

# Accountable to Whom?

John Lees

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Brian Thorne's article in the September 1995 edition of *Self & Society*, entitled 'The Accountable Therapist', raises many important issues concerning the practice of therapy — for example, his recognition of 'the essential mysteriousness of personality' in his work with Sally. The human being is, indeed, full of mystery and wonder. So it is a pity that some therapists feel it necessary to indulge in reductive thinking, pseudo-scientism, or limited — and sometimes fanatically held — theoretical perspectives. No amount of clever theorising will substitute for the fact that it is 'essential for me to love my clients if genuine healing is to occur'. His concern about the darker, or shadow, side of our work is also to be welcomed — for instance, the temptation to inflate our sense of self-importance when trying to understand our fellow human beings, instead of just sharing in their 'weakness, vulnerability, embarrassment and ineptitude'. When all is said and done, we, too, are weak, vulnerable and inept. Indeed we have to be careful to avoid adding to that 'sense of power' that we as therapists already possess.

I also share Brian Thorne's admiration and respect for the work of Carl Rogers. Unlike him, I was trained psychodynamically and not in the person-centred tradition, but I have subsequently had to educate myself in other schools of

thought, largely as a result of lecturing to undergraduates on eclectic 'introduction to counselling' courses. This was originally just a curriculum requirement, but has since become a welcome part of my own professional development, enabling me not only to learn about, but also to respect, other schools of thought. It is therefore out of conviction that I have recently evolved a broadly pluralistic approach to teaching, believing that students should be given the opportunity to debate and critically evaluate the different schools and come to their own conclusions about them.

Teaching has also enabled me to step outside the insularity of our profession and attempt to deal with the comments and criticisms of students, for whom nothing is sacrosanct — and to value the importance of other people's points of view, particularly if they are different from my own. And this leads me on to my next point since, as well as finding much to be admired in Brian Thorne's article, there is also much that concerns me. When speaking about the Tavistock consultancy trainings, for example, he refers to 'traumatised businessmen' and 'impenetrable interpretations of group processes and their [the group leaders'] abject capitulation to the second hands of their watches'. I am saddened by the dismissive tone of

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this, and by his somewhat disparaging references to theory and interpretation. I agree that such Tavistock events — I presume he is referring to the so-called 'Leicester conference-style' group relations events — can promote pathology, anxiety and trauma amongst the participants. But my own experience of being a student and a staff member on similar courses is that they are excellent at enabling us to tolerate extremes of emotion. Elation, excitement, anxiety, anger and despair are some of the emotions that I have experienced on such courses. This has enhanced my capacity for tolerating such extremes in other settings — and with my clients — for which I am most grateful. Some people are able to draw on the positive aspects of the experience for many years afterwards. Something similar could be said about theory and interpretation. These can indeed make therapists feel 'important and erudite' and out of touch with the 'uniqueness of the individual'. But they can also, used judiciously, provide relief from suffering — at least that's my opinion.

It seems to me that, in looking at other people's work, it is essential to pay attention to the motives of the worker — as well as to one's own, particularly where one is adopting a critical standpoint. Just as there are manipulative colleagues who work in an interpretative way, or whose work has a strong theoretical underpinning, or who work on group relations events, so there are also many loving and sensitive ones. Rather than indulging in blanket condemnations of others, Brian Thorne would be better employed in looking at himself. With my 'psychodynamic hat' on, it seems to me that his contemp-

tuous remarks betray an element of unconscious aggression which he has projected on to others. From the person-centred point of view I find them singularly lacking in unconditional positive regard for his fellow practitioners.

When considering the question of motives I find the work of Guggenbühl-Craig helpful. Using Jungian terminology he says, in effect, that we all have a therapeutic shadow. Unless we acknowledge this and try to manage it, it will unconsciously and insidiously affect our work. There is no doubt that the therapy relationship can be exploited by therapists to further their own ends, in abuse of their privileged position. Such therapists tend to feed what Guggenbühl-Craig calls the charlatan shadow. And Brian Thorne, in his article, is justified in being concerned about such people. But there is always the danger that, in our haste to overcome the charlatan shadow, we fall into the arms of the false prophet version and simply drive our charlatan shadow underground, so to speak. We assume a position of moral righteousness and professional arrogance, whilst our aggressive and self-seeking impulses rumble in the unconscious.

An important issue raised in Brian Thorne's article is accountability, professional accreditation and registration. And, again, rather than condemning registration — as he seems to do — I think it is more helpful, and realistic, to see it in terms of having both a positive and negative side. There are certainly many people posing as therapists who are ill-qualified to do so. Hopefully as a result of registration some of these people will be weeded out. Yet there is no doubt that registration

can also be misused — the tool of a competitive and dehumanising culture where 'individual worth is construed almost entirely in terms of research output or the ability to attract funds'. And of course registration will not completely prevent charlatanism and the abuse of clients. But Brian Thorne need not worry about this. Even if, in the coming years, we were to face an Orwellian 1984-style scenario, those very qualities that he acknowledges in human beings — the 'mysteriousness of personality' and the 'divinisation of humanity' — would ultimately triumph. Throughout the ages no amount of persecution and repression has been able to eradicate the spirit of the heretic, the dis-

sident or the independent of mind. In fact quite the contrary. Wasn't it Solzhenitsyn who said that the camps in the Gulag made scoundrels into greater scoundrels (stealing, for instance, their friends' last piece of bread) and saintly people into even more saintly people?

Faced with the pressures — and dangers — of accountability we can resolve to 'give unto Caesar what is due to Caesar and unto God what is due to God'. Meanwhile, irrespective of the dictates of external authority, we would be well-advised to remain accountable to ourselves — and our God or Daemon, if we have one.

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## Further Reading

Adolf Guggenbühl-Craig, *Power in the Helping Professions*, Spring Publications, 1971

Brian Thorne, 'The Accountable Therapist' in *Self & Society*, 23(4)

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# Dreams

## Julian Nangle

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Last night I had a dream that I was playing camp-site cricket with a girl in a red dress. She was in her late teens, as was I. There were others in our group, but we had decided to play cricket together, although we had not known or been particularly attracted to one another before. As the 'match' progressed I became aware of a deepening of feeling for this girl

through my enjoyment of the game. This is important: my attraction for her was not separate or apart from the game we were playing — it was because of it. She was bowling at me, in fact throwing the ball at me very fast and I recall it hit the 'fall-over' wicket and as I went to retrieve it I wondered whether I might protest that she was throwing it, but decided not to.

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