



ACCREDITATION — THE DEBATE GOES ON

A Psychotherapist by Any Other Name

Alix Pirani

Reading the article that follows nearly fourteen years after it first appeared in *Self & Society* I am struck by the familiarity of the concerns and dilemmas it exposes. Though they have taken on different emphases and are now perhaps less threatening, they are still with us, and probably always will be. But I am aware, too, of what has actually become more threatening: the context in which we work. My perspective then was innocent of what Thatcherism was going to do to us all, of the increase in economic and emotional depression, in the insanity of our world; the addition, to a clientele with choice, of a clientele who are derelict and have no choice, where we know that we can't save many of them from going under. And we too are fighting to survive and are thrust into competition with our friends.

I feel we must learn to recognise the

bureaucratic complacent defences we may erect against facing that competitiveness, and the fight-flight that helps us to avoid seeing the tragic society in which we live. And I am heartened by efforts, forced on us by the emergencies of our time, to regain our hold on the spiritual roots and humanistic values that are the essential basis of our work, which I think is the practice of responsible love.

The AHPP, not being a training organisation, has the advantage here of some degree of detachment, able to promote and explore those values without the political complications and power issues which beset the trainers. Which brings us back to the question of trust, for if we can't in AHPP deal openly with our mistrust of one another, who are we to criticise others, be it the UKCP or the media, for their mistrust of us?

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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, as recommended by a working party set up in 1975.

In the many AHPP meetings I've attended we have worked through fundamental issues of standards, ethics, professionalism, self-assessment, exclusion/inclusion, trust and mistrust, public relations and the 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 the designation of 'psychotherapist', a term many of us adopt to describe what we are doing, and 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 our own maturing.

Yet how to assess ability? As soon as we attempt to lay down specific requirements in training and experience 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 specifications.

Time and again it comes back to trust, and the need for 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 the careful organisation of mutual support, nourishment and education. Despite all we may say about humanistic values, as psychotherapists working unobserved and in isolation we are capable of becoming very defensive, denying our blindneses and our needs, and ending up getting our satisfaction from controlling and manipulating our clients. Lacking the rigorous discipline of the psychoanalysts, we fall into the power of our own unbounded egos. For me the spectre of the restrictive authoritarian Freudian is now equalled by

that of the seductive power-seeking Humanistic. (These are, of course, only my own personal 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 there are also economic considerations: those who are recognised by the Government will be eligible to receive public funds, should such funds ever be made available for the promotion of 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, 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 intercommunication or any agreed way of defining themselves. The upshot was that this loose collection (about 30 organisations were represented) declared at a gathering last July that they were not ready to move towards registration. They then decided to meet for a weekend in January to find out what and who they really 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 concerns were 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 communication 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 or unacceptable and scapegoated; but I was also aware of the degree of curiosity and interest in them, and how much they

are needed to revitalize the practice of therapy. We can contribute our experience of working with greater openness, depth, courage and creativity than do many traditional therapies, of working with the body, and with spirituality. The experience we have gained over the last 15 years or so is a potential source of strength and growth to a hard-pressed profession. However, it remains to be seen whether any moves towards registration or definition of training would be so restrictive as to exclude us. Even if they were, 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 ourselves have to think in terms of 'us doing something to them', an interpretation which leads inevitably to fear about 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 that 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 surfaced just 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.

