

# PEER ACCREDITATION...

## WITHIN A HUMANISTIC FRAMEWORK?

An Experiment by Richard House and Jill Hall

On 7 December 1990, thirteen members of the Norwich Group Process Training Group met for a day workshop - the broad theme was the issue of accreditation. This training group, which has been meeting every second month since the end of 1989, came together originally in response to an initiative by the Norwich Collective to offer training in group facilitation leading to the possibility of accreditation. It was an open question as to how much it would be up to us to define what form our accreditation would take. We share a background of extensive experience as participants in both facilitated and peer groups - some of us already leading groups of our own and some of us considering doing so, some currently practising as therapists and counsellors and some of us still in training. This brief article attempts to distill some of the principal ideas that emerged from the workshop mentioned above.

### The Male Method

The group decided to set up some accreditation simulations in order to explore the feelings and issues thrown up by the accreditation process. Several alternative simulations were enacted including one in which all four members of the accreditation panel were assessing the applicant in her absence, and in relation to a set of strict, quantitative guidelines. We all felt deeply disturbed by this exercise: we realised how 'safe' it made us feel as accreditors and how unsafe it felt for the applicant (who, as a group member, was observing the process). As such a procedure serves to ease the fear of the accreditors while increasing that of the applicant, we asked ourselves for whose benefit it was devised. Someone remarked on how very male it was in conception and practice. It was also pointed out that any 'improvement' or attempt to safeguard against the dangers of an accreditation procedure of this kind, with all its attendant values and assumptions, could only lead towards a tightening of the system, in the sense of generating more and more rules in order to become ever more rigorous - *ad infinitum*. In other words, once one accepts the logic of didactic, quantitative accreditation and its underlying rationale, then any modification or streamlining of such a system will tend towards an ever more restrictive and limiting form of accreditation.

We then experimented with a more 'enlightened' version, but still the personhood of the applicant seemed secondary. We kept experiencing the excitement of touching new ground only to catch ourselves lurching back into old habits and assumptions. Eventually we tentatively sketched out the following format for consideration: three of the panel members were to be chosen by the applicant herself, the fourth being a 'professional' accreditor from an established organisation, and with a consultant monitoring the panel's deliberations and offering process feedback from time to time as the dynamics of the accreditation meeting unfolded. We thought it important to keep a 'cross fertilisation' between established methods and new procedures in order to avoid the consolidation of deep rifts and factions, with a subsequent breakdown in communication between them.

### Openness

We then looked at what the principal features of an alternative, learning-focused model of accreditation might be. The group came up with a number of ideas. First, the focus would be on **process** rather than **product**, openness rather than premature closure, learning rather than judgement. Attention would be focused far more on the personhood of **all** the participants involved rather than on rules, regulations and bureaucratic procedures. The view was expressed that if a peer-group model was used then it was important to create an environment which is sufficiently safe for, and conducive to, the expression of critical or negative feelings towards a potential accredee. Honesty and challenge are essential ingredients of any meaningful accreditation procedure. One member said 'It's the most difficult thing in the world to be direct, to be honest, to be straight with my peers - I don't know how to do it! (Do we not prefer 'one of them' - a so-called objective, external accreditation board - to do it for us? We ourselves can then remain nice and supportive, allowing an impersonal panel to carry the critical part of ourselves and our feelings about our own and our peers' shortcomings. Do we perhaps help to create the very thing that we claim we don't want?)

There is a very difficult *quality* to the judgements involved in the open and truthful expression of feelings towards a peer-group member and the impersonal judgements that occur if there is no relationship established with the person being assessed; the former may actually be an enormous **gift** to the recipient, whereas the latter is inherently alienating and disempowering, detached, as it is, from its living context. Another crucial difference is that any interpersonal material that arises through the sharing of reservations and criticisms can be worked through within the group - those offering the judgements will be equally required to look at their own process.

## **The Bad Side**

One of the group members then suggested an exercise in which he deliberately focused upon all his shortcomings as a therapist while the accrediting group strenuously attempted to contradict his self-criticisms and reframe them in a positive way - in other words, he had to show us how bad he was rather than impress us with all his credentials and capabilities. We had enormous fun with this, and the accredittee found that he 'got far deeper far more quickly' than when using the more usual self-appraisal exercise. (He felt it was no co-incidence that the following week six of his clients felt free to challenge him on the very points he himself had shared in the group.) Thus, if we can turn things on their head and they can be so useful, then what is it about that we are so locked into the conventional mode?

Other points and questions brought to our attention were:

- the very qualities that we might view as being most crucial in a counsellor or therapist - namely, love, honesty, integrity, intuition, therapeutic presence - are inherently unquantifiable.
- does not accreditation feed off fundamental vulnerabilities that exist in all of us (for example, the need for affirmation and for reassurance of our worthiness)? Could it then have the effect of insulating us from fully experiencing and integrating these vulnerabilities? - they could, potentially, be 'accredited away' with the stroke of a pen.
- it is important to acknowledge our deep need for recognition, for marking our competence in the work we have undertaken, within some kind of social context. Perhaps formal accreditation is not the best form of social act to fulfil this need and we should do well to devise other modes of recognition. It does not seem enough just to be left affirming ourselves; we want something more. Hence the common experience of ambivalence around the subject.
- a focus on formal accreditation may possibly render us less satisfactory practitioners, to the extent that we may really believe that obtaining a piece of paper means that we have 'arrived' as therapists; a formal qualification could be used as a substitute for taking responsibility for the quality of our work as an everyday personal matter.
- there is the danger of unintentionally communicating the idea that a piece of paper guarantees competence, clients thus being exposed to values which are contrary to those of Humanistic Psychology.
- the very fact of pursuing accreditation must of itself affect, and all too likely get in the way of and distort, the training experience and how we are in it: self-exploration and development could be seriously impeded rather than regarded as the core of our training.

- an accreditation procedure which is based on the filling in of forms encourages the idea that therapy is a science, whereas we felt it more fitting to regard it as an art; viewing it as the latter necessitates a completely different approach that stresses quality rather than quantity, integrity rather than qualifications, creativity and intuition rather than relying on set techniques.
- accreditation that draws solely on written information ultimately disempowers **everyone** involved in the process, rather than being a vehicle for empowerment and responsibility-taking.
- perhaps we have to face the challenge that accreditation **in itself** could promote rather than safeguard against the abuse of power; does it not increase the divide between practitioner and client, and between 'the profession' and the rest of society?

Of necessity, only a very cursory and sketchy review of the themes covered at the workshop has been presented here. It has not been possible to discuss in any depth some other important issues that came up for the group - the role of power in accreditation, for example, or the debate between those favouring the continuing evolution of new and flexible modes of accreditation procedure and those who feared that any form of accreditation created more problems than it solved.

As a group we firmly believe that any system of accreditation should as far as possible be consistent with the philosophy on which our approach to personal development is based - for example, personal responsibility as opposed to external direction. We recognise that this endeavour is likely to be fraught with difficulties and tensions, but we wish to explore rather than avoid them. We hope that the ideas that we have shared here will help to stimulate a wider debate to which readers might wish to contribute. As accreditation within counselling and therapy is still in its infancy, it could be that dialogue of this nature will perhaps make a substantive contribution towards, and may even have a tangible effect upon, the future direction that the accreditation movement takes in Britain.

The group is organising a one-day experiential conference on the issue of accreditation, to be held at the University Graduate Centre, Cambridge University on Friday 27th Sept. 1991

For bookings and further details write to:

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