

Jacob Stattman talking

with Mona Lisa Boyesen, Clothilde and Vivian Milroy

Humanistic psychology is a movement which claims to be one of the most effective in coping with depersonalisation, alienation, the inability of the person to feel and act to their full potential. And there's a kind of necessary assumption that I think belongs to a small group, in the sense that humanistic psychology is a small movement within the world of psychotherapy, there's a kind of glib assumption that we are all doing alright because we mean well. I'm one of the main activists in this work: so I believe in it, but I believe that there isn't enough internal dialogue within the movement, between the people who are doing the work - the professionals, the group leaders and so on - who are using the methods of humanistic psychology. There isn't enough internal self-criticism - in other words, to too great an extent, the assumption is that the methods and techniques are sufficient into themselves and that they are good and that a good group-leader is a well-meaning person who is not going to try depersonalising people. And what I want to talk about are ways in which, with all the good intentions, the very techniques and methods of humanistic psychology can themselves lead to some depersonalisation. In other words that Gestalt and body therapies and guided imagery and encounter are all subject to misuse as much as they are capable, because they are so effective, of liberating people's energies and changing their behaviour. I want to talk primarily about what I see as problem areas that any group leader or therapist who uses these methods has to be aware of, to the extent that if he is not aware of it they may be, in a sense, as manipulative as the orthodox therapies are wherein the participant in the group does become an object of the therapy or the healing process, the same as the psycho-analytic theories accused the behaviour theories. What I want to do is perhaps oversimplify the various problem areas in order to focus on them, the same as in Gestalt where you exaggerate something in order to see it more clearly.

I could begin by saying that any technique is subject to the creative imagination as well as the knowledge of the holder of the technique, the group leader or therapist. Having said that I can go on to focus on the potential problem areas with respect to depersonalisation or genuine liberation.

And from now on what I say can be equally relevant to groups or to one-to-one private sessions. The reader will have to use this imagination and his own experience to see how this might apply. The first area I want to focus on is where the individual is forced to serve the technique rather than have the technique serve the person. For example, the leader has a certain vested interest in the technique. He believes in it, he

believes he understands the principles behind the technique, and to some degree then the participant is under pressure to make the technique work, i.e. to respond appropriately, regardless of whether it is a verbal technique or a non-verbal one, whether it involves body or body movement or role-playing, it doesn't matter. There is always a pressure, which is why people in groups even where no rules are stated are always looking and asking for rules and norms, there's always a pressure to try to fulfil the particular technique, partly in the belief that it's a good thing but also to please the leader. What can happen is that, according to the degree of security of the leader, they can permit the technique to fail rather than the person. A concrete example might be that some of us are asked to engage in a Gestalt situation: are fed then for whatever reason, either because they are not in an appropriate place to verbalise, or because they are too locked up within their body or because the leader's suggestion to employ Gestalt at that moment was inappropriate, the person simply does a very poor job of responding to the Gestalt technique. The exceptional leader still might be able to make it happen, but the operative word is *make*. In other words the person is caught in the double-bind of on one hand wanting to deal with the problem, to please the group leader and the group, i.e. to do it right. And at the same time finding himself in some degree unable to respond to that technique. At this point one can say the person is stuck with trying to serve the technique. There will be nothing wrong with the group leader deciding to drop that technique and move to an entirely different modality and all this is related to how big a repertoire the leader has to start with and also to the expectations of the individual and the group. But if the person finds himself serving the technique he is going to have responses appropriate to that conflict which will get mixed up with the conflict he was dealing with in the first place, and the result will be an increased dependence on the leader, a loss of autonomy, a depersonalisation. I, the individual, am working on my problem and at the same time trying to support a technique and please the leader.

Let me take a more simplistic example: if the mode of the group is to express our feelings honestly and take risks and a person finds himself desiring *not* to express himself for some reason, he is very likely to find himself castigated by the group and by the leader on the automatic assumption that this is an avoidance of his feelings, or an unwillingness to participate in the group process. On the other hand, it is quite conceivable that the person's silence is the most creative and helpful thing he can be doing for himself at this moment. Many times people who are very glib verbally come into a group and try to reverse their behaviour in a creative way which involves a certain amount of silence on their part, but often they are not permitted to do this because of group pressure or leader pressure. This is another example of serving the technique, so that in a psychology which essentially claims to be existential and non objective there are certain objective norms which create pressure, which can be helpful or which can be depersonalising. So that the person is now an object of honesty and expression rather than an object of role playing and with no necessary difference in his internal behaviour.

I don't know if this is a serious comment or just clearing up my mind at this moment, but you use 'depersonalisation' in a way I wouldn't. That is, I would see this as making for dependence on the leader but I don't see that it is necessarily depersonalising unless he is removed from his own feelings about it.

That's what I mean by depersonalising, that he is trying to create feelings and responses to please and to support a process rather than expressing what is spontaneous. Every leader has a personality and each technique elicits a certain kind of behaviour. But with all that there is still a tendency for some groups to reward certain kinds of behaviour and punish other kinds, very much as a behaviourist does. There are certain group norms that are set up, often with respect to the split between emotion and statements about one's feelings, and in some groups emotion per se is the word and in other groups emotion which is not the here and now is punished, i.e. emotion which doesn't deal with the immediacy of the situation. In one group a person might attack the leader and this could be rewarded; in another group this might be punished and judged to be an avoidance of himself. So that much of the issue revolves around the relationship between the leader and the individual participants and the awareness of the rest of the group of what constitutes reward and punishment in this particular situation. For example, some groups can permit the silent ones to remain and keep them within the group. In another group the same person might be excluded, rejected or judged in some fashion. In other words I am saying that the leader or therapist must always be asking especially when he is using a specific structure or technique - are they doing this as a resource which may or may not be appropriate and will only be determined by what actually happens, or are they in effect overtly or covertly demanding that the individual support the technique, and this support is judged by whether or not the person responds appropriately? That is to me an open question, not a statement that can be turned into a formula, but an issue that is both ethical with respect to allowing the person to fail and allowing the technique to fail. At the same time it's a pragmatic issue in the sense that if the leader is measuring his own adequacy by virtue of how a person responds to his suggestions, then the leader is involved in a covert competition with this person's resistances and defences, through the use of the technique - and that's a form of manipulation.

One of the most emotive issues for me in the group process in humanistic psychology is around the area of the famous statement that you are responsible for yourself - you take responsibility for your actions, you take responsibility for your inaction. As a statement I don't quarrel with it, but then contradictions arise on the basis of the techniques that are employed. The most specific example I have in mind is when a technique is used in order to enable regression to take place, or if regression takes place unexpectedly. In either case, the person now, to the degree that he is regressed, is really not here and now. To the degree that the regression is occurring the person is here and now with his affective behaviour, but those feelings and emotions are characteristic of an earlier time of life - if regression is strong the person is probably dealing with an experience of the first five years of life. In which case the notion of taking full responsibility for yourself is now being applied to a child. The efficacy of the techniques make it quite easy to achieve regression but at the same time it seems irresponsible to tell a person who is in the emotional and mental state of a five year old, that he is responsible for himself, because if they are that age, they are dealing with parental relationships. In fact, that means that the leader and other instrumental members of the group are seen as parental figures and it is ludicrous to demand of this regressed individual that he simultaneously function as an adult member of the group and as a regressed individual now experiencing infantile conflicts. This can be, depending on the sensitivity of the leader, one of the most rewarding and liberating

steps of behavioural change - or it can be one of those devastating and primitive experiences in the group process. And for one primary reason, if you are in a regressed state and responsibility is demanded of you, you are receiving a double message which requires a double-bind reaction. To my mind this conflict comes up in groups to a large extent because of a lack of understanding of the nature of infantile experience. The adult in the group regresses, acts infantile and at the same time he is being forced to conform in some degree to an adult code of behaviour, the group's norms of responsibility. There will be a fear and a lack of trust that one can let go to that degree. On the other hand, if the person does let go and completes a cycle and then gradually returns to an adult phase, there's a fairly good chance that the trust he receives from the leader in the group and the freedom to be a child was supported but now contains an additional factor, which is that area called transference. After all, the leader and maybe other members of the group, are now for the most part good parents, good to the extent of being idealised because of the dependency which now exists between that individual and the group leader. In a sense you cannot say that the person has been released from parental constraints and parental dependency but he has shifted them from the real figures in his past to the present good figures of the instrumental members of the group. And that stage needs to be worked through in the group as well as the regression. When that is done, then it is a completed cycle.

Are you suggesting that often it isn't worked through? That would seem to me a fairly normal follow on, to work through these new feelings.

I think that often it's not worked through; this isn't always because people are unaware that it ought to be but because there isn't time. Certainly in a long term on-going group there would be time, these things would emerge spontaneously. In the short term workshop where the emphasis is on immediacy all the time, then the pressure is to enable everyone to work and the likelihood is that the cycle wouldn't be completed and almost any group leader has dozens of experiences where he meets someone a year or two later and it's quite obvious that the relationship that's left at the end of a group experience is still at exactly the same point. If it was one of frustration, it's still there. Rejection, it's still there. I don't expect that every group leader can complete these cycles all the time but it's the responsibility of the leader to keep it in mind. Perhaps it might be more important in the short workshop to provide time for the whole cycle even though less time is available for the very dramatic breakthroughs. In the long run I believe it may be more therapeutic to the individual not to try to provide dramatic breakthroughs but to enable him to experience a total cycle.

Is this a kind of debriefing that you are suggesting? That you work up to a specific point and then spend time discussing it and working through it and letting it absorb?

Right. Often the feedback aspect of a session includes some of this but feedback is not the same as working on, and while I may be expressing what might seem to be an impossible expectation, it is of such importance that every group leader should keep it in mind every time he works with someone who goes into a regressed state.

Another side to this is the problem for the group in general. When someone is

regressed the group also must experience a double bind. Do you relate to this person as an adult or as a child? Often at this point they look to the leader. Or in terms of their own insecurity about the situation they will tend to be very adult with all the implicit primitive possibilities in that adult-child relationship. In other words they will replay with this individual those unfinished parts of their own behaviour that they have introjected from their parents and they will project them onto this person. This is where the group leader has a greater responsibility than in the straight open-encounter group where the regression is at least being systematically elicited.

So regression is an inevitable necessary step I think to resolve deep behaviour problems. It calls for a different attitude on the part of the group leader and the group than when everyone is functioning at so-called adult levels of responsibility. None of this that I've said is to demean the notion of taking responsibility for yourself as a fundamental requirement for change but if a person is in a regressed state you must deal responsibly with respect to the age he is experiencing. In other words responsibility vis-a-vis the five year old and his potentiality to be responsible for himself in a particular context versus the responsibility of an adult.

The person who as a child couldn't take responsibility for himself because the adult figures did have the power and authority to control their reactions and so the child made adjustments that at the same time pleased the authority figures but damaged the child's personality. This can be re-enacted in the group.

An example of what I've been talking about is to imagine someone regressing to a point where there is a deep longing to be held by the parents and he begins to express this deep need. The need may seem to be out of all proportion to the adult perceptions of the leader or the group, perhaps even frightening as it's such a deep need and it calls upon the group members to feel comfortable and secure within themselves to provide the mothering that is being demanded. Too often in groups the person is told at this point that now it is time for him to learn to stand on his own two feet, that Mummy isn't there now, that Mummy is busy and they've got to be strong. From my perspective this is just replaying the entire cultural prohibition against letting children be children; children have to become adults as soon as possible and it is somehow weak and perhaps even disrespectful or disgusting to have such needs. And it highlights the confusion, certainly in Western culture about the nature of nurturance. There are dozens of books about how the primitive mother carries her child, holds it, touches it, provides all the nurturance the child needs and somehow the child's demands do not become excessive. In our culture it tends to be an either-or. Either you are 'a good child' in that you don't make demands, you suppress your needs; or you demand too much and you are judged to be 'a bad child'. This gets replayed in the group and certainly to the extent that the regression is effective, is bound to emerge. What often seems likely when the demand by the regressed individual is being made, is that you've opened up an unending tunnel that can never be filled. Often the regressed individual expresses this himself saying 'I feel I could never get enough'. If this process of nurturance is not understood adequately the person won't get enough from the leader or from the people in the group. He will be forced too quickly into the adult role, the need will be cut off the same as it was in childhood originally and instead of being liberated as an individual the person has simply reinforced the futility of being

able to fulfil his needs. He has been negatively conditioned with respect to opening up this area and it's quite likely that the trauma of replaying this need drama without adequate fulfilment has produced an even greater closure than was there initially because the negative elements have been reinforced so that the person will in the future learn to cover that need more effectively and will to some degree manifest aggression and hostility as a result of being frustrated in this need in the group, and it would take an exceptional awareness to see that this aggression and hostility come from that therapeutic experience.

This is a danger that's limited to humanistic psychology, because in classical analysis it wouldn't happen.

No, I would say that it's impossible to make a comparison at this point because in classical analysis the assumption is that this will arise but it will be worked through. But on the other hand one could say that in classical analysis there is no provision for nurturing and the positive factor about humanistic psychology is that in a group there can be this nurturing provided and when it does occur it's one of the most significant and beautiful experiences that is possible. This is precisely the strength and the beauty of the humanistic way, but again it doesn't always happen to completion and when it doesn't happen humanistic psychology is engaged in stifling and repressing nurturance under the guise of supporting.

So far what I've been talking about is situations and examples which in simplistic terms could be called possible manipulation by the leader of the group. This manipulation is unseen because the primary motive is one of trying to help a person and the source of the manipulation is a lack of understanding, not a lack of good intention.

to be continued next month.

GENESIS

*Like an unborn foetus
I have lain asleep. Without
Any sense able to be stimulated
Into the great infinite of being
Alive.*

*Uncertainly, Self begins to stir
To the shadowy awareness of what
Has always been; Reality
Who makes Self known in an activity of
Becoming.*

*And I am evoked to be; Self in
The fulness of being; To be
Engaged in the becoming of Cosmos;
To struggle within the Being Alive which is
Eternal.*

Stephen Bartlett