

Statutory Registration: A Response to Digby Tantam

Denis Postle

It seems that neither Digby Tantam nor, by implication, the UKCP appreciate the extent and depth of feeling and argument that exist against the actions they are taking in favour of registration, and more particularly statutory registration. When I read this letter I was sad to realise that concerns I would have preferred to discover were prejudices or misplaced anxiety on my part were in fact well-founded.

To begin at the end of his piece: Tantam says 'registration restricts entry into the field . . . I have no objection to restricting entry to those people who will make good psychotherapists, that is to technically sound and ethically committed practitioners. Would anybody question this?' Well yes, I would question all of it. 'Restrict' implies gate-keepers, and gate-keepers imply gate-keeping. Who controls the controllers? He seems unaware of, or even applauds, this unwarranted assertion of 'power over' in our field. There is an extensive literature on the problems that arise from persons who assert the right to define human nature, that's to say, what is 'normal' and 'natural', as psychotherapists do, when they have the power to enforce their definitions. See Chorover, *Genesis to Genocide*, for a good review of this.

Secondly, but just as important, I dis-

agree that 'a good psychotherapist is someone who is technically sound and ethically committed'. I refer Digby Tantam to Guy Gladstone's piece in the same issue of *Self & Society* where he says 'the point . . . is not the discipline, the doing, the variety of activities in which one is engaged but the identity, the being that precedes the doing.'

After listing his core values, which seem to reflect a medical perspective on human nature, Tantam says 'I'm not sure how many people would contend there is no risk of exploitation.' A tendentious question. I'd ask the reverse, who contends that there is a risk of exploitation? How many people? And outside of the media and UKCP, who are they? I believe that this supposed exploitation of clients is a spontaneous side-effect of the development of the UKCP, something that conveniently legitimises its actions. Any tide brings flotsam and jetsam with it and the tide of professionalisation has brought 'exploitation of clients'. See Mowbray, *The Case Against Psychotherapy Registration*, for the extensive arguments from both sides of the Atlantic challenging the exploitation myth.

Tantam questions whether I and others concede there is a problem and what my

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preferred solution would be. Yes there is a problem, but it seems to me to lie with individuals and groups of people who are significantly unaware of the extent to which they enact 'power over' attitudes to social organisation and relationships, while claiming to represent good practice. Part of my and other people's objections to UKCP is that this seems to have been transparently true of that organisation. For example I find it paradoxical and disingenuous of Tantam to lay aside his role as chair to reply to my letter and to make a personal response. Why? Because from the beginning, and still today, UKCP is a collection of organisations: it has never listened to individuals.

It seems to me characteristic of UKCP's unaware 'power over' posture that it has never to my knowledge sought the opinion of existing practitioners and asked what they might want in a trade association. It is also disingenuous to try to persuade me that this is a professional organisation when it is overwhelmingly composed of training organisations. I have been close enough to the struggles of one training organisation faced with collapse due to its non-membership, to continue to assert that UKCP is a trade association that is engaged in structuring the market for psychotherapy. I have no problem with there being a psychotherapy trade association, we have just as much right to organise as, say, cement manufacturers, but calling psychotherapy a profession, as though it were a unified field, is to conceal the wide diversity of psychotherapeutic practice, the extreme improbability of a viable definition of it, and the non-representative nature of the UKCP.

To return to the point about 'power over'. David Kalisch put it very well in the

letter before Tantam's: 'UKCP is a dominator hierarchy seeking to borrow power from another dominator hierarchy in order to impose its dominance . . . It is not possible to canvas for pluralism and diversity whilst voting for statutory registration'. That UKCP could get itself into the position of claiming to do both speaks to me of a deep lack of awareness of just how ubiquitous 'power-over' dominance can be. 'Inevitably a hierarchy formed', Emmy van Deurzen Smith admitted in her interview about UKCP in *Self & Society* some months back. But hierarchies only seem to be inevitable if we are ignorant, or forgetful, of the range of other choices. It is precisely because 'power over' dominance often seem to be 'second nature' that we need constantly to give attention to seeking it out and eliminating it, both in our practice and in our trade associations.

To me this is a fundamental issue for people who call themselves psychotherapists, whose clientele, if they are anything like mine, are very frequently preoccupied with issues around power and its expression, both personal and social. Yet UKCP is an organisation consisting primarily of training and accrediting bodies that is not electable by, or accountable to, the people it claims to represent; by definition 'a dominator hierarchy', an organisation that embodies and endorses domination in its structure.

For an organisation claiming to be a professional grouping of therapists to have failed at this level seems to me to be bizarrely incongruent. Insofar as I concede at all that there is a problem, that clients might be exploited or demeaned, this question of non-accountability is the one that matters to me. Why? Because from the

most basic of group dynamic perspectives, UKCP's 'power over' dominance is going to contaminate everything it touches.

Tantam asks what my preferred solution would be. My solution is taking shape as the Independent Practitioner Network (IPN), which builds on a well-established tradition of the facilitation of power sharing in groups, represented by, among others, the Norwich Collective and the Institute for the Development of Human Potential (IDHP). IPN started from the premise that a credible association of psychotherapy counselling and facilitation practitioners must have an organisational structure that embodies 'power with' relations and keeps all aspects of how power is distributed constantly in sight. In other words, we aim to be fully congruent with our practitioner values of 'power with' relations with clients.

Association with IPN is open to anyone, but 'membership' requires that a practitioner be a member of a cell group consisting of a minimum of five other practitioners who each engage in a process of getting to know each other personally, and in their practice, so that they can 'stand by each other's work with clients'. To be a 'member' group of IPN, each of these cell groups must have established ongoing links with two other similar groups. The link groups have the role of supporting and challenging the quality of the group process through which we can stand by each other's work.

Complaints, should they arise, are dealt with first by the practitioner concerned; then, if the grievance or dispute is not resolved, it moves via the 'member' group, and the link groups if need be, to the network as a whole. If an individual group member is demonstrably in breach of their

obligations to clients, the whole group loses its membership of IPN. Around two years from its founding in November 1994, IPN has several hundred people engaged in the process of assembling a network of such groups.

My own group of seven people has formed over a period of a year and a half in a process that has included many hours of co-supervision as a way of getting to know each other. We have travelled to visit each other's work rooms, and we are presently carrying out a comprehensive self- and peer-assessment and accreditation. This latter is an onerous task that enables a range of people with diverse working styles to declare their strengths, weaknesses, working practice and client population in a way that honours their developed strengths and yet is open to scrutiny and caveat by others. For me, choosing to accredit or re-accredit ourselves in this way provides a deep, congruent and ethically searching commitment to honouring clients' interests.

Digby Tantam goes on, in his response to my *Guardian* letter, to argue, as though this legitimised UKCP, that 'in every other activity where people place their lives or personal safety in the hands of others, some sort of accreditation or registration procedure has been introduced'. For me this is simply untrue. Where is the 'register' of journalists and TV producers and advertising executives? Would Tantam argue their influence is less than that of psychotherapists? I would argue the reverse. That the trust we place in such persons is informal doesn't lessen their influence or their capacity to entrance whole nations. And also I wonder that Tantam should assume practitioners would accept or tolerate people 'putting their lives or personal safety in

their hands'. I do not believe I do this in my practice. If a client is really unable to enter an agreement with me about their aims and intentions and in effect to 'take themselves on as a project', then I would very likely decline to work with them.

Tantam's arguments about taking responsibility for other people's personal safety do not hang together; they seem to come from an alien and restricted perspective. Were I to guess, I might say that as a doctor and an academic, his focus on emotional disorder has undermined the range of diversity he can contemplate with equanimity. My goodness, all these 'untrained', technically unsound people running about, saying they are psychotherapists... this is a disorder that can't be allowed to continue... I may be doing him an injustice, but this is how his statements and those of the UKCP come over to those of us who are not 'believers'. Because he then goes on to admit that 'without an effective means of assessing competence and of how ethical values are applied in practice, registration is inevitably based on training and acculturation into a professional role'. Coming from someone who, as I suppose, has a scientific background, this feels very wonky to me. Inevitably? Really? Surely a scientific perspective would suggest that if there is significant doubt, all bets are off? There are effective means of assessing competence, for example, self and peer assessment and accreditation if you can let go of the 'top-down', 'senior gate-keeper' model of accreditation.

Tantam is right to say that I accuse the Council of being unrepresentative and it isn't enough to wheel out an account of its history as a rebuttal, especially one that leans on the sentence 'we made considerable efforts to draw every potentially

relevant organisation into [its] formation'. I know of several hundred therapists who do not acknowledge that it represents their interests, or is ever likely to. Indeed, as I asked earlier, has the UKCP ever been accessible to individuals? But what troubles me most in Digby Tantam's letter is this sentence: 'We have avoided having a definition of psychotherapy because it seemed premature to draw too rigid and too tight a boundary around the field.'

Is it unreasonable to read this as meaning 'it is premature today but it will one day not be premature'? That Tantam is asserting a right to define eventually what is, or is not, psychotherapy and to erect a tight and, I will suppose, 'statutory' boundary around it? The fact that there may be fifty organisations colluding in this does not ease it for me. It is still a form of theft and I believe that it presents a much greater long-term danger to clients than the ethical issues he worries over. For me the 'unaware acting out of domination' is at the head of the list of ethical issues psychotherapists always need to attend to, and I see UKCP not only embodying such 'top-down', 'power over' relations, but also planning to colonise the territory I work in and arranging with the government of the day to support their policing of the boundaries. This, as it seems to me, deeply unscientific complacency leads Tantam to his equally offensive later statement, that 'registration will weed out unpromising, ineffective, or downright harmful innovations at a much earlier stage'.

Is this really a psychotherapist speaking? Has Tantam no idea of the critical relation between creativity and diversity? His use of imperious language like this in several places in his article suggests that he has little awareness of how 'dominance-

bound' is the enterprise that he chairs.

I would be inclined to acknowledge the right of trainers to form a trade association and to publish the names of successful students had I not seen close up how such

arrangements tend to become a protective cartel. For this and the other reasons I have outlined, I do not accept that UKCP has the right to fence off a section of the psychological territory and call it a profession.

Remembering Ian Gordon-Brown, 1925–1996

Ian Gordon-Brown's generous life ended on 6th October last year. He was at the zenith of his achievement, a joyful man. Born, appropriately, on St Valentine's Day, he dearly loved his life and work, friends and family, and spoke often in recent years of how fulfilled he felt.

Ian was an industrial psychologist, educated at Bryanston and Cambridge. He married and had three children. For 12 years he was secretary of the Lucis Trust (Alice Bailey's work). In 1973, he and Barbara Somers founded the Centre for Transpersonal Psychology. In 1977, he helped Barbara establish the Centre's training, and continued to carry the broad workshop programme. Reynold and Joan Swallow joined them in 1976. Other colleagues have since come alongside.

In 1994 Ian established the Centre for Transpersonal Perspectives and its programme of new workshops. In 1995 he was elected president of EUROTAS (European Transpersonal Association) with twelve-nation membership. This greatly appealed to his eclectic viewpoint.

That was his outer life . . .

His release from life was exemplary. Having led a workshop on his major theme of Initiation, he sang (in a fine bass-baritone voice) joyously to Mozart and then went to sleep. In the small hours of 6th October, his heart stopped beating and he flew free.

Many people loved him, and rejoice that he has gone so gently to his next adventure. Such a big man leaves a big space, which is now being filled by hundreds of tributes, all speaking of his warmth, humour, wisdom, clarity and incisiveness. He did not suffer fools gladly, and said so. He loved deeply, and said so. Life and death held no fears for him. He was totally himself.

We salute and celebrate him, and hope to learn from his example. The Centre's work continues, as vital as ever.