CONFERENCE REPORTS

A Tale of Two Conferences

Organisational Form and Accreditation Ethos
by Richard House

This is the story of two conferences, which could hardly have been more different from one another, and I hope that this brief, impressionistic piece will throw some light upon the issue of accreditation — which has received wide coverage in recent numbers of this journal — particularly in terms of the way in which the very structure and form of a gathering of practitioners can tell us a great deal about the tacit assumptions about and orientations towards the dynamics of accreditation and its shadow, discreditation.

Readers of this article may well know of the second national conference on the dynamics of accreditation (hereafter referred to as 'the Cambridge conference'), organised in association with the Norwich Collective, and held in Cambridge on 11-12th June 1992. The other conference to which I will make reference is the George Moran Memorial Meeting, a day conference on the theme of psychoanalytical approaches to infant and child development, held on 27th June 1992 at the Middlesex Hospital, London, under the auspices of the Anna Freud Centre (hereafter referred to as 'the London conference').

At the London conference, the setting was a large lecture theatre holding some 400 people, with those giving papers being seated behind a large table on a stage at the front of the theatre. Every contribution from the stage was applauded by the audience, while very few if any of the contributions from the floor were acknowledged in this way. For the most part the conference took the following form: most of the presenters of papers (who were often referred to as 'Professor this' or 'Dr that') read their texts verbatim from prepared manuscripts, sometimes conveying such complex material so rapidly that I found it difficult to follow the flow of the argument. The form taken by the conference conveyed very clearly a picture of the experts, one might say 'the accredited', handing down their wisdom to those of lesser stature who were aspiring to accredited status (I am using 'accredited' here in more of a general sense, and not in the more limited and strict sense).

I was particularly struck by one comment from the floor: one of the presenters had presented some case material involving a young boy sitting around a very expensive, polished table with the rest of his family and demanding some attention from them. The boy suddenly started to scratch the table with his cutlery, much to the chagrin of his father. The presenter (who had, I hope I recall accurately, been working with the child psychotherapeutically), proceeded

to offer plausible-sounding psychoanalytic interpretations of the boy's behaviour. When the conference was opened to the floor a bit later, the second person to speak prefaced his remarks by saying that he had no psychoanalytic qualifications or credentials whatsoever. He then went on to offer an alternative interpretation of the boy's destructive behaviour: perhaps the table was, for the child, a cultural symbol, representing for him the lack of real contact between himself and his parents (I am of course recounting the floor discussant's comments from memory, which might make my description less than faithfully accurate, though I believe that I am conveying the sense of what was said accurately).

It was interesting and revealing that in his response to the floor discussant's comments on his paper, the presenter unambiguously rejected the alternative interpretation. But it was only later that the poignancy of this alternative interpretation struck me with full force (by this time, unfortunately, it was too late to share my thoughts, as the next paper was being presented). The discussant's interpretation of the boy's behaviour could very well have been an unconscious commentary (or a 'communicative' statement, to use Robert Langs's term) on the whole way in which the conference itself was set up, that is, 'lack of real (emotional, feeling) contact', 'lack of real communication between those present', the powerful and the accredited clearly delineated from the unaccredited and those aspiring to accredited status, and so on.

The Cambridge conference was very different. The conference is discussed in more substantive depth by Sue Hatfield and Cal Cannon in the previous article. My purpose here is not to describe the content of the conference, but rather its form. I also want to point out the way in which observing form and structure can tell us a very great deal about implicit orientation to the issues of accreditation and the power underlying the phenomenal form taken by such events. In the plenary sessions those present sat in a circle (granted, it is somewhat easier to set up a circle of 40 people than it would be 400). There was very little sense of hierarchy in this forum. To the extent that I felt disempowered in this context, it was absolutely clear to me that I was doing this to myself; whereas in the London conference, on the other hand, the very nature of the set-up had the effect of disempowering the unaccredited, of splitting those present into 'expert' and 'novice', and of inscribing the assumed differential status of those present into the very form taken by the proceedings.

Discussion was open and free in the Cambridge conference, and comments were heard and responded to on their merits, and were rarely judged on the basis of the credentials of the person making the contribution (though there were certain occasions when I did feel that there were some signs of this happening). I am reminded of a letter sent to the *Guardian* many years ago complaining about the practice of certain letter-writers to national newspapers signing their letters 'Dr' or 'Professor' so-and-so, as if this badge of academic accreditation somehow conferred greater gravitas and legitimacy to what they had to say than if they were just a plain old 'Mr' or 'Ms'.

The intolerant and impatient (and quite possibly projecting) part of me came away from the

London conference asking, 'Just why is it that the psychoanalysts don't seem prepared to use their own theoretical insights (with which I have a great deal of sympathy) to shine a light on and question their own behaviour?' It was a similar question that screamed out at me from the pages of a recent book that describes in painstaking detail the infamous civil war between the factions around Anna Freud and Melanie Klein that for a decade or more threatened to rend assunder the British Psycho-Analytic Society (King and Steiner, 1990)... what on earth was the use of their sophisticated theoretical formulations if they weren't able to interrogate their own behaviour in the same light? What a rich vein of insight could be mined from the consideration of the dynamics of accreditation in the light of the insights of psychodynamic and object relations theory (see, for example, Wasdell, 1992).

In contrast, I came away from the Cambridge conference confirmed in the view that if we as humanistic practitioners embrace any form of unproblematised didactic accreditation or licensing system we will be betraying the fundamental principles which inform our practice and our very way of being in our work. For how can I encourage my clients to take full responsibility for their own lives if I as a counsellor give away my own power by relying upon external validation in preference to internal self-valuation and personal empowerment?

I strongly believe that the insights of psychodynamic theory can make a vital contribution to the cause of personal development and fulfilment that lie at the very heart of the humanistic project. But while practitioners refuse to subject their own process (both at an individual and an institutional level) to the same painstaking analytical rigour and openness that they use to explore the psyches of their 'patients', then the value of that potential contribution will be severely compromised. And it will risk the unfortunate consequence of an understandable but unwarranted wholesale rejection of the analytic approach — even by those of us whose goals and ideals are by no means inconsistent with many of the insights that psychodynamic thinking provides.

References

King, P. and Steiner, R. (1990) *The Freud-Klein Controversies*, 1941-45, Tavistock/Routlege, London

Wasdell, D. (1992) *In the Shadow of Accreditation*. Self and Society 20 (1), pp. 3-14