

GAIE HOUSTON interviewed
by **NEIL HARRIS** for the
British Gestalt Journal Vol. 8.
No.2 1999

NH *How did you come to be interested in Gestalt?*

GH I came as I suppose most people come - quite sideways to Gestalt. I really came first from learning about group behaviour with a National Training Laboratories group.

NH *I am intrigued how you came to be there in the first place.*

GH I was on a 'residential lab' as they called it. I was very excited and moved by the event. One of the psychiatrists who was leading it said to me afterwards that I was a natural for that sort of work. I really hadn't thought of doing it until he said it. I was just thinking that this was an amazing event. So he made me think in terms of possible experience and training in psychotherapy.

I came back and started doing bits of stuff at Quaesitor and the Tavistock, a Leicester experience and these sorts of courses. Then there was something at North London Poly called the diploma in behavioural science. I have talked about this elsewhere. It was a very innovative and rather revolutionary thing where they got the students to make the academic submission and to design the curriculum. It was a very flawed notion and a very exciting one and one of the results was that we really got over-extended into the work.

When we went away on some residential event and were driving along after it I had one of these peculiar experiences which I suppose lasts about four seconds, and is outside the use of words. I suppose I can try to convey it in words but it is diminished by that. It was as if I became aware of an extraordinary process which was like the whole of myself, whatever that is, like a kind of black dough, very slowly and inexorably turning and then what came up on top of it, out of everything, out of everything that was in there - and everything was in there, from race history to tonight's supper - out of that complex of material came "I want" at the top.

Shortly afterwards I read something about Gestalt and thought that gestalt was groping to put into some kind of system what I had experienced, something that really had happened to me in this peculiar moment. "I want" was the foreground, organismic decision I had perceived for once in awareness. So that gave me a kind of faith that this Gestalt description of perceptual processes was a good one. I was enthusiastic about it and wanted to work with it.

That was what really brought me into Gestalt and I added bits in the States and over here with Ischa Bloomberg. That's how I got into the field and I always had a strong interest in synthesising the various psychologies of groups and how to integrate this with Gestalt Therapy which was then to my eye highly individualistic. That in a way leads me to quite contradictory theoretical underpinnings. Mike

Crow, a family therapist at the Institute of Psychiatry says that in his sort of family therapy they very much stress the responsibility of the individual and then they also look at how the family brings about the individual's behaviour. He says this is contradictory but it works! That has supported my confidence in saying, "Let's not always be too pure about having a consistent theory underpinning what we do". Everyday life is for most people most of the time rationalised or supported by myriad contradictory theories.

NH *So it's OK to be consistently inconsistent?*

GH I don't want to put that as a main tenet of what I do but it's interesting me particularly at the moment. With Maja O'Brien I'm writing a book on an integration of psychotherapeutic theories, and a training therefore, which sets out not to be just another brand of psychotherapy called integrated, but really honestly to integrate what are the commonalities and to look at what are the differences between the models and to look at how people idiosyncratically can put those together and work in a way which is effective and consistent.

NH *I wonder what it was like for you to live with the tension that I know can exist when stepping between models, for example stepping between the Tavistock and gestalt and other radical movements and how you lived with that at the time?*

GH It was a great excitement and I don't think I was outraged

at the differences between the things so much as some bits within the different things. For example, on a Leicester experience, part of the process is that somebody comes in and announces an institution event. The point is that you should get to know the staff. The staff then disappear into a room and the most junior member of staff is a sort of guard on the door. You can go and visit that room by being an observer which means you just sit there and see what is going on, or you can be an envoy of a group you had to form and they could send you with tasks such as finding out, or you could be given ambassadorial powers by your group and decide what you want to do. Of course the forming of the sub groups is the main occupation. I decided that as, at that time, I worked totally freelance it was inappropriate for me to be in a group. They didn't like this. They wouldn't wear that, very properly.

Lying awake that night I worked out something very exciting about authority and what authority is. It was a very odd arrangement that we had paid money for them to teach us something and they then took on the role of an authority. So who was to say where the authority was? I thought that they had set rules about observers and so on but that I could set rules too. In this room the staff took turns reporting their stream of consciousness which in Gestalt would be termed their phenomenological process. They did it very purely and I had great respect listening to it. It was totally believable - the grumbles and the frustrations that were going on.

I had been in as observer and they couldn't stop me doing this, and so I went back the next day and began to make interpretations about the staff from where I was sitting. I made observations about what was happening and they began to get cross and the director got very angry and I went on interpreting. I got more and more frightened and in the end the director leant over the table and banged it and screamed, "Shut up" at me. I interpreted this and went on another couple of minutes and then left the room, I hope looking put together, but absolutely shaken to the core. I was left with something that wasn't just a rebellious response but a really proper examination of where authority should reside and what gives people proper authority and how it can be questioned, so it was very important for me. But I was much more questioning what was going on within this system than between systems.

NH *That links to a question I have noted: "What do you think is the role of leader within the group?"*

GH It depends what sort of group. In some work groups I think the leader's function can be to mediate the boundaries of that group so that the group can get on with the task and isn't too much impinged on by the outside world. The leader takes that role of managing the boundaries to leave the primary task for the rest. That's a sort of service leadership. There are all sorts of different occasions with different needs- there's a need for charismatic leaders at times. There's a need for models of competence, and in therapy groups at times a sort

of listening synthesising tracking leader. This approach is the sort of leader which is probably more common in Gestalt groups. Or maybe should be. There are charismatic leaders in Gestalt groups, which I don't think is always to the good. A mode for learning to do with the soul, the psyche, is one of great openness. Such openness seems to me to leave people vulnerable to uncritical introjection. That is teetering on cult formation, rather than the chewing, discrimination and careful assimilation more humble leaders invite.

NH *So some people get invested with authority in ways that are unhelpful?*

GH Yes, and of course I have seen that happening sometimes.

NH *I've been linking this with thinking of you in north London being radical, and knowing of and reading about Paul Goodman at the same time. I'm wondering whether you think his spirit is still alive in Gestalt or whether we need to resurrect him? What's happening to him?*

GH My fear is that there has been such an academization of gestalt and a bringing in of a false respectability that I feel the anarchic values that he stood for may be annihilated. I think that the way he was interpreted - and perhaps partly the way he was - was at an uneasy end of anarchy, getting towards the "anything goes" experimentation. I have a fervent belief in anarchy and it seems to me it must be preceded by an extraordinarily

copious and good education. It needs to come about where there is a sense of what synergy is and an understanding that synergy and anarchy are a great combination. Where anarchy is just seen as ignoring the field and doing your own thing, it is just the making of very narrow Gestalts and that is not useful.

NH *I feel that we are moving very fast across huge areas. I'm wondering then, how do we create the field conditions for constructive anarchy? What is Gestalt's part in that?*

GH I like the question. All the time I think that education is the only answer I really come up with. By that I mean education at every level, and I see this as at least a three-generational project. At least. It would take a very long time even if people started in on it now. There have been various experiments in schools. I have known of a few, mostly of children up to the age of 11, because they are not so bound by the exam system. There is leeway in the minds of the educators at this stage. Where they have used the sort of group methods the we are familiar with in Gestalt with children, had them contributing equally in groups or with their teachers, and using self-criticism and questioning of each other and listening to each other, the results have been amazing.

I went into a school long ago in the north-east of England where they had an ordinary village school with a class rooms round a big open area that was used as a gym or as an assembly hall. The

headmaster had removed the age divisions and the timetable and the whole school assembled in this central area every morning. They were doing a project on communication and they started with an ex-England football coach who came in and did exercises with them - all sorts of interactive stuff.

When they were all panting he would say "Come on, don't let this energy slip through the floorboards, what are you learning out of this? ". They would take this into the projects that they were thinking about. When I went into see them there was a little boy of eight who had taught himself hieroglyphics and was writing stories in hieroglyphics and they were genuinely in Egyptian hieroglyphics. It was just that he was interested in them. Others thought about the railway system as a form of communication. They wrote poems about communication. Not only was that happening but they were getting better results in exams than children from other schools.

Then they went on to ordinary secondary school and presumably that creativity was not attended to there. So I have faith that if we bring in methods that I loosely called Gestalt, but I don't think exclusively belong to us in any way - they are Moreno's sorts of ideas, that we can let children explore how to achieve responsibility in the gestalt sense and how to keep raising their awareness of other people and their culture and their history. And there need to be continuing interventions with parents, about the general ethos of attending to these issues rather than just to

information technology as seems to be happening.

NH *So is the ground getting any more fertile at the moment?*

GH It's a bit sad for me to see that in the last few days the government is proposing some measures towards making family life more secure and the immediate response is anger from all the groups who feel by implication that they have been marginalised or whatever. I suppose that has to happen, but there is a lot of work to be done for people to be trusting enough that they can be helped with the task. There is probably more work to be done for people to be able to see that there even is a task there. That is frightening. And from my point of view the task is vast.

NH *As you are talking, with my interest in working with children and families, you are sparking off all sorts of things for me.*

GH Well I'm interested in that. That's something I have noticed about the interviews that have been published, that they are so much focused on the person being interviewed that the context of you the interviewer is left out. You risk being largely a cipher. That seems antithetical to gestalt in a way. A dialogue seems more interesting than my pontification.

NH *Well, I'll tell you than that one moving experience for me was in a training group when I was filled with a sense that we were doing something that was crucially important and that people needed to know about it. People in the group needed*

to realise that they had a massive amount of influence if we use our skills in the right way. I have a sense of the possibility of ripples of knowledge about communication and contact spreading out into the community, and the ripples going down streets and through people's front doors and into their families. I do carry a belief that whenever I'm with a family if I can stay true to my beliefs and my way of working then that family can be changed in this sort of way that we are talking about. Of course, the number of contacts that I can make is very small and temporary. There is a project local to me now set up by an energetic doctor where teachers are being trained really to be much more interested in support and development of a community. I hope that this sort of voice can be heard and can happen. That's what I've been juggling with what you've been talking.

GH I'm very interested to hear that. I have a strong belief in that sort of whispered transmission, that a great deal does happen by the way the we meet people even over short periods of time. In my life the things that have stayed very important to me have often happened in a very brief time. I talked earlier about that intra-psychic experience of mine which was a minute bit of time, I imagine. There are poignancies of meeting and moments of meeting that stay with me, and they took an instant.

There need to be interventions right up and down the scale from political interventions by government that will be

resisted and fought over, a process that has to happen. Alongside this there are things that have to happen for the individual, which may be more harmonious and rewarding but may only last a micro second.

NH *For me there's something central about the capacity to meet, in a full sense of the word, and I wonder if these are what Buber talks about as I-Thou moments, and that we remember and carry with us for the rest of lives.*

GH That's what I'm trusting that he means, and for me it's a very physical recognition of that happening. It can be an extraordinary excitement which I feel in my arms right through to my viscera, and I'm sure if we were stuck in a scanner we could see what was happening, something very strong which will last, which at least can last.

NH *Well, not surprisingly the questions that I have to ask you are inter-related and I'm not sure which one is growing out of what we have just been talking about. You say you have a project of writing a book integrating the commonalities of therapies and I'm wondering what your thoughts are about Gestalt's position in the therapy world? I suppose I'm putting forward a point of view of mine in saying that Gestalt may have a tendency to devour and incorporate other therapies and say "that's ours". You are nodding.*

GH I do see it as not especially Gestalt's bad behaviour - but that it is the bad behaviour of so many therapies. It seems singularly immature and useless, real playground stuff.

I'm much more interested in establishing what works, what is effective, than in establishing what ruddy provenance an idea or method has. It's strange, but in a way, Gestalt is in a position to assimilate the findings, the discoveries and successes of other therapies. The licence to experiment is the licence to use all those things.

At moments, for example, I can see Melanie Klein as somebody who talks polarities. She happens to have established what is the content of her polarities. They can be very useful polarities. Then again Perls himself in PHG talks about when an interpretation is useful; people don't quote that very much - so there are lots of modes that are available to Gestalt and legitimately so. I think the pity is where any therapies have stopped themselves from using particular methodologies or insights because they say, "It's outside our boundary".

I'd far rather they said, "Is it useful and if so how can we incorporate it?" That seems to be the measure for me, and the criterion of whether something should be used in a therapy room, not whether it has of this or that brand label on its front.

NH *So, is gestalt still your home base or are you free-floating in the therapy world?*

GH It is absolutely my home base, and I think I'm no more idiosyncratic than any other practitioner that I see in the way that I use it. I think that I have brought in a lot of group discoveries from Bion and others. At the Gestalt Centre where I work some of the time,

the students are required, when they are doing their group training for the diploma, that they become aware of and facilitate intra-psychic, interpersonal and group level work. By group level I mean really looking at how what somebody does is really a function of the group coming through that person at that time. Is it gestalt or isn't it gestalt? I don't know, but I'm prepared to call it gestalt, not in the way of trying to devour another therapy, but wanting to say that the insights towards it came from people who are in the analytic world, as most gestalt has done.

NH *So, while learning about groups at the Tavistock Institute at the same time as you are starting out in gestalt, did you move between the hot seat approach and other approaches, or work with them in parallel for a time? What happened at that time?*

GH In the Seventies for seven years I was a staff lecturer on a counselling course and I was seen as a gestalt practitioner. There was an enormous appetite at that time for gestalt among the students, and there wasn't time to give them enough. So I set up a sort of training group and I tried to be as gestalt as it seemed to me I could be according to my vision of those days. I thought that spontaneity was very important so they didn't have to sign up for coming to all the sessions. I expected them to consult themselves about coming and to pay if they attended. There was a fluctuating membership and I never knew how many people would be there from one week to another. In that group I taught and we

experimented with, among many other things, how we could all feel free to intervene when somebody was doing a piece of intra-psychic work or a two chair a piece of work. We came to some insights and criteria for this: by and large when someone starts to work in a group, everyone starts to be both patient and therapist in their own mind and to start diagnosing and prognosticating. We established that we needed to be self-regulatory about this.

If you judged that when you wanted to intervene you were just getting on a hobby horse which was a competitive hobby horse then you went back to the stable quietly; but if you really got the sense in good faith that there was something to develop in the dialogue that was happening but that it wasn't being said then you chipped in and tried it. That didn't mean that the person who was primarily in the dialogue had to step down but it was seen as supportive intervention. Likewise if you became totally uneasy about the dialogue that was happening and thought a cul-de-sac was emerging then again you could take responsibility for interrupting and criticising that dialogue and changing it. I really do think that that worked very well.

That was a curious aspect of empowering everybody in the group to do something that had very much been a one-person job or the leader's job before, in Gestalt groups I had attended, or analytic. I think it was probably a reaction in part to the interpretative stance at the Tavistock. It was as far at the other end of the spectrum as

you could go. I was fascinated by letting people interpret about the group as well as do that sort of intra-psychic work. I was interested in everybody taking on the consultant role. At the Tavistock they also want that to happen. People from other orthodoxies will not admit that - they just pretend it's a sort of power trip that the consultant wants to keep interpreting and everybody else has got to be dumb - but they are teaching a way of looking at what is happening. So again I think I just speeded the process by saying to people, "See what images come up, see what curious extraneous thoughts come to as you sit here in this group". By naming these mentations fantasies, rather than interpretations, I was a correct Gestaltist. So that was letting things in from another system but imposing my methodology.

NH *You do come across as quite certain of yourself*

GH *(she laughs)*. I suppose that's said to me in a different way in a therapeutic setting, so that people feel trusting of me. Maybe they feel that I must know or something. It may be something to examine that I appeared too certain here. I think you asked me about something that excites me so that I may appear a bit vehement.

NH *I was thinking more that you talk about your views in the way that I imagine children who had the benefit of the education in contact, communication and self-support would of their view of the world. I am led on to a thought I had - what are your recommendations for us as*

therapists - how do we support ourselves so that these political and social changes are more likely. What do we do?

GH As soon as you ask that my mind goes back to a curious event some years ago. I was asked to help with some people from social services in a group. [My answer is somewhat sideways to your question]. It was a very difficult group and they were split. Some thought they were very clever and couldn't bear the others and thought they were plonky. This wasn't absolutely overt but it was implicit. I didn't know how the hell to deal with this. I lay awake worrying - it was a five-day event. I devised an exercise. I suggested that everybody in the world was dying from a peculiar disease related to stress. Once you got stressed you died from this disease. There were a couple of places left that had not been affected. These people who were in the group had to divide themselves into teams to go in and see what they could do to prevent the unaffected people from getting stressed, so that they would not get the disease.

The group spontaneously and predictably split into sub-groups of the "clever ones" and the others. The clever ones, given a period of time to work out what the strategy would be, thought that there might be a bit of contamination in the town that they would visit so they would have to have enormous butterfly nets to catch the people. They devised a series of very aggressive, certainly stress-provoking interventions, including isolating these people.

The so-called also-rans first thought of taking hot water bottles and other comforts to take care of themselves and to make sure that they were in a position not to upset or stress other people. Finally the intellectuals came round to seeing that this could be a better approach.

So I think I am answering you. It is really important to do what ever can be done to create harmonious and loving groups among people who are going to do such difficult work. I am naive enough to be distressed when there are such hideous internecine struggles within therapies. I can account for that with some sorts of theories but it still distresses me and I still wish that since we have made it our business be insightful about how humans work that we can use the same forbearance we use with patients, with each other. I think that often what happens is that people are so stressed with working with difficult people in the field that when they come back to their colleagues they become in a way a bit regressed and angry and take it out on each other. That might mean that you have to have facilitators to handle these groups. It seems to me where there are those safe friendly groups it is like having a secure family. Then people can do a lot from that and can carry a lot of aggravation if they know that there is a safe place where they can be heard and loved and recognised.

NH *That's the second time that you've used the word love and I am thinking of the circularity about the conditions being necessary for love and love*

being necessary for the conditions.

GH A poet who was writing a newspaper column asked me about love and I said that I suspect that love is the underlying condition and that all the rest is what we manufacture over the top of it because of fear. So that fear and love are the major positions in opposition to each other.

Fear gets in the way of love.

NH *My sense is that recently people have wrapped that up in talking a lot more about shame. I'm interested to hear from you about shame in groups. Specifically, how would you work with shame in groups?*

GH This might be rather shocking to you. I have problems with quite a lot of what goes with that label. I remember that William Blake said "Shame is pryde's cloke". I get quite uneasy sometimes when I see a certain process of crying Pax : "Shame has been named, therefore you can't touch me. This is my shame issue." Everybody says, "Oh sorry, we'll all stop". I think that goes with this great carefulness with clients that I see as particularly American because there are such fears of litigation. Apparently very supportive psychotherapy is done which I think can be collusive.

I would be sorry if that comes over here and we then cultivate something a little bit phobic in people, and there's an issue that they won't face which we might call shame. It gets made bigger from stepped around

rather than bringing it out into the light and saying "How big is this?" or "Is this an obstacle?". Now I am sure that anybody who majors on working with shame would say of course that's what they're doing. I get a bit uneasy about the concept being used so often.

NH *So maybe they're not actually being true to their phenomenology but using a label which is not accurate? Pride might be a label at times.*

GH Yes, pride or fear. My trust then is to stay with the phenomenology, find out what is actually being experienced rather than the name of the category.

NH *One thread all the way through for you has been drama. How has that run through your work?*

GH It preceded my psychotherapeutic work. I was writing plays for the BBC before I got into training. Very often this work, the psychotherapy I do, has come in the way of my writing because it does take time to do it. My experience as a therapist comports down so that I have the impression that I make characters who have a lot of psychological truth and that they are not copies of anybody but that that the way they hang together is plausible.

NH *I certainly found your characters in 'Being and Belonging' easy to like and dislike, and project on to and have relationships with.*

GH Some people in the States people said, "They were all so horrible those characters, I

didn't like any of them". I felt so much for the poor creatures, they had so much to suffer about. There are sometimes things that I am writing more directly about as issues.

Some years ago I wrote a radio play while I was working in a Home Office experiment of sending violent offenders to a day centre instead of being imprisoned. The idea was to avoid the dependence that they form in prison. The idea was that by attending the centre and attending to themselves properly and looking into their styles that something different might happen. [There was no research on the project, so no clear outcome. It was one of those Home Office pilot schemes that it runs its course and then disappears.]

Lots of judges and magistrates and probation officers came to look at the initiative. We insisted that they sat in the group and we ran it as a large group with all these people as visitors. I got more and more struck by the extraordinary overlap between the 'crims' as they called themselves and the straight guys, the goodies. I wrote a play about that, and that would be a play about the direct overlap between therapeutic work and drama. I wrote the play in the place with the help of the 'crims'. "Here" they used say, "listen to this" and they would tell me horrendous memories from their childhoods, some of which with their permission I incorporated into the play. A recording of it was used in the project for a number of years.

NH *So drama and your work sound, not surprisingly,*

intimately inter-related, so that the work feeds into a drama. Does the feedback work the other way, from your drama into your work?

GH I think it's easy for me to invent experiments that are dramatising in some way or another if that is called for. I don't know that I do it that often but it isn't at all difficult for me. A different level of that is that I belong to something called the International Theatre of Spontaneity. That is a group of about 16 of us, some actors, some therapists. We meet once or twice a year in different countries. We have a few days working together so that we are a really close ensemble, and then we go into a theatre, usually a small centre. In the way of Playback Theatre that I think was at the gestalt conference last year a director elicits stories or scenes from the audience and these are then enacted by the actors. You move through to the point where you invite someone from the audience to come and join the actors and do it on stage. That's a Moreno idea. It excites me a lot because I like to see polished drama superbly done, professional theatre, but I would hate it if there was only that. All these enactments are somewhere around in psychotherapy, psychodrama and dramatherapy. This interesting mode is somewhere between the professionally dramatic and the personal.

NH *The one character in your book Being and Belonging which I did not feel very much sympathy for happened to be the psychodramatist. Did that come out of any feelings you have about psychodrama?*

GH Not a bit, not a bit. Somebody had to be a difficult character and be assigned to a particular therapy. I have a lot of respect for psychodrama. I have worked with psychodramatists on occasion and there has been a good synthesis with Gestalt Therapy. They can do the broad-brush stuff and then I have done the small fine work of getting to the centre of what was there in the drama afterwards. They have reckoned that it has enhanced the psychodrama to do some Gestalt with it.

NH *What would you want people to know that we haven't talked about?*

GH There's another preoccupation I have with membership of groups, and in particular membership of more than one group. It does seem to me that some positive education about group membership is needed if people aren't be thrown into quite primitive states by the size or kind of groups that they are in. At the Gestalt conference some years ago I was asked to facilitate the large group process through the conference. Early on, I remember, I wanted to get people to notice how many different sorts of small group were contained within the bigger group. I suggested we called out categories and formed the corresponding groups. For example we formed groups by training schools, and by birth sign.

When somebody called out "nations", straight away people clumped into their national groups and started to look quite smug. One or two people were

running around seeming distressed and unable to decide which group to join perhaps because they had dual nationality or other reasons for not fully belonging. In the end they clumped into a group of "don't knows". Meanwhile the others had started, just like football crowds, even though they were "terribly nice people", to shout chauvinistic slogans at each other across the room. A lot of them came to me afterwards and said that they were appalled that they could hear themselves doing this and couldn't stop.

That to me was a beautiful example of them experiencing their primary membership at that moment which was of the Gestalt conference, and as such a band of brothers or sisters, but that as soon as they defined themselves as belonging to these national groups all the clichéd national slogans were produced. That's just one small example but it does seem to me that one way of describing the antagonism between people is that they have let go of the awareness of some of their group memberships and they have made figural just one group that they belong to. It's what has to happen in wars. If you're going to make a war you have to create the enemy by defining them as out-group and forgetting that he or she is also a fellow human being in some way. This is obvious in Yugoslavia for example.

NH *So there's a tension between the need for what you call a reference group and an acknowledgement of membership of humanity.*

GH Yes, and for acknowledgement of simultaneous membership of many groups, which sociologists refer to as heterogeneity.

NH *What is the most effective way of helping people live with that tension? How do we say to them, "You are not only a Manchester United supporter, you also live in Southampton"?*

GH I would like to have an answer. You might accuse me of certainty! I think that one piece of small scale education is in letting people have the safe emergency of being in a large group in the sort of setting that we as therapists might bring about, and giving them space to experience the peculiar sweep of emotions that do happen in those groups, and to stand back and understand what it is that happened, and how they let themselves get into that. So that they can understand rather than unwarily surrender to those emotions. I think we need to experience awarily that strange thing of becoming the crowd and yelling and being confluent in the large group with things that we don't actually believe.

NH *Well, not all the time at any rate.*

GH No, not all the time, and that's right. This is the lynchmob mentality. People who wouldn't think most of the time that they could tear some else to pieces, maybe will if there are enough others around who are there to get their blood up.

NH So, I can imagine the education process would include educating young children as to how they are members of different groups.

GH I suppose that the ways that that is done are not effective enough. Ideally, children should be able to experience an allegiance to their school, to their class, to their football team and I don't know to what extent that it's stressed in schools and how much it is made an open topic. It is an example of the holding of different and conflicting theories in everyday life.

NH Some programmes to address bullying aim to bring the victim and a bully together and emphasise their joint membership of groups as well as their membership of for example, the bullying group. Their commonalities are emphasised.

GH I think that is a very difficult piece of work because there are such strong, quick and primitive responses in that situation when groups are in these particular configurations.

NH Do you think these are phylogenetic, that these are to do with evolutionary survival and that they get switched on almost automatically for all?

GH They seem to have been there a very long time to me. They are so far below awareness and they jump out so fast in so many people that I imagine they are part of a survival mechanism. For a group operating in order to survive, for all the members to get into either fight or flight at

the same time might enhance the chances of survival.

NH One thing about interviews that are published in a psychotherapy journal is that for professional reasons, I guess, there is very little referencing of views and opinions to personal history. I would be very interested to hear about that and respect that for reasons of privacy in your work this would be difficult. There is an element of the context which is inevitably missing. Is there anything more that you can say about yourself outside work to help put your work into context?

GH I am very much in sympathy with what you're talking about and I don't know quite how to answer you. Gestalt is so much about context that I am frustrated when I see interviews in which polished, interesting things are said, but you can't mesh into what prodded the writer to say that. I think there is probably quite a strong strand through me about redressing what I see as injustice. I think that relates to a few events in my early childhood when I felt that I was dealt with in a way that I would call unjust or betraying. That was enough to get me going; that is a sore place for me, injustice - so a lot of my work I would describe as letting people empower themselves to pick themselves up after being unjustly treated.

NH I'm interested in your sense of membership of groups, and in particular what groups you consider yourself as belonging to.

GH Immediately you say that, the picture that comes to my mind is of my form at school when I was 11 years old and the rest of the class was grouped together and I was sitting a short distance away, perhaps a foot. I was an only child until I was five and I think the membership of a group was highly problematic for me. So I think groups are figural and that there is something there about membership that is significant. The experience of being in a T-group in the States had a particular dimension of learning which was in a way euphoric for me, of for the first time sensing myself as absolutely trusting of all the people around me. Probably improperly so. As I say, it was euphoric and it was great that it happened once. So I think that right from the outside to the inside, that group membership and my interest in it has a compensatory function for me.

NH Do you belong to a group that addresses the transpersonal?

GH No I don't. I belong to things like the Organic Gardening Society and Psychotherapists and Counsellors for Social Responsibility, and I have what I suppose is a humanistic and passionate belief that immortality is what I have done and achieved here, which inevitably affects other people and their children. It has a knock-on effect through the generations, for good or ill. It seems to me that everything I do and that we do is horrendously important in the way that it has the possibility of going on and on. It might just stop like many genetic things but some keep whizzing

through. I don't think that's fanciful, I think it is real in just the same way that language continues. Centuries later, we are using phrases that Chaucer and earlier people used. Byrd meant lady to him. Now feminists can writhe at being called birds. So an innocent intention may end up in something of a twist.

NH *I share with you that sense and that time could magnify things, so that if involved in a change of course for some years somehow that can magnify over time and in perpetuity, and the effect can increase.*

GH Yes, that's right. I see this as a therapist. I get a sense of something, and I know that it's three-generational - I think, by God, I'll bet this is seven or ten-generational. We can have a particular way of looking at the world or a rigidity that somehow was set up in the system generations ago. That is a great rationale for a deconstructive therapy such as Gestalt.

Oxfordshire, April 1999