Humanistic NVQs?

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The whole world of counselling and psychotherapy has been struggling with NVQs for a couple of years now. What are NVQs? The initials stand for National Vocational Qualifications, which are standardised qualifications, divided into a number of levels. These levels are based on competencies. In other words, you measure what somebody can do, and award them a qualification at a specific NVQ level for that achievement. It is not important what course they went through or what other achievements they may have had to their credit: it is simply the present-day competence that is of interest.

At first blush this sounds like a great idea. Very democratic, it enables us to evade the clutches of expensive training courses and find our own way to excellence.

There have always been doubts, however, as to whether this model fits with counselling or psychotherapy. The doubters have pointed to the knowledge base which is required for a therapist (not covered), the values which are inculcated (not covered), the inner experiences based on one's own therapy (not covered), the intimacy of the relationships involved over time (not covered), and so on. But so far the game has all gone one way: both the British Association for Counselling and the UK Council for Psychotherapy have gone down the road of building up elements and items which can be put together to make a qualification at level 5. But an interesting angle has come to my notice from quite an unexpected source: the world of psychometrics.

One of the most regular publications in the world of psychometrics is the *Selection & Development Review*, published by the British Psychological Society. In issue after issue, it publicises and analyses the latest tests and measures of ability, aptitude, personality and so forth. In the issue for February 1995, however, there is an article by Mitch McCrimmon of the PA Consulting Group, entitled 'After Competencies, Then What?' He draws a distinction between, on the one hand, precisely defined jobs with clear objectives, and on the other, jobs which require an entrepreneurial approach. For the former, NVQs may be quite appropriate, but for the latter, it seems not. Why is this? 'The essence of entrepreneurial action is that you have to *act first* and then reflect on what does and what does not work. Too much detailed prior thought spells paralysis. Not enough is known in advance about the likely consequences of various alternatives. Entrepreneurial action is essentially *exploratory* or experimental. It is *drawn* or led by a fast changing environment, rather than *pushed* by rational thinking and deciding.'

This begins to sound very much like the humanistic approach to life. Maslow used to say that at every moment we had an existential choice between safety and freedom. If we choose freedom, we have to do without the luxury of knowing exactly

what we are doing, because we are on the edge of choice.

McCrimmon goes on to elaborate, saying that the whole emphasis of modern management is on empowerment, rather than control. (Another humanistic concept coming in here!) Control goes very well with the NVQ approach, empowerment does not. Similar considerations apply to the distinction between knowledge use and knowledge creation. And he urges that 'the *delivery* values of efficiency and having well-defined slots for people will likely stifle creativity in an entrepreneurial context. Empowerment of knowledge workers means that people should be left to their own devices, within reason, if they are to have any hope of developing their own brand of entrepreneurial flair.'

He goes on to suggest that rather than managing people directly, it is more effective to manage the environment in which they work; but competency profiling (the NVQ approach) is about managing people directly.

Now counsellors and psychotherapists are not entrepreneurs, but these arguments seem to me to apply very directly in this other field. If we are aiming at the empowerment of clients, surely it is appropriate to want empowerment for ourselves. We certainly want, in the field of humanistic approaches, to encourage creativity and not to stifle it. And so it seems to me that we can learn much from this argument, and need to question quite fundamentally the value of NVQs in the field of counselling and psychotherapy. If we are the self-managing people described by Mitch McCrimmon, it cannot be useful to apply a model which only applies to people who are strictly controlled and managed by others.

I would like to add to this interesting thought from McCrimmon a couple of thoughts of my own. Because the NVQ idea comes from cognitive behavioural origins, with their emphasis on functionalism, it has to ignore two crucial areas for psychotherapy: the unconscious, and the transpersonal. Cognitive psychology has no place for these. Now we may have a variety of opinions about the unconscious — some preferring to talk about experience which is out of awareness, or unfinished business, or dissociation, or restimulation — there is a long list of concepts, all of which have to do with the idea that more than one level of consciousness is going on in the relationship. Petruska Clarkson's excellent book *The Therapeutic Relationship* suggests that there are five different relationships all going on at the same time in therapy. One of these is the transference and countertransference relationship, which is mostly about the unconscious.

The other area — the transpersonal — is also covered by a variety of terms. Some speak of the higher Self, some of the superconscious, some of the Guidance Self, some of the soul, some of the imaginal world, some of sacred psychology — there is again a long list of concepts, all of which have to do with the idea that something essentially spiritual is involved here. If we ignore this level of consciousness, we do so at our peril: Clarkson again has some useful remarks on this, and of course I have written a whole book about it.

If NVQs have nothing to say about these important areas of the work, it seems to me that they can have nothing

to say about psychotherapy as a whole. They can only deal with types of therapy which do not handle such material, such as the various forms of cognitive-behavioural therapy.

So if on the one hand NVQs cannot handle entrepreneurial activity, which I have argued is close to what therapists practise — and on the other hand they cannot handle the unconscious or the transpersonal — then they cannot be of much relevance to humanistic practitioners. At any rate that is what I would argue.

It is quite sad for me to say this, because I was involved with the development of NVQs in the early stages, and participated in a couple of the originating workshops. I tried to give the idea every chance. But the closer I got to it. and the more I learned about it, the more clear I became that I could not participate any further, in spite of many requests to do so. In my opinion, the NVQ for humanistic practitioners is a dead duck.

Conference Reports

Women & Men Working Together for a Change, 15th & 16th June 1996

About 150 people attended this conference, which was held in the beautiful building of the Royal Geographical Society in Kensington Gore. The weather was beautiful too, and it was possible to make use of the attractive lawn behind the house. As we went in, we picked up our programme and our name badge, and then went to a table to sign up for the workshops to be held in the afternoon. With our programmes, we had a piece of paper showing where each workshop would be held, half for men and half for women. As we went in to the lecture hall, we passed through four screens, pushing through narrow gaps to get a sense of penetrating through veils to the real experience. All round the hall were large paintings on loose cloths, to give a sense of occasion, and on the stage stood two huge masks of African appearance, one at each side. Lolli Aboutboul was responsible for all the art work, and she was given a hand at an appropriate time.

The organisers gave a brief introduction (Bernadette Vallely and Richard Olivier) and we went into the first presentation, by Bea Campbell, who had just arrived after a journey. She talked about crime, and made the point that crime was mostly masculine, but no one ever said so. No one pointed to masculinity as the problem. She made it clear that she was talking about the dominant form of masculinity in our culture (sometimes called hegemonic masculinity) which has as its main reference point the avoidance of anything feminine. This anti-femininity often became actual misogyny. But in reality young men were more in danger from other young men than from anyone else. We then broke for refreshments.

There was quite a nice table set out with food and drinks, and you could buy