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A PSYCHOTHERAPIST BY ANY OTHER NAME

Thoughts on accreditation, registration, and the therapeutic activity.

During the past two years I have been involved in two parallel activities concerned with defining the practice of psychotherapy: One has been the efforts of the Association of Humanistic Psychology Practitioners to establish categories of membership, and to put some sort of boundary round the category of psychotherapist, a term which arouses certain specific expectations in the public. The other has been the getting together, at the behest of the DHSS, of a number of organisations concerned with the practice of, and training for, psychotherapy, to discuss the desirability of statutory registration, which was recommended by a Working Party set up in 1975.

In the many AHPP meetings I've attended, we have worked through fundamental issues about standards, ethics, professionalism, self-assessment, exclusion/inclusion, problems of trust and mistrust, problems of public relations, and encouragement of growth. The conflicts have always been about boundary-setting: on the one hand is our need to cultivate high standards in our art and practice, on the other is our fear of becoming restrictive, rigid, and incapable of change or exploration. Undoubtedly the most vexatious area is in the designation of 'psychotherapist', a term many of us adopt to describe what we are doing, and a term which invites the placing of considerable responsibility on us by individuals who are in need. Obviously we believe that this calls for a high standard of competence, based on a thorough training, long experience, recognition of the need for continuing supervision, and a concern to promote one's own maturing.

How do you count? As soon as we attempt to lay down specific requirements in training, experience etc., we rebel against ourselves, because we know that quantity is meaningless without quality. Somebody may have more than enough paper qualifications for me to say yes to their being accredited as a psychotherapist, but I shall still be asking myself, would I let my son or daughter go to this person for therapy?

I don't think it is easily resolved, and we shall be continuing to argue about this and other issues for some time. We have also to take into account that 'humanistic' therapists use approaches and methods which are so different from those of traditional psychotherapy that it might be fairer not to use the term at all: then we need not waste energy trying to match 'our' specifications with 'theirs'.

Time and again it comes back to trust, and the need to found a basis on which to trust. Founding that basis, for me, means establishing a body of agreed ethics translated from agreed values, and the maintenance of those values through vigilance and careful organisation of mutual support, nourishment and education for people with common interests. For all that we may say about humanistic values, as psychotherapists working very much in isolation, unobserved, we may become very defensive, deny our blindnesses and our needs, and end up getting our satisfaction from controlling and manipulating our clients. Lacking the rigorous discipline of the psycho-analysts, we fall into the power of our own unbounded egos. For me the spectre of the restrictive authoritarian Freudian is now matched by that of the seductive power-seeking Humanistic. (These are, of course, **my** spectres.) I want to see power shared and pooled laterally among colleagues for general benefit, not used, nor withheld, competitively.

The question of statutory registration raises very much the same issues, though it has taken longer for the fundamental questions to be arrived at because of the politics involved. Protection of the public from incompetence and malpractice is only part of it. There are status rivalries, and economic questions: those who are recognised by the Government will be eligible to receive public funds, should such funds ever be made available to promote the practice of psychotherapy in the public sector.

The Working Party recommended state registration mainly in order to protect the public, but was only able to propose indicative registration i.e. registering the name, not the function. There would be State Registered Psychotherapists but everybody else could continue to practise as before, provided they didn't call themselves psychotherapists. The Minister declined to promote legislation unless the profession wanted to move towards it. The profession protested that it wasn't really a profession - only a loose collection of unrelated practitioners without coherence, effective inter-communication, or any agreed way of defining

themselves. The upshot was that the loose collection of practitioners of psychotherapy (- about 30 organisations were represented) declared at a gathering last July that they were not ready to move toward registration, and decided to meet for a weekend in January to see what and who they were.

That weekend symposium was a valuable and, to me, revealing meeting. The 'threat' of registration - which could still be called for at any time by a Private Member's Bill, as happened in 1981 - produced a variety of defensive responses, similar to those we've had in the AHPP, but these were increasingly given up as more trust was established and more openness achieved. Also familiar were the discussions about exclusion/inclusion, defining psychotherapy, qualifications, handling of malpractice and incompetence, and public relations. The outcome, after two days of argument, puzzlement, challenging discussion, boredom excitement and getting to know one another better, was encouraging and positive: a consensus that our real concern was about the maintenance of high standards without the discouragement of growth, and the need for better communication amongst ourselves. It was decided to set up a Standing Conference of relevant organisations, which could be joined by any who wished to do so. Its task would be to look at such issues as ethical codes, training, improvement of psychotherapy within the profession, and the promotion of psychotherapy as a practice of value to society. The question of registration would be considered only when there was a coherent base to work on.

Representing the AHPP and speaking, inevitably, for a wide range of 'New Therapies' which have no established organisation, I was in an interesting position. I was only too aware of how our therapies could be branded irresponsible, unacceptable etc, and scapegoated; but I was also aware of the curiosity and interest in them, and the need for them to re-vitalize the practice of therapy. We can contribute our experience of working with greater openness, depth, courage and creativity than many traditional therapies, of working with the body, and with spirituality. The experience we have gained over the last 15 or so years is a potential source of strength and growth to a hard-pressed profession. However, it remains to be seen whether any moves to define training or to register would be so restrictive as to exclude us. Even if that were so, we need not lose the respect of the 'acceptable' therapies, nor give up the valuable dialogue with them. Certainly I came to respect them, as represented at the meeting, and overcame some of my own prejudices.

It is, perhaps, only a question of the name and, as I've said, we may need to find ourselves another name, and keep away from the as yet undemystified expectations attaching to the word 'psychotherapist'. The most important task is, I feel, to inform and educate the public about what we are doing, what we offer, and how choices might be made. The more responsibility the 'client' can take, on the basis of informed understanding of the processes involved, the less we have to think in terms of 'us doing something to them' which leads inevitably to fears of our power to do harm. Difficult it may be, but let's stick to our principles and accept that every person is free to choose how to deal with their life questions and problems, and all we can do is offer more possibilities than they may have known of, and give more meaning to the concept of choice.

I don't think it's an accident that the question of registration has appeared now. It came in the guise of a threat: an expression of suspicion and fear. But underneath I'm aware of the vulnerability that a distressed and depressed society is expressing, and the implicit challenge - can psychotherapy help? I believe it can, within its limited scope. And the wider growth movement, which has come to learn experientially so much about distress, depression, creativity, group behaviour, power issues, health, sickness, hatred and love, has much to offer in helping to restore sanity to a sometimes insane world.

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- * *Copies of the Report of the Symposium on the Registration of Psychotherapists are available from the Secretary of the AHPP: Ian Cunningham, 124 Capel Road, London E7. Free to AHPP members; others please send 50p and a large s.a.e.*
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