

The Independent Therapists Network

Nick Totton

The Independent Therapists Network is now in being. That was the unanimous outcome of the second network conference held in Birmingham in March, which adopted an interim constitution in line with the initial proposal around which people came together: a proposal for 'an alternative model of accountability and validation . . . which actually makes use of what we know as therapists about human interaction'.

Principles

The best way to communicate the approach of the Network is probably to reproduce here the first part of the interim constitution.

1. The Network exists to further and support among its members good practice which is open about its aims and underlying principles.

2. The Network also seeks to provide people looking for help with a context of basic security within which to make their own decisions about which practitioner and which form of work is appropriate for them, in the confidence that Network members are able to provide and sustain a suitable environment for the work they offer.

3. To the above ends, member groups recognise that practitioners must take responsibility for ensuring that they are able adequately to fulfil their role. Member groups are committed to supporting this responsibility through continuous self and peer assessment, monitoring, and challenge.

4. Member groups know and stand by the work of the individuals who comprise them. Each group takes responsibility for resolving any problems that emerge in the practice of its members, including any complaints made by clients; and is prepared for this process to be monitored by other member groups, and ultimately for its membership of the network to stand or fall by how it carries out this commitment. Similarly, each group takes responsibility for helping to resolve any problems that emerge in the practice of its peer groups.

5. The Network has no commitment to any specific model of therapy, therapeutic training, or the therapeutic relationship. It specifically favours diversity and ecological complexity.

6. The Network seeks to develop a culture of openness, mutuality, support and

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challenge within and between its member groups, so as to ensure good and empowering practice.

Structure

The constitution establishes that the unit of membership is a group of at least five, and usually no more than ten, members who stand by each others' work, vouch for each others' good practice, and sort out any problems that arise. Each member group must in turn be linked with at least two other such groups in a similar relationship of mutual validation and responsibility.

This means in effect that each practitioner's integrity is bound up with that of their colleagues (at least 14 other people in their own group and the two link groups). And this relationship of support and responsibility extends outward, through inter-group links, to the whole of the Network. The safeguard for clients is that they can take their grievance to any of these fourteen or more people — or indeed to anyone in the Network; and that if a practitioner's group members don't resolve the issue to the satisfaction of their link groups, those links will be withdrawn and the whole group will lapse from membership.

The Network's structure, in effect, is what the Network stands for: mutual openness, support and challenge at every level. There is no one shared code of practice; but each member group must publish its guidelines (and the names of its members) to the whole Network. Similarly, there is no shared position on therapeutic methods, theory or training: the Network supports diversity and plurality, and recognises that there are many ways of

becoming an effective practitioner.

What constitutes 'good practice' is not a question with a single answer; but openness about our practice allows a wide and ongoing debate, including criticism and challenge. The Network's whole ethos is that there is no centre to give authoritative judgement; individuals must take responsibility for their own definition of what good practice means, and share this definition publicly.

The Current Situation

Although the Network unambiguously exists, its sound construction requires a lengthy exploratory period in which we really get to know each other, our practice, and what membership of the network might mean. Accordingly, at this moment the Network has no full members, only conditional ones. For a group to be a full member, it needs to have at least five people in it; a statement of ethics; and two other groups willing to form links of mutual validation and responsibility. We know that there are perhaps a dozen and a half groups working towards this position; and we hope soon to be able to announce the first full members, along with the conditional ones. Meanwhile, there are something like 150-300 people already wanting to be involved; some of these in established groups, some in forming groups, and some hoping to join together with other individuals. We intend soon to produce lists of 'people looking for groups' and 'groups looking for people'.

There is also an unresolved issue about the Network's name. Although it's generally agreed that 'Independent Therapists Network' is catchy and straightforward, there are a number of people who don't

feel that their identity is reflected in the term 'therapist'. Also, quite a lot of people feel the 'ITN' acronym is — as someone put it — 'already taken'! But finding the perfect alternative isn't easy, and we haven't yet managed it. So 'ITN' is a provisional title.

Looking Forwards

As we begin working together and moving towards a recognisable form, we become aware that to honour the underlying principles leads us to a structure based not on representative democracy, but on autonomous self-responsible action, and on pluralistic consensus — the ideal outcome of decision-making being a way of proceeding which allows everyone's goals and methods to be pursued in parallel. This may sound (and may be) cumbersome, but it is part of what seems to us an important and exciting adventure in moving away from pyramidal hierarchies of authority into unknown territory of self-responsibility and multi-centred networks.

In particular, we find ourselves seeking an organisation which can accommodate the fear, and accompanying internal critic, which are seldom absent in responses to the issue of accreditation: the voices which tell us all 'You're no good', and pressure us to bow to the supposed authority of others. The Critic will undoubtedly reappear in the Network; but hopefully our structure will let us main-

tain enough self-awareness and self-belief to process it effectively. This is already happening: we have already moved from a much more defensive and complaint-centred approach towards one which fully acknowledges the need to deal with complaints, but within a positive and creative context.

For the Network to work successfully requires a high degree of commitment, response-ability and awakesness from those who are part of it. If we start treating it as a sort of union card, an automatic safety-net on which we can rely unthinkingly, then it will become worse than useless. In a whole number of ways, we have to put energy into the Network's functioning: not only the work of administering the structure, but the circulating of information of every kind, and the informing ourselves about each others' practice.

We should be very clear that we are not offering second best here — some kind of jury-rigged apology for a 'proper' accreditation system. If we do it right, we are offering a jewel beyond price: a network of practitioners who feel good enough about themselves and their work to be prepared to share it openly with others; who feel good enough about each others' work to be prepared to share responsibility for it. With the Network, through confronting the structures of transference and projection, we have a chance to seed a new culture of therapy and counselling.

If you want to know more about the Network, write to ITN, 326 Burley Road, Leeds LS4 2NZ, or phone 0113 275 5984. You will receive a copy of the interim constitution, other material about the current state of play, and a questionnaire to indicate your own involvement.