Tanya Domi: Hi, this is Tanya Domi. Welcome to the Thought Project recorded at The Graduate Center of the City University of New York, fostering groundbreaking research and scholarship in the arts, social sciences and sciences. In this space, we talk with faculty and doctoral students about the big thinking and big ideas generating cutting edge research informing New Yorkers and the world.

Tanya Domi: This week's guest is Dr. Susan Opotow of John Jay College of Criminal Justice and The Graduate Center at CUNY. She is a core faculty member of the sociology department at John Jay and a doctoral faculty member in the psychology program at The Graduate Center. A social psychologist, her research examines the psychology of justice, conflict, exclusion and inclusion.

Tanya Domi: Dr. Opotow, along with eight of her doctoral students, researched the 9/11 attack on America, publishing New York After 9/11, Fordham Press 2018. As New York City and America approaches the 18th anniversary of the shocking events that took place on that beautiful crystal clear morning in New York City, this history has now become memory, as the book points out. Opotow will share what she and her student discovered in the years since that fateful day on September 11th, 2001.

Tanya Domi: Welcome to the Thought Project, Dr. Opotow. Thank you for being here today.

Susan Opotow: Thank you for inviting me.

Tanya Domi: We're going to be talking about 9/11. I think one of the first questions that people always ask one another is where were you on 9/11? What do you remember from that fateful day?

Susan Opotow: Yeah, that's a very grounding moment, isn't it, when the world shifted. I was in Boston and arguably I might have been in the buildings that the planes headed for the World Trade Tower flew over on route here at the University of Massachusetts Boston Campus where I was working.

Tanya Domi: Right. I know they took off in Logan. Right?

Susan Opotow: The flight pattern seemed to have gone right over campus. A colleague was slated to meet with me that day and he called me and he said, "I'm not going to meet you today." He said, "There has been a plane crash in New York." I didn't have many details, but I thought it was odd not to come to a Boston meeting for New York crash, but he was actually right. Boston shut down, my campus shut down and everything seemed to shut down there. I've only found out what had happened when I called my husband. I was able to call in. Apparently, he couldn't have called out. They changed the balance, so people can become reassured when they reached people they worry about.

Tanya Domi: Right. He was in New York City, right?
Susan Opotow: He was in New York and he had no idea. So he turned on the TV and he said, "It's the World Trade tower," and the two of us freaked out. We had a sense of the cataclysm that was unfolding and it was before the buildings dropped.

Tanya Domi: Right.

Susan Opotow: So, it was a really very, very painful day.

Tanya Domi: It certainly was. I mean this part of this podcast is, we talk about our own experiences and how they informed the conversation. But I was actually in graduate school at Columbia University and got off at the 116th Street Station and walked across campus. But when I got off there was a sign in the station and it was hand written and it said, "All trains will be slow today." I have never seen that sign before or since. I walked across the campus having no idea what was transpiring in the skies above us and walked into the ground floor of the School of International Public Affairs and I could see the student lounge where people were standing, like 300 people, standing shoulder to shoulder.

Tanya Domi: I walked in and I was like, "What is going on?" A colleague of mine turned to me and said, "A plane has hit the World Trade Center." I looked at him and I said immediately, "That's terrorism." I was standing there watching, all of us were watching when at 9:59 AM when the South Tower collapsed and there was an audible scream that I will never forget on that day.

Susan Opotow: Yeah.

Tanya Domi: When you think back about it, it seems like it's so present in my memory all those images that day, listening to the Today Show staying on air. They were reporting it live. It's hard to believe it's the 18th anniversary of that tragic and shocking day.

Tanya Domi: You have published a book, New York After 9/11 published by Fordham Press last year. On the first page of the introduction you write that quote, "Our memories have become history. This may seem obvious to people or not, but that memory is a powerful insight that informs not only our day-to-day life, but our attitudes, the formation of policy, our relationships and worldview." How did you and your students use your own memories to inform the writing of the book and what did you find out about people's memories of that day?

Susan Opotow: There are two waves of students. The first wave of students were the students that I worked with to code the material that we studied to understand what would happen afterwards. I was at that time a professor in a dispute resolution program. We were all master students, very interested in conflict and its sequela. I just knew as a justice and conflict scholar that something was going to happen afterwards and I didn't know what. And so I started at that point archiving articles on New York after 9/11.
Susan Opotow: I have a tremendous loyalty to New York. I was born here. I was raised here. It's my home and I wanted to see what New York would do, how it would respond, how it would recover, having no idea of what would come up in the news. So those were the students who worked on sorting through these articles that were coming through very, very, very quickly at first.

Tanya Domi: Right.

Susan Opotow: There would be whole sections on New York. Yeah, it could have been a whole newspaper on New York after 9/11 and that happened for quite a long time. The news cycle is so quick.

Tanya Domi: Right.

Susan Opotow: A week later we barely remember what happened the week before because there is something new to replace it. But this stayed and stayed. I collected articles on the New York experience for five years because it took that long to recede from a-

Tanya Domi: I know.

Susan Opotow: ... from a real presence in the newspaper. I mean obviously other things happened.

Tanya Domi: Right. A front and leading presence, right?

Susan Opotow: Yeah.

Tanya Domi: And of course we'll never forget all those New York Times editions with the head shots and the personal stories. They had it on the web and they also had it in the paper. It was very powerful.

Susan Opotow: It was very powerful. Now, as you say, it was 18 years ago and so young people and even in their early twenties don't have personal memories if they were very young, so we're talking about most college students now.

Tanya Domi: Right.

Susan Opotow: Then the museum was built and there have been books on it. The memory is starting to become other people's memories. It's history. I wanted to capture the memories of people who were movers and shakers in the years after, not in that they were famous and that they were in the news a little bit, that's not true of all the authors, some are famous. But just to find out the people who were working on New York's recovery based on the data we had from the newspaper, what, how did, what did they do, what did they experience? How did they help New York rebuild? What was the process?

Opotow Interview Final 08-14-19_mixdown (Completed 10/10/19)
Transcript by Rev.com
Susan Opotow: We chose areas that were very prominent in the news. Everybody I speak to has other areas because of people who remember it as you do, remember certain things. But I just used the bedrock spine of the articles in the New York Times to our in of one a sense, one city, one newspaper, but to just see what the narratives were that were dominant and just follow those in the book, so the book is written by those people who played those roles at the time.

Tanya Domi: What were the narratives? Can you give us a trend on those narratives? How would you describe them?

Susan Opotow: Well, there so many spheres in society. There is the political, the legal.

Tanya Domi: The people on Wall Street or the financiers in the World Trade Center that died, the story of the security director of the building and had been in the FBI and had tracked Osama Bin Laden for like 20 years.

Susan Opotow: There are so many stories of individual heroes. The guy with a red bandana who helped people out and perished as well.

Tanya Domi: Yes.

Susan Opotow: I think those stories are being told in books and movies. I was interested in the more collective aspect of it. How did people come together to bring New York to where it needed to be? I'm not saying back because we didn't go back, we went forward. Right?

Tanya Domi: Right, right.

Susan Opotow: But we went forward from trauma to rebuilding, which is a very difficult process and rebuilding psychologically, physically in many ways. Lower Manhattan suffered the most. 94% of the people who died on 9/11 were from Lower Manhattan, or in Lower Manhattan at the time. But the whole city was in some ways in shock. There is not really six degrees of separation here. People know each other and they know people who know people and many people lost folks in this.

Tanya Domi: It's true, it's true. Also, the facts are very interesting is that the victims ranged from two years old to 85 years and approximately 75 to 80% of the victims were men. I thought that was also interesting.

Susan Opotow: Wow.

Tanya Domi: At the Pentagon, 184 people were killed and in total 2,753 people were killed at the World Trade Center when two planes crashed. It was Flight 11 and Flight 175. I actually have met people that were on one side away from one of the towers and actually saw the plane go right through the building. He was in his
law firm sitting in a conference room and literally saw the plane go through the building. I mean, we're going to talk about health issues later, but certainly the psychology of that event. The purpose of it was terror obviously.

Tanya Domi: What's so remarkable is that in my research about your book, I discovered that the compensation fund did not provide for psychological treatment, which is just unbelievable. I wonder if that's been included in the most recent infusion of money?

Susan Opotow: I don't think so, and I don't think it was added. It was part of the deal, and to get compensation at all was a huge fight for anything.

Tanya Domi: Right, right.

Susan Opotow: In the book, the doctors who were involved in the health of people afterwards mentioned it. Mental health was one of the biggest issues after. As you say, your friend was traumatized. Children saw the video of the planes crashing in-

Tanya Domi: Playing over and over.

Susan Opotow: ... over and over. We're all traumatized. There was a low flying plane in recent memory and people were nervous during a small earthquake. We are jumpy.

Tanya Domi: Right, of course.

Susan Opotow: That's not pathology. It's a kind of a PTSD that we all carry in our bodies.

Tanya Domi: It's just really remarkable given all that we know about psychology and trauma that, that wasn't included. You decided to code, archive and look at these New York Times stories to access the stories of everyday New Yorkers. That's pretty remarkable, five years of going through the New York Times.

Susan Opotow: Yeah.

Tanya Domi: It would seem to me that there is probably a political perspective that we've heard about over the years. I think one of the biggest was that maybe Rudy Giuliani probably did his best work in the immediate aftermath of the events, ordered police on all mosques in the city and said, "That's not who we are. We're all New Yorkers together," and even George Bush embraced that point of view. In retrospect, that seems to be that was the blip in time because later on we've now come to know about the Muslim ban and the rise of Islam phobia in the United States and actually around the world probably in post 9/11.

Susan Opotow: Yeah, there was in us in a moment of [convivencia 00:14:29] and we all came together.
Tanya Domi: Right.

Susan Opotow: People were rightly proud of that. People were very, very generous in helping each other and in ministering to the city. Some people, quite a few at this point, more than 2,000 have lost their lives because of the work that they did after. But I have to say that some of that convivencia initially wasn't extended throughout the country.

Susan Opotow: There was the question of the Ground Zero Mosque Park 51, which wasn't a mosque and it wasn't at Ground Zero, but there was a lot of rancor about that. I think it was 2010. I could double check that. A lot of the people who opposed it were actually from further from the Ground Zero than the ones who approved it. Mayor Bloomberg was steadfast about this. That this is a local zoning issue. It's so interesting what becomes sacred and hallowed ground because this was the street with the off track betting. It had bars. I mean it wasn't a religious site, but Islamophobia was a big problem. I mean on a one-to-one basis I saw someone get out of a car, walk up to a Sikh taxi driver and punch him in the face.

Tanya Domi: Right.

Susan Opotow: Then there was of course the surveillance of the Muslim student associations in CUNY and how dampening that is to the students to not know when they're within their own space-

Tanya Domi: Right.

Susan Opotow: ... who to trust, who not to trust. It's hard to grow and develop when you're in an environment where you're under surveillance and you don't know who's watching you and what you can wear and what you can do.

Tanya Domi: Right.

Susan Opotow: So it was very unfortunate.

Tanya Domi: Yeah, and reports did come out that NYPD was surveilling.

Susan Opotow: Yeah.

Tanya Domi: I know that involved the CUNY students and I remember being at Columbia at the time and people were saying, "Well are they looking at NYU? Are they looking at Columbia? You know, what's going on here?" But it does make sense, does it not, when you're talking about hallowed ground? I mean it literally was a graveyard.

Susan Opotow: Yes. But where does it stop is the question?
Tanya Domi: Right.

Susan Opotow: Is it a few blocks away?

Tanya Domi: Right.

Susan Opotow: Is that part of it or what is and what isn't? The question of what's hallowed and what that means is really interesting. I mean it's a justice question and one of our students here and I have written about that.

Tanya Domi: When you start talking about memory as history and people have lost loved ones there that is going to be extremely emotional and it's no surprise is it not that rebuilding Ground Zero was inevitably going to be controversial?

Susan Opotow: Totally.

Tanya Domi: I mean, and so it went through from Giuliani to Bloomberg. When you think about the location and building the 9/11 Memorial and the 9/11 Museum has also been extremely controversial. In the book, you apply a psychoanalysis approach of recovering and rebuilding the city. One of the co-authors and architect for the memory foundations, I was really surprised was that you invited Daniel Libeskind to help contribute in the book and he was the architect and had gotten international renowned for his work on the memorial in Berlin with respect to the parish of Jews during the Holocaust. I was really taken with part of his writing in the chapter that he contributed. He said, he wrote rather, "You can never say that some part of history is finished. Histories are interlinked. Memory and the future are also interlinked."

Tanya Domi: What did you learn using this framework that juxtaposed... I thought it was also interesting that you had two co-authors write a chapter that juxtaposed New York city post 9/11 with an analysis of Hiroshima, Japan, which was bombed during World War II with the first atom bomb ever used in warfare? That was very interesting.

Susan Opotow: Yeah. August 6th, so we recently just [crosstalk 00:19:04] passed that date.

Tanya Domi: Yeah, 1945.

Susan Opotow: It's a wonderful chapter because it puts everything in a broader perspective and the process of the memorial. We have two chapters in the book, one by Daniel Libeskind who did the master plan for Ground Zero.

Tanya Domi: Right.
Susan Opotow: And also Michael Arad who did the Memorial Plaza, which includes the amazing sculptures, the fountains, and now a new one, a new memorial that just opened in May to the people who died after 9/11, not on the day, so that's another.

Tanya Domi: Right. That's an addition to the original.

Susan Opotow: Right. He mentions it in his chapter that it was a work in progress at that time. What [Menome 00:19:47] and Dave is right about is that whole process it's very controversial. There was the epitaph and, I'll just read you what it says because it's very brief. The epitaph says, "The era shall not be repeated." It's a vow. "That to let this all souls here rest in peace for we shall not repeat the evil," but that's English. But the Japanese leaves out the subject, so it's not clear who should not repeat.

Tanya Domi: Interesting.

Susan Opotow: And who it's to. There was as much controversy about that as there was about Ground Zero. But what they argue is that, that controversy is itself the process of working through the past. That it's a way of collectively, when personal memories give way to collective memories, you have you do something with it.

Tanya Domi: Right.

Susan Opotow: Then you're going to have this controversy. That those issues arise and you can deal with it. No matter how difficult it is, you're dealing with something very concrete. So their chapter talks about that conflict not as an unpleasantness or evil by part or product of dah, dah, dah. But they talk about it as a healing, if difficult process. They also note that it's 74 years afterwards.

Tanya Domi: Right.

Susan Opotow: So it takes a long time because there's... It's still, everything is still amazingly fluid in terms of is this the right memorial, is this what we need?

Tanya Domi: Yeah. I think there is also intergenerational narratives that get generated.

Susan Opotow: Yes.

Tanya Domi: I mean you see that for example, in Bosnia at the Potocari Memorial where over 7,000 men and boys, Muslim men and boys are married... buried. It's not been that long. It's only been 25 years.

Susan Opotow: Yeah.

Tanya Domi: So they've got a little bit more time on us than 9/11. But nonetheless, one of the things that you did say to me is that most New Yorkers haven't gone to the
memorial and that would include me. I have not gone and nor do I want to go any day. I guess I'm really not psychologically ready to deal with it, and that's very interesting.

Susan Opotow: I think a lot have been to the memorial, the fountains, which you may not have, but most people I know have seen them. They opened around 2011.

Tanya Domi: Right. That was 10 years after.

Susan Opotow: 10 years after.

Tanya Domi: Right.

Susan Opotow: It was very well received and it's a very healing place to be. Although it's also very sad because you have the names around.

Tanya Domi: Right.

Susan Opotow: The way that Arad described so beautifully how he did that in this chapter by meaningful adjacency. But you see people who are at a particular spot because it has a particular meaning to them because of somebody they knew was lost there. But the museum itself is an interesting experience. It's underground. It goes down 70 feet to bedrock, which is where the towers are ground. That it's on the site of the buildings and these are buildings people died in, people jumped from.

Tanya Domi: Right.

Susan Opotow: The buildings themselves have tremendous amount of pain associated with them and the way that the museum is organized into a memorial exhibition, a historical exhibition and then a large hall that holds the slurry wall is very, very interesting. But it's very, very deep emotionally. I think it's hard for people. The Foundation Hall doesn't have many artifacts. But it does have a lot of benches situated in it, and the last column and people sit there. They just sit in that space. It's a little bit like going to a cathedral because the ceiling is so high. Some people may never be ready to go and a lot of people have said to me, "I've lived through it. I'm not going there." But not everybody in the world lived through it on a first hand basis.

Tanya Domi: Right.

Susan Opotow: Then younger people who go for them it's history.

Tanya Domi: Right, right. A colleague of mine from Bosnia who works on genocide actually went and asked me to go with her and I was like, "I can't. I wish you well."
Tanya Domi: I would also say that the thing that Libeskind says that I'm really moved by is that when he talks about memory and the future are also interlinked and that what the master plan was all about, it was about how to bring the affirmation of life to life, the affirmation of what we stand for as New Yorkers, as Americans and as a free people around the world. It was about how to take that memory of this tragic event that murdered Americans as well as people from many, many countries. It was about how to use the space in a way that is sensitive, that is significantly civic, that it was also a space that works for the future of New York. I've seen the video of the fountains. I really haven't seen the fountains either.

Susan Opotow: [crosstalk 00:00:25:08], they're beautiful.

Tanya Domi: I haven't gone. Maybe I'll see the fountains. I would definitely not want to go underground. But I do think that there is this idea of what New York is to the world and when the World Trade Center was attacked, I've worked around the world and have many friends in various countries around the world, and people reached out to me very quickly and people were very upset.

Tanya Domi: So many people who have come to New York have seen the Statue of Liberty, know all about New York city, how diverse it is and embracing with all of our problems and shortcomings. But nonetheless, it does, I think represent the epitome of what the United States is to the world. Maybe not to the rest of the country, but certainly to the world and what we represent here. And so I think everybody felt it. I mean, everybody felt it. I can understand why people that come to the city want to go to the memorial. I understand that.

Tanya Domi: How are your students affected by this that worked on it and that actually contributed chapters? I mean, it must have been fairly powerful for them.

Susan Opotow: Yeah. We'll go back to the students who coded it.

Tanya Domi: Sure.

Susan Opotow: Coding it was so emotionally difficult.

Tanya Domi: Well, that's true too.

Susan Opotow: It was in the aftermath and they would be reading these articles and they'd say, "I couldn't stop crying."

Tanya Domi: Right.

Susan Opotow: The articles were very beautiful. They were beautiful journalism. They captured people, place, everything. I owed a great debt to them. We would discuss and discuss the articles and it was really a very powerful experience. There are a number of students in our program who co-wrote chapters and they did such a
beautiful job of delving into not only what happened and with clarity, but also what it meant. Their contributions to each of the chapters that they participated is really wonderful to see. They were willing to take this leap into... Some were not from New York, some were not here at the time.

Tanya Domi: Right.

Susan Opotow: But to understand this as part of the fabric of the city that they live in now, to understand that it's deeply social psychological at its core that everybody underwent something and we all did together.

Tanya Domi: Right, right.

Susan Opotow: And just so to be part of that. I was just extremely impressed by their work. They co-authored several of the chapters in the book on Hiroshima, on health, on the conflict and change and on the writing, and on the museum, on the building at the museum. All the chapters in the book are wonderful I have to say, but it was very special to have our own students from CUNY work on it.

Tanya Domi: For sure. I would just say also about the health impact. I mean you have a really excellent chapter on the health effects. It's absolutely remarkable to me that it was just last month that the Senate finally added-

Susan Opotow: Oh my God.

Tanya Domi: ... billions of dollars to the fast dwindling compensation fund for 9/11 workers and first responders. I mean it was championed in this round by former Daily Show host, Jon Stewart. This infusion of money is really supposed to extend the compensation fund for decades. I would be remiss if I didn't mention then US Senator Hillary Clinton who was a great champion. I mean she got the first iteration passed, and then Senator Kirsten Gillibrand followed and also got the second tranch, I believe and so really true public service.

Susan Opotow: And Senator Schumer.

Tanya Domi: And Schumer too, yes.

Susan Opotow: Yeah. The health people said our legislative delegation was fantastic.

Tanya Domi: Right.

Susan Opotow: They really had everyone's back and it's been important. I mean you have so many ill people. There are now 80,000 more than 80,000 people in the health program [inaudible 00:29:37] World Trade Center Health Program because many people came from other parts of the country.
Tanya Domi: Oh, right.

Susan Opotow: There were people injured also in Washington and Pennsylvania.

Tanya Domi: That's right. People that came in to help from other cities, right.

Susan Opotow: The problem was that people weren't operating as if they were at a toxic site as much as at a site of human disaster.

Tanya Domi: Right.

Susan Opotow: So they were exposed more than obviously was ideal. And so are no suffering with various illness. John Stewart for taking this up has made it a high profile issue even though it should have been with-

Tanya Domi: It should have been anyway.

Susan Opotow: ... anyway. But he's really been, I think a real friend to that cause and those folks and it's much appreciated.

Tanya Domi: Oh, for sure. It says an awful lot about the politics of destruction because the Republicans blocked this additional funding for so many years.

Susan Opotow: Yes.

Tanya Domi: I would also say, I think one of the sad legacies of this is the continuing Islamophobia that exists. There was a thread that came out of it and it just, I think it just got pulled and unraveled and it was out pictured with the development, the establishment of the Department of Homeland Security, which is now being used against immigrants and people trying to legally apply for asylum in our country right now. And then of course you have the current president who initiated and successfully established a Islamic ban in several countries, so this is very alive and present. It's truly, truly despicable from my point of view.

Susan Opotow: Yeah, yeah. This is an example of the after effects of the attack. Most disasters are studied for years, very few for this 18 year period, but it's now 18, so that's 17 years that the chapters cover a very large time. That's a very important thing because the changes occur.

Tanya Domi: That's true.

Susan Opotow: First, they're right on the front and center, but then they are still happening.

Tanya Domi: Right.
Susan Opotow: They're still happening in multiple ways, so this is a great example of how something has become normalized in our society, and is really a terrible dynamic that infuses all levels in some ways.

Tanya Domi: Yes. I mean there has been attempts to, since that time when the Congress gave then President Bush the authority to initiate attacks that were directly connected to the Al Qaeda attack on the United States, and that has been really expanded in used and justified in ways that are regrettable and not appropriate. I don't know when we're going to get out of that because of the current politics.

Susan Opotow: Right.

Tanya Domi: I mean this is a tremendous contribution to the academy and the documentation, which I think is so important and maybe it's useful to a lot of people who not only work in New York City, but deal with trauma and disaster with such an unbelievable event.

Tanya Domi: For those of us who are older, I can remember when John Kennedy was assassinated and Robert Kennedy and MLK and I would put 9/11 right up there. But for me, it was even more grave in that I knew immediately as someone who has served in the military and worked on security issues that the minute those planes hit the tower that we were going to war, and that's exactly what I said to my colleague in the [CIPA 00:33:44] Student Lounge, "We are going to war."

Tanya Domi: It's unfortunate as John Walter refers to just war that, that war wasn't initiated against Afghanistan, but they went into Iraq, the great folly of the, one of the outcomes of 9/11.

Susan Opotow: Afterwards, there were many things that happened that didn't have to happen. It would been hard enough without all the things that we chose to do.

Tanya Domi: Right.

Susan Opotow: Like surveil youth and not have enough protection against toxic [inaudible] and going to war. I mean, they are all things that we could have avoided and it would've... the longterm effects would have been much...

Tanya Domi: True. But props to you and your students. This book, I think is really useful. It has a good understanding and overview because of, again, the period of time in which you studied.

Susan Opotow: Thank you.

Tanya Domi: So I congratulate you, Dr. Opotow.
Susan Opotow: I want to thank the authors who did a fantastic job in their chapters. It wouldn't be a very incisive book without their wisdom.

Tanya Domi: No.

Susan Opotow: So thank you so much for inviting me to speak with you today.

Tanya Domi: Thanks for tuning into the Thought Project and thanks to today's guest, Professor Susan Opotow of John Jay College and The Graduate Center at CUNY.

Tanya Domi: The Thought Project is brought to you with production, engineering and technical assistance by Sarah Fishman. I'm Tanya Domi. Tune in next week.