

Letters

Dear S&S

What a sexist editorial (No 5, November 1993)! A considerable number of women were also pioneers in the 'new understanding of personal growth/therapy' which prompted the 'radical psychology of the 1960s'.

What was considered 'radical psychology' began long before that — before World War II — when some women psychoanalysts who were also Marxists (try *Mothering Psychoanalysis* by Janet Sayer or *Secret Symmetry, the untold story of the women who changed the early history of psychoanalysis* by A. Carotenuto) emigrated from Europe to the USA. Anna Freud, who came to London with her father, revolutionised child 'analysis', and her studies in loss and attachment based on her work in refugee children's nurseries, has been widely adopted and developed by others. Karen Horney is credited as being the first 'feminist' psychotherapist, and while some of her theories were somewhat sexist, she is still quoted in textbooks on women's sexuality and feminist theory, including feminist therapy. The entire 'radical psychiatry' and 'people's psychiatry' movements of the 1960s in the USA and in Europe (especially Italy) were based on values which would later be called 'humanistic'.

The most radical psychology of all during the 1960s was not 'based on simple theories'. It was feminism, which challenged a great many things other than therapy. The women's movement prompted the most radical therapy of all self-help.

These revolutions might all have been happening simultaneously, though it is remarkable how subsequent 'new' therapy theories which appear contain substantial element of feminism (and, yes, Marxism too). Much of the 'recovery' and 'co-dependency' material has in part colonised feminist ideas. In addition, our understanding of the human condition has surely come from studies of Eastern philosophies, Tibetan 'psychiatry', and many other sources including literature. There is also a belief that 1960s 'humanism' was merely a return to Sigmund Freud's original ideas. The 'nastiness' of some of the political theories cannot be blamed on Marx. There are always those who will exploit and distort new thinking for their personal profit.

Val Young

Dear S&S,

Do you know that experience when you pick up a book and you can't put it down, you're so engrossed; you want to know what happens next; and then when you end, you close the book with a long and satisfied sigh? This is normally something that happens with novels, but can you imagine the pleasure of learning, if this was the case with academic books? Well, now, for once, it is. *Being and Belonging: Group, Intergroup and Gestalt* by Gaie Houston is a highly informative book about group, group development and group process, and an enthralling read as well.

I feel impelled to write to you because I don't want your readers to be put off by John Rowan's mean review of it in the last issue of *Self & Society*. Reading his review,

I could hardly believe that we were talking about the same book. The only angle that we seem to agree upon is the book's originality, which he identifies as creating difficulty for him. The honest place for him to have stopped would have been there, but he goes on to portray the book in a way that does no justice to it at all.

The book is a fascinating portrayal of a fictional group, whose leader is absent and who are together for a period of five days. The different characters in the group come from different theoretical backgrounds, and different cultures. So we learn about different approaches to group dynamics and behaviours, from the lips of the various group members. We are also stimulated to consider what it is about people's personalities that draws them towards specific therapeutic orientations. The group's development over time is fraught with difficulties, as you would expect, and is commented upon by the group members, and retrospectively by the absent leader. The possibilities inherent within therapeutic groups is vividly captured by Houston — their potential creativity and destructiveness — as is an understanding of some of the processes whereby either tendency arises.

John Rowan declares that the book will appeal only to gestaltists. But it has a far wider potential audience than that. I would include anyone interested in groups (running them or surviving them), and any practitioners who call themselves eclectic or integrative, who haven't put themselves firmly and rigidly within one school of thought and who want to examine and compare different approaches in the development of their practice.

Eva Coleman

Dear S&S,

I am writing in response to John Rowan's review of Gaie Houston's book, *Being and Belonging*. While bearing in mind that we all read our own version of a book, I was puzzled about how unrecognisable this book appeared to me through Rowan's eyes. I would like to balance what seems a lop-sided reading.

I do not identify myself as a gestaltist, yet contrary to the reviewer's opinion I did love the book. It is an exciting attempt to marry fiction, empirical knowledge and theory, an artful and elegant work with tremendous substance. It is challenging and welcoming, inviting the reader to use intelligence and imagination to further their own learning.

To me the review fails to look at the book sufficiently from the point of view of the writer's intention. Aside from some puzzling falsifications, notably the criticism that the group process is depicted as overly positive, that the intergroup process is ducked, that the participants each march under their own theoretical banner, gestalt, according to Rowan, wins a war of propaganda. Far from being propagandist, the author explicitly and implicitly states her interest in presenting a pluralist debate of theories (or 'myths') of group process, and this is borne out in the development of the plot. Its dramatisation in dialogue, interpersonally and internally, makes for compelling reading.

I would greatly regret if readers of *Self & Society* missed out on such a thought-provoking and delightful book offering substantial intellectual and ethical nourishment with poetry attendant.

Inge Kessel