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CHAPTER 16

An Unqualified Good: The Independent Practitioners Network as a Path through and beyond Professionalisation

Richard House

The Independent Practitioners Network has been referred to a number of times in the book to date. As described in Chapter 1, I have been involved as a founder-member of and participant in the IPN since its founding at the Open Centre in November 1994. The following piece was an invited contribution to the *Self and Society* special issue on the IPN published in the Autumn of 2004 (*Self and Society* 2004). I hope that the following piece clearly conveys the value of the Network, and just why it is a superior form of practitioner accountability compared to the statist and institutionalised regulatory alternatives on offer, and which are heavily critiqued throughout much of the book.

Bob Mullan: What are your thoughts about the ‘registration’ process?

Peter Lomas: I am appalled by it... I am not sure whether we wouldn’t be better without it altogether... I do not think that people realise how dangerous [a register] is and how careful one should be with it... one should be very careful about what is considered irresponsible... the control, the monitoring of the training of therapists is very destructive of creativity... the greatest threat to our creativity is the register.
(quoted in Mullan 1996: 87–8)

BACKGROUND

In this chapter I offer a selective autobiographical account of my own particular vocational development within the climate of creeping (or do I mean land-sliding?) professionalisation that has characterised the British therapy landscape of the past 15–20 years. This reflection on my journey as a developing counselling practitioner focuses on the professionalisation process in general, and on

nearly a decade's involvement with the IPN in particular. The lineage of my particular journey is traceable back, at least in Britain, to a series of early radical anti-regulation/pro-pluralism articles, appearing predominantly in *Self and Society* (Heron's brilliant 1990 article is seminal; others include Brown and Mowbray 1990; Kalisch 1990, 1992; Postle and Anderson 1990; House and Hall 1991; Totton 1992; Wasdell 1992); through the two National Conferences on the Dynamics of Accreditation in the early 1990s (Cannon and Hatfield, 1992; House, 1992) and the Norwich Group Process Group originally led by Robin Shohet (House and Hall 1991); to the founding of the Independent Therapists Network (now the IPN) in 1994 (Totton, 1994, 1995); and thence to the publication of Richard Mowbray's seminal book *The Case Against Psychotherapy Registration* in 1995 (see Chapter 13, this volume), and of the anthology *Implausible Professions* (House and Totton 1997/2011). (See Chapter 1, this volume, for a fuller outline.)

My own experience of 'practitioner becoming' has been above all overwhelmingly *experiential* and *self-fashioned*. Along with a number of colleagues in Norwich, in the 1980s I entered upon a self-development journey, out of which, *almost as a by-product of the experience*, most of us 'graduated' into working with clients. This is a centrally humanistic, experiential approach to 'training' (cf. Blomfield 1997) which is in very real danger of becoming extinct in the low-trust days of didactic professionalisation, where people decide that they want to be 'career' therapists and then train to be one, rather than their practitionerhood emerging organically from a personal development path.

Gladstone (1995: 15) has similarly written about what he terms the 'apprenticeship model' of practitioner development, in which 'becoming a therapist is a personally transmitted craft for which no amount of academic course work can substitute' (see also Gladstone 1997). For me it is little short of a tragedy that therapy trainings have become increasingly 'academicised', with more purely experiential trainings having virtually died out altogether because of their lack of credibility with a therapy bureaucracy intent on imposing didactic standards and 'competencies' from without, rather than enabling and *trusting* emerging practitioners to 'self- and peer-accredit' and organically develop their own authenticity and integrity in the work.

But I will rein myself back from critiquing the professionalisation process any further in this chapter, for its central intent is to communicate the positive experience which I have had through my involvement in the Independent Practitioners Network since its founding at the Open Centre in 1994.

SOME RELEVANT PRE-IPN DEVELOPMENTS

At a time when my own disquiet with the then creeping 'accreditation-mindedness' was mounting, I was thankfully being nourished through my involvement with the Norwich Group Process Group (1990–2) and the two National Conferences on the Dynamics of Accreditation which the Process Group organised (Cannon and Hatfield 1992).

Around 1990 a proposal emerged from the Norwich Collective (a large and diverse grouping of broadly humanistic local practitioners) for an experiential group that might meet regularly to explore the dynamics of the accreditation process. This in turn seemed to be inspired by no little unease with the regulatory 'noises' emanating from the then UK Standing Conference for Psychotherapy, and moves within the Association of Humanistic Psychology Practitioners (AHPP) to sharpen up its 'professional' act.

Initially, the Group Process Group met every month or so, for a day at a time, and we engaged Robin Shohet, a friend and peer-colleague of Jill Hall's and consultant to the Norwich Collective, to facilitate the group. Before long Robin decided to become a peer member of the group (no doubt as we got deeper into teasing out the alienating dynamics of hierarchy, accreditation and its shadow, *discreditation*). A prominent role was taken in the group by Jill Hall, also an active member of the Norwich Collective and regular contributor to *Self and Society*; and as I remember it now, the original intention was to devise an alternative 'humanistic' accreditation model for group facilitation and

therapeutic practice which could in some sense be ‘recognised’ or validated by the Norwich Collective.

Some of the deliberations of the Group Process Group on humanistic approaches to accreditation were written up and published in House and Hall (1991); and after meeting for well over a year, the group eventually decided to organise a national conference on the dynamics of accreditation. In fact, two conferences were held in successive years (1991 and 1992), and reports of these highly successful events (in which [soon to be Professor] Brian Thorne and group consultant David Wasdell played a leading design and facilitation role) were published in Cannon and Hatfield (1992) and House (1992). Around one hundred practitioners from all over Britain attended both events combined, and within a few years at least some of the faces at those pioneering conferences were to appear again, and to become familiar colleagues and friends with the inauguration of the Independent Therapists Network in 1994.

Certainly these were exciting, heady times for all of us – and personally, the Group Process Group was one of the most richly nourishing and challenging experiential learning environments that I could ever wish to experience.

THE FOUNDING AND GROWTH OF THE INDEPENDENT THERAPISTS (LATER, PRACTITIONERS) NETWORK, 1994

When, in early 1994, I read an interesting letter in *Self and Society* written by Nick Totton (Totton 1994), little did I know that his tentative proposal for a Self- and Peer-Accredited Therapists Network’ would, within a few years, have given birth to a thriving, pluralistic nationwide network of therapy practitioners. About sixty practitioners (myself included) attended the ITN’s resultant inaugural conference at the Open Centre, London, on the 19th November 1994; and since then I have myself been a member of an IPN practitioner group, the ‘Leonard Piper’ group – a grouping of (currently) seven practitioners from across the south of England who meet for a day every 4–5 weeks to witness, validate and challenge each others’ work as practitioners. Our group has implemented a rigorous self and peer assessment (SAPA) process, through which we have all ‘graduated’. This has been by no means an easy or conflict-free process, as peer-to-peer challenge, both professional and personal, is built into the SAPA procedure itself; and so the view that is often heard mooted, that such a process is cosily collusive, could hardly be further from the truth. The Leonard Piper group’s SAPA process has been written up in detail by two (now former) members of our group – Juliet Lamont and Annie Spencer (1997).

MY EXPERIENCE OF THE NETWORK AS A LIVING ORGANISM

I see the Network as a living and vibrant example of what John Heron has evocatively termed a ‘self-generating practitioner community’ (Heron, 1997), in which the twin motifs of *freedom* and *responsibility-taking*, set within an overarching and enabling environment of *trust*, are, for me, paramount. What does this mean in practice? Just some of the features I would highlight are:

- An environment of sustained, ongoing peership and a profound intimacy of peer relationship, leading to a deep knowledge of self and other (both personal and professional) which springs from sustained collegiate encounter and relationship;
- An organically and experientially grounded environment of trust and mutual respect;
- A safe-enough space for responsible interpersonal challenge to occur and be received relatively non-defensively;
- An embodied and *owned* ethical responsibility;
- Support through career development and personal struggles – making sense of the work, and of our respective relationships to it through both ‘local’ and national IPN collegiality and community.

The Network has a group, *communitarian* ideology, rather than a 'privatised', self-centredly individualising focus which is becoming so endemic in modern culture (Lasch 1979; Wallach and Wallach 1983), and to which the practice of individual therapy itself can also unwittingly be subject. The Network is therefore a form of 'self-generating practitioner community' in which participatory ethics (Brown 1997; House 1997) (requiring responsibility-taking by all involved) are privileged over didactic, responsibility-eschewing institutional Codes of Ethics (cf. Pattison 1999).

The Network's self-regulating participative system of validation and accountability has been quite explicitly fashioned so as to be consistent with the core values of pluralistic therapeutic practice. The overall Network structure is therefore horizontal rather than vertical or hierarchical – rendering it far more in tune with recent progressive developments in 'postmodern' organisation theory (e.g. Jackson and Carter 2006) than the conventional old-paradigm alternatives on offer in the therapy and counselling field.

The Network stands for an approach to difficulties or complaints which encourages the willingness to own mistakes in an atmosphere of non-defensive openness (Totton 1997), and thereby seeks to transcend the regressive 'victimhood, blaming dynamics (Hall, 1993) that dominate conventional punitive, shame-inducing and victimhood-reinforcing complaints procedures.

It is interesting to note that the values underpinning the IPN do seem to have much in common with the Person-Centred and community-building philosophy of Carl Rogers, as Gassner (1999) has very clearly articulated (Jean Clark, personal communication). Overall, the IPN is founded in the values of creative pluralism (House and Totton 1997/2011; Samuels 1997), an unambitious modesty, and the celebration of growth and human potential development, rather than in those of infantilising hoop-jumping, 'power-over' hierarchy, and a quasi medical-model preoccupation with 'psychopathology'.

I would personally like to see a significant client/user dimension to the Network, as it is currently still exclusively practitioner-driven; but as is the way of the Network, the responsibility for initiating such a development is left to those who wish to pursue it – if I/we have the energy and commitment to follow it through.

It would be wrong to imply that the Network's strugglings with the intricate and subtle dialectic between radical individualism and communitarian values has not been variously challenging, frustrating, and at times exhausting. Yet these 'birth pangs' are perhaps a *necessary* and unavoidable process with which *any* grouping of individuals struggling towards a mature, operational *social community ethic and praxis* must engage. The extraordinary subtlety and complexity of what is at stake in all this is beautifully summed up in Rudolf Steiner's 'Motto of the Social Ethic', given to Edith Maryon in 1920 (and cited in Lipsker 1990: 60):

The healthy social life is found when in the mirror of each human soul the whole community finds its reflection, and when in the community the virtue of each one is living.

It is certainly no coincidence that there are many interesting philosophical and procedural commonalities between the IPN, and the worldwide Steiner (Waldorf) educational (Steiner 1926, 1988) and Camphill Community movements, and also, indeed, the Quaker movement.

THE 'LEONARD PIPER' IPN PRACTITIONER GROUP

In the course of our own 'Leonard Piper' Group's Self and Peer Assessment (SAPA) Process, each group member has written a detailed self-assessment, freely interpreted and under the following broad headings:

- WORKING HISTORY;
- TRAINING HISTORY;
- PRACTICE;
- SUPERVISION & SUPPORT;
- ACCESSIBILITY;
- CONTRACTING & BEGINNINGS;
- ENDINGS & FINISHING;
- FAILINGS, LIMITATIONS, WEAKNESSES;
- BOUNDARIES;
- UNACCEPTABLE PRACTICE;
- PROFESSIONAL SELF PROTECTION;
- MONITORING;
- PERSONAL LIFE AND SELF CARE;
- MOTIVATION;
- GENDER, RACE AND CLASS;
- DEFINITION OF A CLIENT;
- EXPERIENCE OF PERSONAL THERAPY;
- SELF REFLECTIONS;
- MY PHILOSOPHY OF COUNSELLING/THERAPY.

SAPA is an ongoing, living process rather than a once-and-for-all form-filling exercise. Thus, we periodically conduct a SAPA updating process, where we each write something about how our practice and general life circumstances have changed or evolved since the last SAPA or SAPA update process.

There follows an excerpt from a SAPA Update which I myself wrote in March 2001, to give the reader a flavour of what can be involved in this process:

WAY OF WORKING

...I have noticed a slight evolution in my way of working [since our last SAPA Update] – by no means a dramatic change, but just perceptible to me when I reflect on it. I now find myself increasingly and quite spontaneously working out of deconstructive/spiritual/Zen ways of thinking-being which (sometimes quite explicitly) recognise *uncertainty* and the 'mystery of life' as very much central existential realities, with the essence of 'freedom' and 'freedom from anxiety' residing, paradoxically, in a full taking-in of just how little ego-control we actually possess. Relatedly, I also work with an awareness of the possible unconscious influence of cultural and transpersonal forces on individual self-experience – which I am increasingly coming to see as an important, and sometimes crucial, influence upon individuals' subjectivity and self-experience. (Of course this kind of perspective has to be worked with with sensitivity and subtlety, as it could so easily be seized upon in a 'blaming' way to deny any of the self-responsibility that I believe we do all have in creating our realities.) For me the greatest challenge of the work is now about subtlety and paradox – how to make sense of human experience in which we are somehow both creators of our worlds and yet also profoundly affected by 'forces' of which we are unconscious, and the influence of which is also commonly not experienced consciously. Rudolf Steiner's painstaking work on, and indications for, consciously becoming more aware/conscious of 'supersensible' forces/realities of course becomes very relevant here – an area which I have yet to explore in any systematic way; but I feel I am certainly working towards it.

This subtle trend in my work has meant, concomitantly, less of an emphasis on encouraging an analytical-deterministic understanding of people's 'psychodynamic' histories and their (alleged!) causal influence on the present. This change in my work could also reflect a shift in how clients are coming to counselling (i.e. less past-focused), and not just a shift in my own philosophy – though of course it's very difficult to assess something like this in any 'objective' way. Overall I am very comfortable with this evolution in my work, as I feel it congruently matches my own development as a person; and I really am noticing how clients do seem

genuinely 'lighter' when I do share these kinds of insights (which I do from time to time – but by no means frequently: of course I only do share these types of insights when it seems to fit with the living context of the emerging work)...

Our 'Leonard Piper' group has also adopted a procedure for writing and exploring personal *Time-Lines*. We have each written a detailed Time-Line of our lives from birth to date, which has undoubtedly greatly informed and expanded our experience of each other, deepening in the process the levels of sharing and intimacy in our group – which, I believe, can only enrich the quality of our group relating and the effectiveness of the group as a holding and an enabling of our work as practitioners.

My own experience is that involvement in an IPN Group requires openness, a willingness to be vulnerable with one's peers both personally and professionally, commitment and reliability, and above all a willingness to engage in a live, authentically real, ongoing face-to-face way with one's peers. I believe that my work as a practitioner has been supported and deepened in a way that it is hard to imagine occurring in any other kind of setting.

One common criticism is that peer groups such as this can be, or can become, routinely cosy and collusive. In response, I can only give my own experience of my own group (which I assume is not self-deluding) – that our IPN group has been a source of both support and challenge for all of us – that we have challenged each other on many many occasions, but non-punitively and non-attackingly. In short, in a way which has maximised the likelihood of us each looking relatively non-defensively at our 'material', in a setting that encourages openness, truthfulness and potential development, both personally and professionally. Our group has also proved to be an excellent forum and crucible for questioning quite fundamentally the very nature of therapy itself – an ongoing process of questioning and open-minded deconstruction which, as I have written elsewhere (House 1999, 2003a), I see as being quite essential to effective and non-abusive practitionership in a postmodern world.

To repeat: it is difficult for me to imagine a setting in which these precious, rare processes could have occurred more successfully or effectively.

I'd like to finish by referring to a recent link-group meeting which, for me, threw into strong relief all that is best about the Network. My own IPN group met with one of our two link groups in what were quite challenging circumstances. We spent much of the day together and, drawing upon our many and diverse professional and personal resources, we found creative ways of shifting and facilitating our respective individual and group processes in a way that was at once energising, moving and inspiring – and in a way that surely only honest, relatively non-defensive face-to-face peer exchange can achieve. It is experiences like this which ongoingly reaffirm the unique benefits that the IPN peer process confers upon all who participate in it.

I hope that I have given readers at least a flavour of something very precious and uniquely empowering which they might wish to experience for themselves in their own particular and unique journeys towards mature practitionership. Certainly, if you like what you have read here, it is likely that you and your participation in co-creating and deepening our practitioner community would receive a warm, open-hearted welcome at any of our regular national or regional gatherings.

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