The Independent Practitioners Network: A New Model of Accountability

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The Independent Practitioners Network is a response – or at least, began as a response – to the pressure for compulsory registration of psychotherapists and counsellors: from practitioners who, as Denis Postle has put it, preferred therapy to remain an *occupation* rather than becoming a *profession*. In other words, they take the position that nothing is broken, so nothing needs fixing: that all the sound and fury of the registration/professionalisation process is at best unnecessary, and at worst destructive of what already exists.

This position deserves and needs support; and I want to describe here how the Network, as well as providing this support, has taken on many further positive and creative aspects, becoming an initiative for a new model of accountability and a new way for practitioners to organise and relate to each other.

Origins

Over the last few years, many people in the therapy and counselling world, along with other practitioners who use relationship in their work, have become deeply unhappy about the process of regulation and control which has developed under the banner of 'registration'. Out of this unhappiness came, in late 1994, a proposal for 'an alternative model of accountability and validation ... which actually makes use of what we know as therapists about human interaction'. Em Edmondson and myself invited people to attend a conference which would set up a network composed of *groups* of therapists – rather than either individuals or training organisations – involved in mutual self and peer assessment and accreditation: a network where 'there will be no distinction of more or less qualified or "registered" members, since we recognise that therapeutic ability is not based on hours of training or numbers of essays written. Nor will we be scrutinising each others' qualifications. In other words the structure will be horizontal and multi-centred rather than vertical/pyramidal.'

The aim, as outlined in the leaflet advertising the event, was 'to provide intending clients with a context of basic security within which they can make their own decisions about which practitioner is valuable for them.' The Network would 'not attempt to define terms like "therapy", or to distinguish between different styles of work, since we see a richly pluralistic and multi-skilled ecology as the ideal.' Above all, the Network would not be run by a "trainers' club" in the same way as the UKCP: accreditation would be mutual and horizontal, rather than trickling down from the top to the bottom.

Sixty people attended this meeting, and most of them agreed to set up a Network along these lines. There was strong emotion involved – many people spoke of feeling that they had found a home, a place where they belonged. Two and a half years later, and after several more large gatherings, about 400 people have expressed interest and over 200 people are actively involved in forming potential member groups[1]. Some of these are long-established groups of practitioners – for instance the Open Centre and AMAP in London, Six of One in Norwich, the Derby Counselling and Therapy Centre; some are groups that are newly forming around the Network, and often finding the peer assessment and supervision function of the groups extremely valuable in its own right. As of May 1997, four groups have fulfilled the criteria to become members, and at least another half dozen are close to this point.

Principles
The best way to communicate the approach of the Network is probably to reproduce here the first part of its Interim Constitution.
1. The Network exists to further and support among its members good practice which is open about its aims and underlying principles.
2. The Network also seeks to provide people looking for help with a context of basic security within which to make their own decisions about which practitioner and which form of work is appropriate for them, in the confidence that Network members are able to provide and sustain a suitable environment for the work they offer.
3. To the above ends, member groups recognise that practitioners must take responsibility for ensuring that they are able adequately to fulfil their role. Member groups are committed to supporting this responsibility through continuous self and peer assessment, monitoring, and challenge.
4. Member groups know and stand by the work of the individuals who comprise 'them .Each group takes responsibility for resolving any problems that emerge in the practice of its members, including any complaints made by clients; and is prepared for this process to be monitored by other member groups, and ultimately for its membership of the network to stand or fall by how it carries out this commitment. Similarly, each group takes responsibility for helping to resolve any problems that emerge in the practice of its peer groups.
5. The Network has no commitment to any specific model of therapy, therapeutic training, or the therapeutic relationship. It specifically favours diversity and ecological complexity.
6. The Network seeks to develop a culture of openness, mutuality, support and challenge within and between its member groups, so as to ensure good and empowering practice.

Structure
The constitution establishes that the unit of membership is a group of at least five, and usually no more than ten, members who stand by each others' work, vouch for each others' good practice, and sort out any problems that arise. Each member group must in turn be linked with at least two other such groups in a similar relationship of mutual validation and responsibility.

This means in effect that each practitioner's integrity is bound up with that of their colleagues – a minimum of 14 other people in their own group and the two link groups. If that practitioner is found to be acting unacceptably, then those 14 other people will have to account for their failure to prevent the problem; if they cannot satisfy their own link groups, then they will no longer be members of IPN – not through a formal 'expulsion' process, but simply because if those groups withdraw their links, their membership will automatically lapse. The structure attempts to model itself on ordinary responsible relating.

This relationship of support and responsibility extends outward, through inter-group links, to the whole of the Network. The safeguard for clients is that if grievances arise, they can take them to any of these fourteen or more people – or indeed to anyone in the Network; and that if the group their practitioner belongs to doesn't resolve the issue to the satisfaction of its link groups, those links will be withdrawn and the whole group will lapse from membership. (As a balancing factor against trivial disputes, the group withdrawing its link would itself no longer be a full member, and would have to

find a link elsewhere to restore its own status. The structure encourages groups to ensure themselves of each others' integrity, but not to argue over details.)

The Network's structure is thus what the Network stands for: mutual openness, support and challenge at every level. There is no one shared code of practice; but each member group must publish its guidelines (and the names of its members) to the whole Network. Similarly, there is no shared position on therapeutic methods, theory or training: the Network supports diversity and plurality, and recognises that there are many ways of becoming an effective practitioner. Participation in the Network is open to anyone, 'with the presumption that at least some of their activities could be taken for psychotherapy, counselling, growth work or facilitation.'

The central goal of the Network is given in the constitution as 'furthering and supporting good practice'. The question of what 'good practice' *is*, however, does not have a single answer; but openness about our practice allows a wide and ongoing debate, including criticism and challenge. The Network's whole ethos is that there is no centre to give authoritative judgement; individuals must take responsibility for their own definition of what good practice means, and share this definition publicly.

The current situation
The Network unambiguously *exists*, and thrives. Its sound construction needs a lengthy exploratory period in which we really get to know each other, each other's practice, and what membership of the network actually means. Accordingly, at this moment (August 1997) the Network has just three x 2 full member groups: that is, three x 2 groups who have gone through the process of:
a) *Formation* – each individual satisfying themselves that they are willing to stand by the other individuals' work[2].
b) *Linking* – finding two other groups who are satisfied with the integrity and validity of the processes included under a), and with the ongoing monitoring process; and for whom the same is also true in reverse – that is, the first group is also happy about the second group's processes and procedures.
c) Satisfying the other requirements of full membership – i.e. a group needs to have at least five people in it; a statement of ethics; a name, and a contact address.

We know that there are at least 32 groups working towards this position – as well as many individuals seeking to form groups; and we hope soon to be able to 'go public' as a resource for members of the public who are looking for accountable and responsible therapists.

Accountability
Personally, I am happy to acknowledge that the accreditation debate has brought home to many of us that there is a real need for therapists and other practitioners to be accountable for their actions. There may be, as I have said, nothing broke and in need of fixing; but there is an appearance, and to some extent a reality, of a lack of open communication between clients and practitioners about the problems that arise between them. Until a few years ago, many of us were in a deep trance around this issue; and I feel grateful to those who organised UKCP and BAC for waking us up. However, I and others in IPN profoundly disagree with the way in which these organisations have tried to create accountability.

There are two main issues here: how can potential clients establish whether they would be in safe hands with a particular practitioner? And how can a practitioner be held accountable for her or his work – and those who have underwritten the practitioner be held responsible for their judgement?

With both of these questions, we believe that the Independent Practitioners Network has come up with a better solution than other organisations. Rather than relying on qualifications and hours of training, we use precisely the qualities at the heart of our own practice – ongoing face-to-face relationship, authenticity, honesty, and personal responsibility. The members of an IPN peer group know each other's work in a real sense – they have to, because they are staking their own reputation on it. They have spent hours in peer supervision, perhaps in a formal self and peer assessment procedure, perhaps even exchanging or watching therapy sessions. In whatever way each group chooses, they have worked through to a real confidence in each other.

And this confidence, this 'standing by' each other, arises from not only support in the simple sense, but also confrontation and challenge. If a problem arises between practitioner and client, then

the peer group should be both able and committed to seeking resolution: not through a fixed and formal procedure, but in a way which is tailored to the specific situation, and to the specific outcomes sought by both the client and the practitioner. (This stress on desired outcome seems likely to be very fruitful as a way of moving from the 'trial' model to one of conflict resolution.) If the peer group cannot cope alone, then it has two link groups to call on, and they in turn can call on others as needed for either 'fresh eyes' or specific skills and resources. We believe that our approach will be both more flexible than those of other organisations, and more profound in the questions it seeks to answer: not just 'Has someone done wrong?', but 'What has gone wrong here, and why – what conscious and unconscious issues are being acted out, and how has the whole situation failed to contain them?'

Looking forwards
It has become clear over the last two and a half years that the underlying principles stated above lead to a structure based not on representative democracy, but *on autonomous self-responsible action*, and on *pluralistic consensus*. This means that the ideal outcome of decision-making is to find a way forward which allows *everyone's* goals and methods to be pursued *in parallel*, rather than to install one option over the others. This may sound (and may be) cumbersome, but it is part of what seems to us an important and exciting adventure in moving away from pyramidal hierarchies of authority into new territory of self-responsibility and multi-centred networks. If our work is about empowerment, as many of us would agree, then our organisational structures should surely also be empowering.

In particular, we find ourselves trying to build a network that can stand up to the critical voices, both external and internal, which tend to dominate discussion of accreditation: the voices which tell many of us 'You're no good,' and pressure us to bow to the assumed authority of others. Internal messages of this kind strengthen the actual political oppression of the pro-regulation campaign. Through working to disarm these internal critics, we have moved from a somewhat defensive approach towards one which, fully acknowledging the need for accountability, places it within a positive context of learning and support.

For the Network to work successfully requires a high degree of commitment, response-ability and awakeness from those who are part of it. It won't work as a union card, an automatic safety-net on which we can rely unthinkingly. This is how the traditional top-down system works, or doesn't work; and undoubtedly some people prefer not to have to be responsible. (This may turn out to represent a limit on the Network's appeal.) In a whole number of ways, we need to put energy into the Network's functioning: not only administering the structure, but the circulation of information of every kind, and finding out about each others practice.

IPN intends to be exemplary in our field. We are offering a jewel beyond price: a network of practitioners who feel good enough about themselves and their work that they are prepared to share it openly with others; who feel good enough about each others' work that they are prepared to share responsibility for it. With the Network, through confronting the structures of transference and projection which seem so often unexamined in our institutions, we have a chance at seeding a new culture of therapy and counselling.

In fact, what is starting to emerge is a sense of the Network as part of a wider social movement towards the restructuring of institutions of all kinds on a pluralistic and non-hierarchical basis. However, we don't want to lose sight of its central function of providing support. Support for *clients*, through a model of accountability which delivers what it promises; and support for practitioners, through peer supervision and feedback in an occupation which tends so strongly towards isolation.

FOOTNOTES

[1]It's not easy to gather accurate information on the Network and its members: like every living organism, it grows in unexpected and unregimented ways! However, as groups reach 'full member' status, an accurate list will develop.

[2]The concept of 'standing by each others' work' has become a fruitful and complex question, constantly subject to further discussion.