Letters

Dear *S&S*,

I thought the January editorial was a satirical joke when I started reading it. But it gradually dawned that the writer was not only serious about hitting clients, but in the same breath talked of 'healing and empowerment' and of the 'comfort and safety' of the workshop. If, as he says, 'nobody is going to be forced into a situation they don't choose to be in', does he advertise this particular empowering technique in advance?

Is the writer aware that this is not only unethical, but also illegal? Is he aware of the incompetence he is demonstrating, that he has to resort to this? What is particularly alarming is that 'the rest of the group sat and watched the trauma unfold without lifting a finger to help'. What state of fear and dominance has he created in the group?

Alexandra Hough

Dear John Button,

I agree with your group participant who thought that you had 'gone a bit far' in your method of groupwork. I think that, when you 'hit some of the participants' and 'physically prevent' people from leaving a group, you are acting as an abusive person. You seem to be committing actual bodily harm and assault, i.e. criminal acts. I perceive your behaviour as damning to the profession of humanistic psychotherapy.

About 35 years ago boys in public schools were caned. After the caning they were expected to shake the hand of the person who had hit them and then expected to say thank you. Your method of therapy sounds the same to me. I think that some of the work of therapy is concerned with clients working through their old and current hurts; not creating new hurts, pain and perhaps humiliation too. Boundaries are established for good reasons both in therapy groups and in society generally. People need to feel safe (as opposed to complacent and comfortable) in therapy. Therapy works well if people feel contained, and in my view containment is not done with a violent hand.

Maureen Hancock

John replies:

Yes, I was being provocative when I wrote about the worth of physical risk-taking in therapeutic groups, but if I thought I were guilty of abuse and actual bodily (and emotional) harm as a workshop leader I would be as shocked and concerned as anyone, and would probably have been before a disciplinary committee long ago.

I would encourage you to read my comments again in the context of my whole editorial, whose main message is that if groupleaders and therapists shy away from exploring big and difficult feelings they will not be serving – or empowering – their clients to the extent that they could if they were more courageous.

To provide more insight into the way I work, we asked Clare Martin, who organised my 1994 anger workshops in London, for her considered response to Alexandra and Maureen.

Dear *S&S*,

If all I knew about John Button's methods was derived from the first paragraph of his editorial in January's *S&S* I might be as horrified as Alexandra Hough and Maureen Hancock. But when he describes hitting workshop participants, this is much less sensational than it sounds.

Last year I organised two anger workshops led by John. At the first one, two participants hit him as hard as they possibly could. He then hit them back. Nobody did this in anger – it was a controlled exercise; and they were slapping palms, not breaking each other's noses. In the context of a workshop on anger it didn't seem particularly out of place. Workshops are about exploration, and where else would I ever get the opportunity to really whack someone, safely? I was about to volunteer next when the group took a hand in things. One or two people were unhappy with it. We all discussed it and, though neither participant regretted the experience, we abandoned the exercise. Far from watching 'without lifting a finger . . .' the group stopped it dead.

I don't know that it was a particularly useful exercise; and why was it part of the deal that he was allowed to reciprocate? With hindsight perhaps we should have negotiated to beat him up unconditionally. Next time . . .

There was no pressure on anyone to take part. It wasn't a case of 'Right we're going to hit each other now. That's OK with everyone isn't it?' You had to volunteer. And John is the only person I've worked with who, when I say 'No, I'm not doing that', not only hears me the first time but commends me for being assertive. He creates a space in which people can take part if they want to, but he also encourages them to opt out of anything they don't feel like. That really is empowering.

I cannot imagine John creating 'a state of fear and dominance' in a group. In his groups everyone does exactly what she wants, within reason. The group of course has its own will and John goes with that will. At the same time he also supports anyone who chooses to go against group pressure. All this creates a feeling of space, comfort, safety and possibility.

I've done some daft things with John, and hope to do many more. He'll take you to the edge, but only if you want to go.

Clare Martin

Dear *S&S*,

I was intrigued to read the two, apparently contradictory, opinions about Jung and anti-semitism in the March issue of *Self & Society*. John Wren-Lewis (pp.31–32) says the anti-semitic charge against Jung hopefully is laid to rest in Gerhard Wehr's book *Jung: A Biography*. John Rowan (p.56) says Andrew Samuels makes it clear, in his book *The Political Psyche*, that Jung was anti-semitic.

I would be very interested to see this taken further in *Self & Society*. How about a response involving John Wren-Lewis, Gerhard Wehr, Andrew Samuels and John Rowan?

Eileen Conn