

Schism and Blues — Accrediting Psychotherapy

John Hills

I don't quite know how the psychotherapy accreditation system works in Australia and New Zealand, but if it is half as complicated as the one in the UK it would still take a time to explain. I said 'system', but to say 'systems' would be more accurate, since there are at least three routes to becoming an accredited practitioner, none recognised in its own right by the government — so let me see if I can take you briefly through this labyrinth to get to the point of my letter.

Clinical psychologists and doctors have no financial or status reason to seek a separate psychotherapy accreditation — though some do — and are licensed by their core professional affiliation. Both the Royal College of Psychiatrists and the British Psychology Society have their own psychotherapy sections, but these have so far remained interest groupings, not accrediting bodies (though this may change). To train and be accredited as a systemic psychotherapist, a clinical psychologist or doctor would have to go through another route, but might still prefer to retain their core professional identity, attaching 'systemic psychotherapist' to it. Are you with me so far?

The three main psychotherapy accrediting organisations in the UK are, in historical order of establishment, the British Association of Counselling founded in 1977, adding 'Psychotherapy' to its title four years ago (BACP). The United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy had its inaugural conference here in Canterbury in 1989 (UKCP). It is hard to emphasise just what an impressive achievement it was to get Jungian and Freudian analysts, transactional and existential analysts, family therapists and sexual therapists, hypnotherapists and constructivist therapists into the same bed together, so to speak, in a common organisation. It was done, not unlike the creation of the European Union, by creating a federal structure of six sections, based on the main approaches, each determining the regulation of their particular approach.

In such a competitive, schismatic profession, ridden by snobbery and status differentiation, it could not last, and indeed it did not. Some of the psychoanalytic groups took their ball away to play elsewhere, and formed the British Confederation of Psychotherapy (BCP) a few years ago. In the last year, the small but highly influential, psychoanalytically based Association of Child Psychotherapy left UKCP

for BCP because UKCP were intending to recognise an integrative, humanistic based child therapy training.

Now I am sure in each case there were important issues of principle involved (when are there not?) but it is hard to resist the view that here at work is obsessive triviality of the kind Jonathan Swift satirised in *Gulliver's Travels* in the intense debate between 'Little Enders' and 'Big Enders' — the question under dispute being the correct end to open a boiled egg! Behaviour like this makes it difficult for any government to treat our profession seriously. After all, the creation of the UKCP was intended to give the general public and the government a sense that here was a serious, credible profession, anxious to regulate itself; not a bunch of prima donnas or primo uomos, above any kind of professional accountability.

As long ago as 1979, psychotherapists took an initiative to regulate their profession, which started the UKCP process, in the face of public anxiety and scepticism. I was the Association of Family Therapy representative in 1989 at the inauguration conference. It was (and remains) a project committed to respectful pluralism and credible self-regulation, which it hoped a current government would endorse and then license practice. I was totally behind both the vision and the endeavour. As yet, no government has given parliamentary time to creating an act of Parliament to license psychotherapy. It remains a shyster's paradise, though there are controls through NHS-based practice (despite the subject of my last Letter from Britain, 'A Citizen above Suspicion', *ANZJFT*, 24, 2: 109–111).

UKCP has a magazine called *The Psychotherapist*, which has had a fitful existence. To have a regular newsletter is a basic requirement, one would have thought, to engage the 60+ organisations and several thousand members and to



John Hills, General editor, *Context*.
E-mail: august@cathcity.demon.co.uk

hold the schismatic tendencies between and among the six sections. At the beginning of 2004 it was relaunched and I was kindly invited to guest edit an issue. Vanity is almost never a harbinger of good judgement, so, after accepting in haste, repentance came equally hastily! I gave myself a ridiculously short time to get the magazine together. Several writers I had commissioned had other summer commitments, which made it impossible for them to produce their contributions on time.

I had intended two interviews with colleagues who belonged to the main psychotherapy rivals — the BCP member Janet Sayers, a widely published writer on feminism, psychoanalysis and religion gave some stunning critical comments on the theme of schismatic behaviour:

The psychoanalytic and the associated trainings are very top down and exclusive — extraordinary, nowadays. I've just read a review of something Hanna Segal had said. The reviewer claimed she had rather ridiculous views of homosexuality — which she tends to pathologise in unwarranted homophobic fashion. I think, like their homophobia, in which there is very little engagement with changing social attitudes there is a tendency to adopt a 'bunker' mentality, overlooking what's going on in the wider society. This is perhaps linked to being very exclusive and cliquy, making them blind to the modern world. They often feel very beleaguered and that they have got to hold the fort.

I mentioned Janet Sayer's remarks to the editorial board without providing the context and caused anxiety (presented as 'curiosity'); the interview with my BACP colleague Mary Godden did not appear in the first set of proofs — I could not get hold of anyone to give an explanation about this for at least a week; finally a shortened version of 'A Citizen above Suspicion' (which I wanted to reprint to highlight the purpose of professional regulation) caused shivers, was threatened with being pulled, but

finally got clearance from UKCP's lawyer after some small changes were made.

So finally we got the issue to the printers and it looks OK. I felt like anyone does in joining a family system that blows away all hypotheses and professional experience — such was the level of imparted anxiety about generating conflict. You fear you can neither move forwards nor backwards, and, of course, ask yourself 'How did I get here in the first place?'

* * *

While I am sitting here writing this, my son and his wife call to tell us we are due to be grandparents in March 2005! They swear us to secrecy until September; as the readership in Australasia isn't likely to get this until the end of the year, I think I can break silence (it is a difficult secret to keep). It is so strange! The person I had always revered most in my family system was my maternal grandfather — he seemed so calm, so archetypically wise. What a role! The existential scriptwriter suddenly casts you in a role you did not quite expect (but rather hoped for) — will I be up to it? You get a reminder of your own ageing and place in the queue on the human life cycle —and yes, there is now another thread in the amazing web of your family system, even if your own contribution to this one is zero, except for being around and lovingly interested in it all.

Those great existential descriptions of our humanness and our contexts, 'being-in-the-world' and 'being-with-others' describe not only what we try to do through the special talk and listening of therapy but also what we attempt in our families or with our friends. I am unashamedly '*child-ist*' and I'm sorry if that causes offence to those who are not. To feel there is another being-in-the-world is better creation than any amount of magazine editing, or psychotherapy organisation regulating. And with that personal thought I will wish you and yours the same delight I presently feel.

Yours joyfully,
John Hills

Subscription Reminder

'In complex, bewildering situations — surrounding multiproblem clients or families, for example — expecting ways out through streamlining specialisation even further appears far less promising than joining forces, reframing the picture, and tolerating uncertainty.'

(J. Seikkula, T. E. Arnkil & Esa Eriksson, 'Postmodern Society and Social Networks: Open and Anticipation Dialogues in Network Meetings', *Family Process*, 42: 185–203, 2003)

Seikkula et al. remind us of the benefits of Network Therapy in response to bewildering situations. No need for bewilderment when it is time to renew your subscription, due on January 1.

Send your sub to: Subscriptions Manager

P.O. Box 135 Moorebank NSW 1875

Fax: + 61 2 9825 4885

Email: journalsubs@anzjft.com

And tell her about your address change!