

## THE GESTALT GROUP ALIVE

### The history, development, and application of Gestalt Group theory

An address by Gaie Houston to the Gestalt Centre at their 35th anniversary celebrations in June 2005.

*There is an alarming and widening chasm between the two cultures ... of Power and Knowledge. There must be more continued interaction and dialogue between those men who have power and no knowledge, and those who have knowledge and no power.*

[Warren Bennis 1969, page 347].

This Centre does more than most to create the means of such a dialogue.

This notable anniversary comes at a time when therapy groups, and the study of how groups work, are both much harder to find than 25 years ago. Simultaneously, there is a general disillusion with politicians and thus with politics. Politics can be seen as the ultimate tussle between group and individual. What happens next may be uninformed anarchy, or dictatorship.

Indications of both are already showing. Parliament is progressively ignored by Government. Happy slappers beat up their peers and take photos. I say all this first, because to my mind the two go together. Denial of the group is as dangerous as it is understandable in a largely comfortable individualistic society like ours. This Centre is very rare in maintaining both therapy groups and attention to how groups work, how they are the field from which we are indivisible.

Different task, and different size groups work in different ways. Small groups have more occasion for intimacy. Large groups have more to do with power. All have a profound effect on the human psyche, and on how we exercise our competitive and our cooperative nature. The more understanding we have of that, the better our chances of making a polis, a society, that functions for the good of the people in it.

That is the wider application of counselling and therapy that is perhaps more recognised here than in most training of this kind.

I would like to begin by recalling some of the history of human groups. Then I shall talk about modern study and experimentation in this field, and relate that to Gestalt and this Centre. Research is becoming a requirement for accreditation, and Gestalt, with its emphasis on experiment, very clearly generates therapy research material.

### The sense of group

Goodman always insisted that social existence precedes individual existence. Just as our sense of smell has been put often in the background by more highly-tuned senses, such as sight and hearing, so, I hypothesise, our sense of group is always there, but is frequently submerged by the psychological perfumes and deodorants of familiar recent social structures, such as the nuclear family or the bachelor pad.

The neurosciences now reinforce the profound truth, often fought against in individualistic societies, that humans are the most social species that has ever been. The indivisibility of organism and field is being commented excitedly by Cozolino, Damasio, Gerhardt and many other unaware or crypto-Gestaltists. Perhaps the next discoveries will be chemical and neural evidence of our near-mystical relation, not just to other significant individuals, as Bowlby very helpfully has taught, but to groups.

Social existence precedes individual experience. One aspect of that is, to use the obvious in a truly Gestalt way, to notice that parents make children. Then again, historically, we can guess at the experience of primitive people coaxing a living from the earth. It is very likely that unless they stayed within a group they would perish.

That may be the centripetal force that makes many people uneasy if they are not aware of their membership of a group, or of many groups. The outgroup may have been another potent force keeping people together. There is a ninth century poem, *The Wanderer*, that expresses the desolation and bewilderment of a liegeman whose lord has died, and who has no hall to hang his shield in, no lord to protect and follow.

### Organising the group

We have a very long tradition of construing groups as hierarchies, with fixed leadership. From Xi'an in China, or Darius in Persepolis or Philip of Macedon in Thessaloniki, there is evidence of high status burials, in other words, of monarchy of some kind, even in the Bronze Age four and a half thousand years ago. Designated leaders, and pomp and ceremony round them, came into being probably when matriarchy gave way to patriarchy.

There is less evidence, but a surmise, that matriarchy preceded, and that it tended to more egalitarianism. Among the Naji people in China even today the women have total economic power, and are the only ones who own anything. They do not marry, but invite men to sleep with them when they feel like it. However, they do all the manual work, and the only duty men have is tending children. Even housework and cooking is done by these burly labouring ladies. That is not egalitarian, but neither is it a leader-oriented group dynamic. I quote this here, to raise the possibility that we probably have race memories of many generations, very long spells, of conflicting ways of organising groups. What these examples show too is a human tendency to rigidity and tradition: there is a pull to do things the way we always do them.

Experience on the other hand demonstrates clearly that groups need to be organised differently according to their task, and according to much else of the field in which they occur.

Here and now, we become members of many groups, probably each day as well as throughout life. Dealing with this membership by internal struggle, self-modification, assimilation, deflection or spitting out is part of our mental life. How we do it is one of the keys to psychological health and political evolution. This is a large claim. Psychotherapy is more and more seen as pair work, as one to one. I reiterate that it is always about the group, whether or not the two players let that fact into awareness.

Now let us narrow the field, and look at some of the thinkers and experimenters who were working directly with group dynamics half a century or more ago.

### **An Early Father: Moreno**

Moreno is in general estimation a major creative innovator in this field. In his words:

*Group therapy, psychodrama and sociometry developed between 1908 and 1925 in Vienna and its surroundings. The place of origin were the gardens of Vienna.* [Moreno 1974]

Sculpting, sociograms, two-chair dialogues and most of Gestalt experimentation stems from Moreno. He points out that Acting Out was a term coined in 1928, not by Freud, but by Moreno himself, for whom it had none of the pathological overtones that are associated with it in Freudian parlance. And we Gestaltists are specially indebted to Moreno for this notion. Gestalt experiments are acting out in the positive Moreno sense. They are an aspect of the safe emergency, the play at the unusual or feared behaviour.

Moreno also had a notion of what he called tele, from the Greek for 'influence from distance'.

He defined tele as 'a feeling of individuals for one another, the cement that holds groups together.' In fact he used the word for all emotional bonds, whether within a pair or a group. But I see the usefulness of a specific word for this sense of group that I have just spoken of. Moreno here to an extent supplies it.

### **The Evolution of NTL**

Kurt Lewin was the person who coined the term Group Dynamics. His last brilliant years were devoted to action research, on the interrelatedness of individual and group behaviour, and on a here-and-now concern about social problems. It was he who founded the Research Center for Group Dynamics at MIT during the 1930s, and later secured a grant to fund research of the first summer of National Training Laboratories, at Bethel, of which more later. Very sadly, he died early that same year of 1947.

One of the people who worked with Kurt Lewin in these years was Leland Bradford, later to become the head of National Training Laboratories. He is not well known in Europe, but in The States he was directly and indirectly responsible for a great deal of education about group behaviour. Under his aegis at National Training Laboratories, the T-Group found fame and wide application. NTL T-Groups I have attended have sometimes been models of what might now be described as phenomenological dialogic Gestalt groups.

The anecdote Lee Bradford used to tell about a significant moment in the pre-history of T-Groups, a tale also written up by Kenneth Benne, [1964] deserves to be in the history books.

Three people, we would now term trainers, but then called action sponsors, were asked in 1946 in Connecticut by MIT and two other sponsors to run some discussion groups about the Fair Employment Act which had created the Interracial Commission.

The overall aim was to test the effectiveness of conference participation in changing back-home behaviour.

Kurt Lewin was appointed researcher, helped by Ronald Lippitt. Three research observers were put in place, one to each of the three groups of ten discussants. In the evening Kurt Lewin arranged for the observers to report back to the action sponsors and researchers, about how the meetings had gone. In present language, on process.

When the members sensed the excitement coming through the staff room door, two or three asked to join in. Kurt Lewin assented, and all the discussants showed up. Soon these de-briefings were lasting up to three hours, with everyone present re-working the process observations that were reported by the three observers. Even members who had to make long journeys home, all stayed for these voluntary sessions.

The life of the event turned out to be in the de-briefings, rather than in what had been intended to be the educative sessions: the then-and-there discussions with role-plays that occupied the daytime.

In the vocabulary now familiar to us, the day meetings had a topic, and so were focussed on content. The evening de-briefings concentrated on process. However, at this stage the process talk was interpretative and at a distance, rather in the manner of social conversations about people who have just left a gathering. It was about the last meeting, not the present one. The Gestalt or existential phenomenological dialogue method was just not yet at people's disposal.

Even by 1947 and the first meetings of NTL at Bethel, the avowed purpose of the training, in Kenneth Benne's words, [1964: 81] was to study the effects of conference experience in terms of transfer of behavioural changes to back-home situations. The link with Moreno is apparent in that many of their findings at this time, the 1930s and '40s, were published in Moreno's journal, *Sociometry*.

The small groups in these early years of NTL were called BST, or Basic Skills Training groups. They postulated the growth of a group to be somewhat like the development of a person, and so they cultivated an examination of what was happening in the group, and a working through of any problem that showed itself. Alongside this, however, they still concentrated on the concerns people had brought along from their work places.

The two stools these foci represent are probably very familiar to all who have led or attempted to serve what are commonly called PD, personal development, groups. It is wonderfully easy to fall between them, and lurch from careers counselling to individual therapy to a general ain't-it-awful-and-aren't-we-lovely mode. What has fascinated me in researching this paper is to see how these pitfalls were fallen into and then climbed out of by the pioneers of small group work.

### **The Environment of the Group**

It was not until 1955 that the NTL T-Group emerged fully as the elegant, if sometimes searing, instrument of learning that some of us have experienced and been deeply affected by. The style involved having the staff member insist on his member status in the group, partly demonstrated in a readiness to admit unknowingness or vulnerability. The other defining characteristic was to begin the group by drawing up a list of guidelines, communally defined.

These tended to include rules of confidentiality; agreement to listen; to note and divulge the emotionality accompanying anything said; to use I-statements rather than judgements; to be open, and to stay here and now. What now sounds familiar was honed in the States in the 1950s. Notably, love and co-operation were the suppressed parts of the human psyche that Lee Bradford's NTL sought to comment and bring more into the light.

By this time there was great interest in group behaviour, and theories of group development proliferated. Most of them were stage theories: storming, norming and performing is a neat and useful example. Others, that ran to thirteen or more stages, I have never seen them replicated in practice.

Of these many, Schutz is perhaps worth remembering, for his Gestalt view that you can separate to integrate. Schutz invented FIRO-B in 1958. Fundamental Interpersonal Relational Orientation. This is an expression of the Power: Intimacy spectra stressed for instance by Sonia Nevis.

He saw behaviour in groups in categories, rather than stages: he called them Inclusion, Control and Affection. How these are represented is an indication of the character and the health of the system, open to adjustment by the members. The American innovations to group theory at this time were about self-responsibility and empowerment of members. Goodman and hippie culture were central to this.

The Tavistock in London, to which I shall return, concentrated on other aspects of group life.

First, I want to emphasise what is often forgotten. Leland Bradford and his colleagues developed the T-Group within what they called Laboratory Training.

Merger and take-over exercises were introduced in their workshops, in the most beguilingly understated way, but leading as you may imagine to florid and memorable behaviour that might immunise even the most faint-hearted against the horrors of company take-overs or marriage re-organisations back home. Edwin Nevis [2004] points out that Richard W. Wallen, an early NTL associate, and an early trainee of Fritz and Laura Perls, Isadore From and Paul Goodman, was with Nevis the prime integrator of organisation development with Gestalt.

The small group exists in the larger field, in nests of groups partly subsumed or undermined by larger groups. In a recent article in *The Gestalt Review* Mark Fairfield makes a strong case for respecting the constantly shifting field of any group or member, and this complexity of other groups. Therapy training that ignores this aspect of reality is delusional in itself, and cheats its students of much insight about what may really be going on for the distressed people they will hope to serve.

### **Bion and The Tavistock**

The Tavistock Institute has been responsible for a vast range of group training interventions in all manner of settings. In their T-groups the consultant is with but not of the group. This provokes the emotionality we all have about authority and leadership. Hostility and sexuality are the aspects the consultant interprets. And there is plenty to talk about.

In the 1940's a psychiatrist and analyst, Wilfred Bion, had charge of a hospital for servicemen traumatised by frontline fighting. Bion is chiefly remembered now for his powerful and peculiar surmises about unconscious pathological processes in groups.

Many of these revolve round authority, a topic that was approached quite differently at NTL. In "Experiences in Groups" [1961] which came out a full decade after PHG [1951], he postulated a tendency to unconscious regression in the early stages of group development, and at any time when the psychological going of the group gets rough.

To remind you, the members tend to shrink to the infantile, and the leader occupies the vacuum round that significant missing object, the parent. So a highly dependent group gets an over-solicitous and worried leader, until the members grow rageful at his or her failure to be completely perfect and godlike, and unconsciously wish or plot the psychic, or other, assassination of this leader on whom they are still fixated, even though by now in a somewhat negative manner.

This hypothesis is often brought into awareness in the training here, and thus becomes Gestalt – common knowledge.

### **Self-Responsibility**

A major contribution from Bion was a finding that is less quoted in these times of creeping fascism: he found that his distressed patients began to get better when they were allowed a degree of autonomy.

Bion was in charge of what was called the training wing of a psychiatric hospital for the military, comprising about three to four hundred men. The training of the title was in interpersonal relations, for traumatised and therefore, in the vocabulary of the time, neurotic people in rehabilitation. He hypothesised that he must best treat them like 'a rather scallywag battalion' [1961:14]. A firm and friendly commanding officer was the other part of the environment he imagined to be of use, and this he became. The aim would be to educate the men to understand that revealing their neurosis was the task. First spot the enemy, then deal with it.

He instituted a regime which included physical exercise, then attendance at a small self-selected group to do handicrafts. If these did not suit, other groups could be invented. If this did not happen, the patient had to stay in the restroom, a quiet reading room where talking was only allowed in undertones, and where couches were provided for anyone feeling unwell. Just before lunch every day everyone was paraded, to make announcements and attend generally to the running of the wing.

Within four weeks a programme group had set itself up to chart everyone's activities. An orderly group was in place to improve the cleanliness of the wing, and complaints were made to Bion about the way large numbers of men just stayed in the restroom. Bion's answer to this was that about the same proportion of any community seem to idle, so how should this community be different? In this and all ways he left people to their own responsibility in a way that might have made Perls' and Goodman's hearts glow.

In another ward he instituted discussion groups to work out whether the good of the group or the good of the individual should be paramount. He found this a useful way to direct patients away from neurotic introspection, and towards looking out and re-engaging empathically.

In this aspect of his work Bion was a bridging figure between the structured freedom of T-Group and Laboratory Method, [Bradford et al. 1969], and the later, anarchic work of Carl Rogers.

### **Carl Rogers**

Carl Rogers was a proponent of encounter groups. Under his aegis, these too had many of the characteristics of some present Gestalt groups, and what are now termed personal development groups. He too advocated acceptant listening, un-judgemental feedback, honesty, and attention to feelings.

Later he shifted towards looking at large groups and society, away from the dyad. I have attended an event in which 160 people were asked to be in a large hall with Rogers by a certain time. But this was the extent of the structuring of their experience. Like Bion, Rogers trusted that people learn from organising themselves, rather than being organised. This is a deeply Gestalt notion.

Where is your focus? What is foreground? What do you want to learn? These can be anxiety-provoking questions, both for therapist and group members. Anarchy is a highly sophisticated political system, and Bion, Rogers and to an extent T-Group trainers embraced and developed it, no doubt to the approval of the ghost of Paul Goodman.

I was part of a radical experiment in group training in the late sixties, at what is now the University of North London. The students devised the syllabus for a Diploma in Behavioural Studies. They made the academic submission, and in concert with the staff, they invented their learning syllabus and method of examination, based on peer assessment. With Tom Osborne, John Heron and Brigid Procter, I introduced this student-centred method to the counselling courses at South-West London College. Finding or not finding effective ways to operate in groups of different size was an inevitable part of these courses, and the legacy is partly there in the Gestalt Centre in London's attention to large group and inter-group experimentation at residential.

You may be able to name other influences on the evolution of Gestalt Group Theory here. Invention is part of what happens, and so is the Autolycus style, the picking up of unconsidered trifles from other schools of thought, as Perls himself often did. Perls wrote in *The Gestalt Approach* p. 3.

What is new here is not necessarily the bits and pieces that go to make up the theory, rather it is the way they are used and organised which gives this approach its uniqueness and its claim on your attention.

There is nothing new under the sun. There is just our refinement, combination and attunement of what is already in the field.

### Let's not forget

Perls used frustration as a conscious part of his method. It is not a technique consonant with the risk-avoidant and litigious culture of the early part of this century. Bion and the Kleinians were and are rigorous in commenting seductive, "Please-like-me" antics from participant or trainer. These are roots that deserve to be drawn on. Perls' insistence on personal responsibility is as stark as anything in any other school of therapy. Together with an acknowledgement of the immense powers exerted by the group, it makes for a therapeutic and educational method likely to produce useful therapists.

In 1964 Lord Robbins at a conference of European rectors and vice-chancellors, pointed out: The failure of universities to develop collaborative, interdisciplinary, problem-centred work and in producing the policy scientists, social architects, change-agents, applied behavioural scientists or any credible group to effect institutional development, social policy, and to help design the future. In our 25 years we have worked at the social awareness, the group dynamics underlying all therapy, and in this way we can hope to as well equipped as any training institution, to perceive and work at the integration of power and knowledge, of power and intimacy, still so disastrously polarised elsewhere.

### Gaie Houston

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