do ethically. What would be helpful given what ethics was and very much of course distinguishing what is a real ethics to professional ethics which would have a certain limit. My sense was without that people get scared, they are doing the wrong thing and they think they better call the hospital or call the police. So, I gave a lot of practical ideas of what to do but I particularly wanted to give them in places where I knew this is where everyone slips up.

One of the areas that I did quite a bit in was women living in altered realities, because people don't know what to do and then they want to call someone who can really work with them. So, how does one work with altered realities? How does one help somebody who is about to do things that are going to get them locked up? What can you say to them and in which ways can you intervene? So, to me this became very concrete in wiring and yet all of it was based on philosophic stances that were articulated. So, holding those two together became very important.

AR – Have you had experiences in your own work with clients where you have felt you have got no place or you didn't know what to do?

BB – I have gotten to a place, not where I didn't know what to do, but I couldn't do it. I had one client I was working with – and in all honesty I have to give myself credit because everybody else had lasted with her maybe two sessions and I lasted five years. I gave myself a goal: no matter how abusive she was toward me I wasn't going to give up on her and I got to a place where she had just gotten to me, where I was dreading the sessions. Of course I knew what I had to do. I had to stop working with her. It wasn't like I didn't know, but it is like I couldn't bring myself. So, I don't think I've ever been in a situation where I was stymied, it is just like I have been in a situation where, psychologically, I didn't know how to get myself to positions and to do what I knew should be done.

AR – Any times when your feminist drives were at odds with what you thought the person needed?

BB – I can't see if there have been. I want to take that back – the answer to the previous question. There have been times when I haven't known what to do. There haven't been often, but there have been exactly predictably where there might be. When I've had people whose altered realities are getting them in incredible trouble and my interventions to reframe those haven't worked. Now usually they work enough in a better situation, but occasionally they haven't worked at all. I am aware that what somebody else would do is try to get them locked up so that they didn't end up in the worse trouble, which I never did, but I did end up feeling that there is nothing I can do that I am comfortable with you and that certainly is a place of being stymied.

AR – Yeah, definitely. In reflecting now on the contemporary state of affairs in feminist therapy –what is your assessment of where we are at?

BB – You know I don't really know where we are at. I talk less to feminist therapists than almost anybody else in the world because I mainly talk to scholars and activists, so I don't know. Occasionally I bump into feminist therapists on listservs and I don't like what they are saying.

AR – What is it that you don't like?

BB – I don't feel like they live in a real world, so I don't know how to address them. I think there are some good feminist therapists out there. So let me be clear, I don't want to act as if I am not saying that. If I had a choice between talking to a lawyer and talking to a feminist therapist, I would choose the lawyer.

AR – Because they are more in the real world?

BB – They are more in the real world and they are more logical and I can have a better conversation and that shouldn't have to be so. I am not saying lawyers are not professionalized but somehow that hasn't stopped them from thinking. I do feel that in helping/healthcare type professionals, it has stymied thought. The first year I taught trauma at OISE, I introduced a trauma course here, everybody in the class was feminist. But, the people who identified as feminists like people who said this is what they stand for were the most apolitical people. Now, to me that was telling me something. They dodged an anti-racist analysis and what that would mean and they didn't want to change the way they practiced in order to be really anti-racist. So, something about feminism has gotten too comfortably mainstreamed.

AR – Well there is this whole, or at least through feedback I've gotten back from students who are activists at heart and then come to the academy and expect to find some outlook for that and gravitate towards feminist programs or women studies thinking they are going to get activism but the feedback I've gotten is that it isn't happening.

BB – It isn't happening in many places. It is among some of my colleagues in OISE, but it is not true at York and it is not true in other places, at U of T [University of Toronto]. Like when Julia Sudbury, who was in social work, it was very much true because there was a whole space where feminism and anti-racist feminism were very vital, thoughtful and intelligent. We were always in danger of co-opting the feminist movements as academics and as helping professionals.

AR – I am trying to be a bit aware of time, maybe I have five more minutes or so.

BB – I am sorry, sure! I try not to take you off track.

AR – Oh no, this has been great, but one way to kind of cut to the chase here is – is there anything that I haven't asked you about your life, career, anything that we have talked about and anything that we haven't talked about that you would like to mention?

BB – I can't think of anything. It is a hard question.

AR – Ok then, let me look at my questions, because I haven't really looked at my usual

questions, if I can find anything to ask you now. Let me see if there is any one of our general themes that I have totally missed.

BB – Feel free to ask any questions.

AR – One of the things that I haven't asked you about, that I usually ask, is personal experiences of discrimination as a woman, as a feminist, as an anarchist, or whatever aspect of your identity.

BB – Again, discrimination is a liberal term. I am aware, as a woman, I am oppressed and I see it in places and we can see this everywhere we go. If we have our eyes open we are going to notice that if a man said the same thing or did the same thing they would be responded to differently. I am teaching at OISE, as a senior lecturer. They could get me because I didn't want to leave U of T, I didn't want to leave Toronto. But I don't think this would have happened to a male faculty person and I think I would have become a professor a long time ago. So, I do think that has something to do with gender. Now, I am not suffering. I am having a very good life and I am very happy to be here. I have a very good job. But, is this is discrimination? Yes, I think it is. Personally, none of us can grow up in this world without being violated as women. On a very simple level, yes, I am a childhood sexual abuse survivor. So all of these things I know firsthand. We have had to live with them and they become very real things and not simply something we read in books.

AR – So, you see your experiences and you can place yourself within a category – “category” is a bad word – as a formation – you are a member of that group and therefore...

BB – I am a member of this group and I am a woman living in the world. I am a woman who was sexually abused and I had to cope with it as a child and I was a woman who things happen to. I quit school at 12 years old because I hate anti-Semitism. So, I've lived in an oppressive universe and I coped the way I coped. In many ways I was very lucky because I didn't go back for a year and a half. If that happened to most people they would have kind of taken away by Children's Aid or something. I got off reasonably well given what might have happened. I am well aware – and I think this helped me – that one of the reasons I did is that we lied to professionals. When I moved from Ottawa where I quit school to Churchill, Manitoba, where I went back to school, I couldn't imagine going back to grade seven because I would have been older than everybody else so I went to grade nine and we just lied to them. I think that helped me to become an anarchist later on – the knowledge that the system is not in your interest. I also come from the working class and I think that the working class knew that. My grandparents were peasants and I think they knew that in a way the middle class did not know it. And I think that helped me to become who I was as a human being. I began with that knowledge of what these systems get you. My father was a psychiatric survivor, a shock survivor, so I came by a lot naturally and it played an enormous havoc in his life. It played an enormous havoc in our family. So, a lot of this stuff was a lot more at the grain than what I've read in books, which were in many cases transparently wrong.

AR – Right. Let me finish with this question then. I want to ask you about your novel.

BB – Which one? The one that I have now or the one that I published a few years ago?

AR – Well, let's hear from both of them.

BB – All right. So, the first novel, the one I published and with no doubt would be the better one of the two novels, was called, "The House on Lippincott." It is about a family, narrated by the middle daughter. There are three daughters and the parents are Holocaust survivors. Originally I was going to write a book about second generation trauma and then I asked myself who would read such a book and I said all the known suspects – the Holocaust buffs, the trauma literature people. I want to get to average human being so that is why I've decided to write a novel. Also, I have an English background that kind of pleases me to actually write a novel because I wanted to do that since my twenties. So, it has been a desire to make a real and body forth something in a non-theoretical way that would make it accessible to people and make it accessible to people beyond students, academia, which is a very limited world even though we sometimes forget that.

My second novel is a much harder novel to write because the narrator is brain damaged because she has been electro-shocked. So, there is no question this comes out of my scholarship, activism, and commitments. So, here is somebody who is writing a novel about her life who has been electro-shocked and can't remember most of the time what she is trying to write about because about twelve years, her life is totally obliterated. She comes to a hospital not being sure what species she is – she is at that very basic reality. So, you could see that it causes problem because it is not your ideal narrator who is on top of this.

AR – Wow! That is fascinating!

BB – So, there is no question that whether we call it psychologist or therapist or what – that person is writing a novel in the sense that I am writing it out of psychological knowledge and out of social justice framework.

AR – But from a different perspective?

BB – From a very different perspective from inside the head of a person in difficulty. In each of my novels there ends up being a huge cast of characters and in this one way more so. In my first novel there is a tight family, there is the farm family. They are very identifiable, but in this case the woman who is the narrator, Naomi, has a break with her family. As a Jew she married a Catholic from a different land and so there were two families. There was even more than that because you had the first wife then children, but the first wife is none of which she remembers. So, it becomes a complex novel with many characters in it including a very important transsexual man who is the first partner of this woman, of this man, the woman as narrator, is married to. So, it is a very complicated novel.

AR – Wow! Indeed!

BB – It has not been the same high source of enjoyment, but it was so hard and seems so impossible that by a year and two I said I was going to give it up. I just could not do this novel

and I couldn't make the novel that everybody could read because it was such a miserable situation she was in. I talked to some friends who are electro-shock survivors and they said, "Bonnie do not give up on this novel. No one else is going to write this novel." So that is how I ended up with this novel and I am continuing along with eventually operating it out.

AR – Ok, good, good! Ok, let me stop there because we are running out of time.

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