



Accrediting Strangers

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There has been a lot of discussion within the AHPP in recent times about the wisdom and even the possibility of accrediting people we do not know in any intimate way. I think it may be useful to look at another organisation which has for some years had this same problem. We can then see whether there is anything to be learned about the process of attempting such accreditation, and also what the issues are. Some people have argued that it is hard enough for a training centre to evaluate the quality of the people who go through their courses: how much harder, then, must it be for us to evaluate the quality of people we have never met. Some go further, saying it is impossible and should not even be attempted. Is there any answer to this sort of critique?

Alan Frankland, in an article in *Coun-*

selling: The BAC Counselling Reader, discusses the BAC scheme of accreditation, which also has the characteristic of accrediting strangers. I myself was on the accrediting committee for some years, and acted as a convenor of one of the groups towards the end of that time, so I am personally familiar with this form of accreditation.

Frankland starts by admitting that 'it is impossible to assess and predict effective professional functioning as a counsellor from a single type or set of observations; the attempt is like trying to draw a complex curve using only a ruler.' But he continues: 'Like other accreditation systems, the BAC scheme has to infer professional commitment, capacity and standing from a number of different sources of evidence which vary in kind as well as in focus. These include: induction; experience; probity; practice assessment; theoretical understanding; continuing development; use of supervision. Our system does not seek to appraise certain other areas which are seen as significant in some professions, e.g.: general education; the capacity to work as a colleague; research capabilities.'

He adds that the scheme is subject to constant change, and that in 1997 a complete overhaul was due, taking into

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account the advent of the UKRC. But let us look at each of the criteria mentioned above.

Induction

Here the number of contact hours in training is the main consideration. Frankland says that he himself would like to see some mention of 'a substantial period of personal counselling/therapy'. This of course does exist within the AHPP scheme. It does seem to be important.

Experience

Refers to hours of supervised practice in actually seeing clients. There can be no doubt of the centrality of this criterion. In my experience most of the real learning of a therapist is acquired in this way, so far as practice is concerned. Questions of technique, questions of ethics, all sorts of issues arise in a live and relevant context, and can be dealt with in supervision better than anywhere else.

Probity

Not only a declaration of adherence to the ethical standards of the organisation, but also a referee's report and a supervisor's report. The diary and case studies offer further evidence of the nature of the applicant's commitment and standard of practice. The AHPP version contains all these features, except for the detailed diary. Frankland suggests that the referee could be replaced by a proposer, who would actively argue a case for the client. This is something the AHPP has not considered to date.

Practice assessment

Achieved through the supervisor's report and also through the case studies.

Frankland argues that although it is clearly the weakest element in the accreditation process, other considerations preclude amplifying it too much. 'The problem remains of how to gain direct access to a counsellor's work ethically and at a cost that can be afforded by all applicants (many of whom are not in paid practice).' He says that to think of a perfect system for achieving this is only a 'reductionist fantasy'.

Theoretical understanding

Assessed partly through the course material, partly through the statement of personal philosophy, and partly through the case studies. For the BAC no one school holds precedence, and so it has to be flexible about the actual content. The AHPP is different in this respect because it insists on a humanistic approach. So we can look for evidence, through this same material, that the applicant's practice is indeed humanistic, rather than psychodynamic or cognitive-behavioural.

Continuing development

Regarded as an essential feature of professional life. This is part of the reason for re-accreditation every five years. It refers both to personal and to professional development. Again the AHPP also lays stress on this aspect, because the person is in constant change and development, rather than reaching perfection on a given day.

Use of supervision

Clearly important both to BAC and AHPP. Frankland suggests that one future move might be to specify more clearly what qualifications the supervisor should have. This is something the AHPP has also considered, and it will be much easier to ask for

this as the number and availability of supervision training courses grows.

Frankland goes on to discuss the administration of the system, but first he emphasises the way in which all these criteria hang together, making the following important comment: 'This sense of wholeness is quite crucial to the assessment. It is clearly a qualitative judgement, but it is not arbitrary . . . [The applicant] will be able to produce an application that is consistent and congruent, noticing and explaining apparent discrepancies where they arise so that assessors are left with a coherent picture of their philosophy and practice.' His description applies equally to the AHPP procedure — there is a coherence about the picture that emerges which is usually very convincing. This is a very important issue, and I am very impressed with the way in which Frankland has handled it.

Going on now to the administration, Frankland says that paid staff do all the paperwork, but that the actual assessment is carried out by 70 volunteers, all themselves accredited. 'Members' applications are read by small teams/panels in four batches a year. Assessors are encouraged to approach applications in a facilitative but rigorous manner — to look for the positives in each application whilst maintaining the standards of which the Association has a right to be proud. This is a hard discipline and it takes a long time to read thoroughly even the most professionally presented forms.'

Equally important is the question of what is to happen when people are turned down. It is clear that this does occur, and that care needs to be taken when it does, so that people feel that they have been treated fairly. 'Applicants who are unsuccessful receive a fairly detailed letter identifying all the grounds on which their application has been refused; they have a right of appeal on matters of both fact and interpretation.'

I think this is an excellent account, and all the points are ones which could also be made about the AHPP system, which of course preceded the BAC system and was one of the early inputs to BAC thinking. It seems clear from the Frankland article — which should be read in full — that the method which we use is at least defensible, though capable of improvement.



Further Reading

Alan Frankland, 'Exploring accreditation', in Stephen Palmer, Sheila Dainow and Pat Milner

(eds) *Counselling: The BAC Counselling Reader*, Sage, 1996. A shorter version of this chapter was first published as 'An invitation to accreditation' in *Counselling* 6/1 55-59, 1995.