Nick Totton and the UK Independent Practitioners' Network

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ABSTRACT *Nick Totton's involvement in, and contribution to, the UK Independent Practitioners Network (IPN) are outlined in this appreciative, impressionistic article. Nick Totton, along with others, took a pivotal leadership role in the founding and development of this radical counter-cultural approach to "psy" accountability in Britain in the mid 1990s, and his major contribution deserves explicit recognition. That the IPN has, and continues to have, a significant influence on innovative thinking and upon the evolving "politics" of the therapy field in the UK is a fitting testimony to Nick's key contribution. Copyright © 2013 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

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SOME HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The UK Independent Practitioners Network (IPN) was founded in 1995, following mounting concern within parts of the UK counselling and psychotherapy community about the trend towards professionalising and regulating a field which many of us felt to be fundamentally inappropriate to professionalise in the institutional way that was being ardently proposed by those with a vested interest in such developments. Indeed, some of us at the time viewed what was emerging in the field as a modernist, extrinsically dominated professionalisation agenda which was, at a crucial level, manifesting a desperate attempt to render safe, plausible and possible that which is intrinsically *un*safe, *im*plausible (House & Totton, 1997) and *im*possible (Malcolm, 1980) – and, moreover, at a potentially enormous cost in terms of the overall quality and depth of "psy work" available in Britain. From this perspective, it is difficult to exaggerate the import of what the IPN stood, and stands, for, as I hope will become clear in what follows.

I don't think it's unfair to say that it was predominantly humanistic practitioners who were launching this rear-guard action to protect the psy field, and, to adopt a metaphor of Nick

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Totton's, to protect the "baby" of therapy work from the professionalising "bathwater", (Totton, 1999). Thus, in 1990 and 1992, there were special issues of the Humanistic Psychology journal *Self and Society* engaging with the regulation issue, which contained a series of articles challenging psychotherapy professionalisation (e.g. Brown & Mowbray, 1990; Heron, 1990; Kalisch, 1990, 1992; Cannon & Hatfield, 1992; Wasdell, 1992); and, soon afterwards, in 1995, Richard Mowbray's seminal treatise on the mal-effects of psychotherapy registration, *The Case Against Psychotherapy Registration* (subtitled "A Conservation Issue for the Human Potential Movement") was published.

When, in early 1994, an untitled yet eye-catching letter to the editor appeared in *Self and Society* written by Nick Totton, with an exploratory proposal for a "Self- and Peer-Accredited Therapists' Network", no one could have foreseen that, within a few years, a thriving, pluralistic network of therapy practitioners was to exist across the country – which was then called the Independent Therapists Network (ITN). In his letter, Nick wrote:

> By a sort of creeping putsch, the UK Council for Psychotherapy has established itself and its register at the centre of the therapy world in this country. This is against the will of a number of practitioners. . . . I want to propose the creation of a . . . stripped-down organisation with as few functions as possible beyond acting as an umbrella for therapists who don't want to go on the UKCP register. . . . [W]e are saying that the appropriate measure of a therapist's soundness is not the number of hours' training done or the letters after their name, but the willingness of their peers to validate their work. (Totton, 1994, p. 47)

It was at this point, then, that Nick began to be widely known to those in the humanistic part of the field who had been challenging institutional professionalisation for some years; and while Nick would almost certainly not label himself as a "humanistic" practitioner per se, it rapidly became clear that we shared broadly similar aspirations for the "post-institutional" organisation of the field, if not always necessarily agreeing on procedural detail. It was then that we learnt more about Nick's earlier writings, showcased in his first book, on Reichian growth work (Totton & Edmondson, 2009). It is clear from his subsequent writings, not least in this journal, that Nick has probably always seen therapy as an unavoidably *political* activity (e.g. Totton, 1997d, 2000, 2006a, 2006b). As he wrote in 2006: "Thinking about psychotherapy and politics must surely entail thinking about the politics of psychotherapy itself" (Totton, 2006a, p. 120) – and, in his very first editorial for this journal, he wrote of psychotherapy and politics always having had "a deep historical relationship" (Totton, 2003, p. iii), and his vision of *Psychotherapy and Politics International* itself taking "an active psychopolitical position" (p. iv).

Like many of us who were radicalised in the 1960s and 1970s by the likes of Ivan Illich, Herbert Marcuse, Wilhelm Reich, A. S. Neill, E. F. Schumacher – as well, of course, as Margaret Thatcher! – there is a very deep left-libertarian ethos and critique of capitalist structures underpinning the shared interest that we discovered in the early 1990s, and which has deepened ever since; and Nick, like the rest of us, very much comes from that critically engaged place.

Nick's 1994 letter, therefore, coincided with a number of other like-minded initiatives – such as the Norwich Group Process Group led initially by Robin Shohet, and the pioneering Cambridge "dynamics of accreditation" conferences (see, for example, Cannon & Hatfield, 1992; House, 2007) – and, in the event, around 60 practitioners from across Britain, Nick and myself included, attended the resultant ITN's inaugural conference, held at London's Open Centre on 19 November 1994.

Thus, in a further letter from Nick to *Self and Society* (Totton, 1995), the birth of the Independent Therapists Network was formally announced. The then ITN (soon afterwards to be renamed the "IPN") held, and still holds, three national gatherings each year around the country, to which anyone is free to come, and which constitutes the policy-making body for the Network. I attended many of the early gatherings, and Nick's presence, engagement and vision were second to none in those crucial early years. No one should underestimate the achievement of a counter-cultural "post-institutional" network like the IPN having survived for approaching two decades in a world increasingly dominated by the fear-driven audit and accountability culture (Cooper, 2001); and the strong roots that were laid down in those early years, when Nick's leadership role was crucial, have surely been a major contributing factor to the longevity of the Network. Moreover, I believe that the *very existence* of the IPN on the UK psy landscape has had a substantial influence on the politics of the field, and on the recent heading-off of the regulation of psychotherapy and counselling by the UK Health Professions Council; and, equally Nick Totton should take a major share of the credit in what was a pretty implausible victory in this paradigmatic "battle for the soul" of our work.

Another important aspect of the founding and sustainability of the Network was the publication in 1997 of the anthology *Implausible Professions*: *Arguments for Pluralism and Autonomy in Psychotherapy and Counselling*, which Nick and I co-edited (see House and Totton, 1997, 2011). We were delighted when, in 2010, PCCS Books (our publisher) approached us about the possibility of a second edition (as the first edition was then out of print) – not least because it was, firstly, an affirmation of the original project, which had helped to bolster the self-confidence of the Network in those early fledgling days, with many of the book's contributors being Network participants; and secondly, a strong message that the content of the original anthology had no less relevance for today's therapy field as it had when it first appeared some 15 years ago.

Nick's own contributions to the original anthology (Totton, 1997a, 1997b, 1997c, 1997d) have very much stood the test of time, writing about, respectively, the medical model and professionalisation, psychotherapy as a spiritual and political practice, the management of client–practitioner conflict, and the IPN as a new model of accountability; and his typically incisive and forthright Introduction to the second edition of *Implausible Professions* (Totton, 2011) makes for seminal reading regarding the (in some ways parlous) state of the psy field in Britain today.

ABOUT THE NETWORK

The Network's group, *communitarian* ideology radically counters the arguably unhelpful individualisation and *me-centredness* of wider cultural trends and mainstream professional practices, with the activity of individualised therapy being perhaps peculiarly subject to a privatising antisocial tendency which needs to be countered via creative cultural innovation.

The Network also can be seen as a form of "self-generating practitioner community" (Heron, 1997) in which participatory ethics (House, 1997) (requiring responsibility-taking by all involved) are privileged over institutionally didactic ethical codes. The Network's self-regulating participative system of validation and accountability is therefore consistent

with the core values of a rich diversity of therapeutic practice, with the overall Network structure being horizontal rather than vertical or hierarchical.

The Network also advocates an approach to difficulties or disputes which encourages the willingness to own "mistakes" in an atmosphere of relatively non-defensive openness (Totton, 1997c), so providing an alternative to conventional shame-inducing complaints procedures – not that we in the IPN would in any way wish to claim to have discovered any "magic bullet" for resolving the issue of complaints and difficulties that arise in this most "impossible" of professions.

It would also be air-brushingly misleading to suggest that the Network's various and multiple struggles with the complex dialectic between radical individualism and a commu-nitarian ethos have not been challenging, frustrating and even, at times, exhausting. Yet these aspects of the IPN's unfolding process have perhaps been a necessary and unavoid-able dimension which any human grouping striving to create a mature *community ethic and praxis* must inevitably encounter at this point in the evolution of human consciousness.

In 2004 I wrote about what I then saw as some of the features of the Network – namely, its provision and enabling of:

- An environment of sustained, ongoing, peership and a profound intimacy of peer relation-ship, 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; and
- 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 (with this taking many forms. including ongoing informal peer-to-peer contact, and an IPN members email group).

For me, the great modern seer Rudolf Steiner's so-called "Motto of the Social Ethic" (in Lipsker, 1990) beautifully sums up the subtlety and complexity of just what is at stake in what the IPN and comparable organisations are striving to achieve in the endarkening age of manic "audit" and accountability obsessiveness, in which we currently find ourselves (e.g. Cooper, 2001): "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" (p. 60).

EXPERIENCES OF IPN

Since 1995 I have been a member of an IPN practitioner group, the "Leonard Piper" group – a grouping of (as I write) seven practitioners from across southern England who meet for a day every 4–5 weeks to witness, validate and challenge each other's work as therapy prac-titioners. I have written at some length about my own experiences of the IPN elsewhere

(e.g. House, 2004, 2007), but I think Nick Totton would agree that it is the experiences of *new* practitioners coming into the Network, who have been exposed far more to the machinations of orthodox accountability frameworks than we wizened IPNers have been, who can offer the most telling insights into the value of the Network, and the crucial place it occupies on the British psy landscape, and in modern culture more generally.

In this spirit, I asked a couple of comparatively new members of my own IPN practitioner group for some comments on their experience of being involved in this unique network that Nick Totton has had such a key role in founding and nurturing. In response, "Leonard Piper" IPN group member Lucy Scurfield wrote:

> For me IPN offers a supportive and rigorous structure which encourages honest and open critical reflection by practitioners for whom integrity at any level is essential to good practice. It offers a model of accountability which inevitably challenges what appropriate practice is. It invites, encourages and values approaches which might otherwise be sidelined and go unrecognised, particularly by mainstream statutory and voluntary bodies.

> I value being a member of a group which provides a space for everyone to express themselves as individuals and to reflect on what "standing by" actually means and entails. In this process, our meetings with link groups bring the promise of a challenging "outside" presence.

> I have also found national gatherings increasingly valuable as opportunities to meet other practitioners and to exchange ideas and reflections. I have felt encouraged to express myself in an informal friendly atmosphere in which newcomers are warmly welcomed and all participants, regardless of background, are heard and challenged with attentive respect.

> I find it inspiring to be part of a network that values all kinds of practices which embrace individual empowerment and respectful relating. It helps me to maintain my integrity as a conscientious practitioner and enables me to develop a language that is accessible to my colleagues, clients, and any other interested parties. This is important for communicating effectively and with confidence as an independent practitioner, and particularly about the purpose and value of Strong Roots, the therapeutic garden project I am developing in Norwich.

Jennifer Maidman, also of the "Leonard Piper" group, writes:

> As I recall, Nick and I first met at a gig in September 2000. I was working with the singer songwriter Robert Wyatt on the "Soupsongs" project (playing guitar and singing) and Nick came up and briefly introduced himself. On reflection, the context of that first meeting seems somehow very apt, as one might describe Nick as a sort of "Robert Wyatt of the psy field", someone who, like Robert, has remained true to his own personal "muse", even when that has entailed stepping outside the so called "mainstream".

> Nick and I met again a few years later when I attended the first meeting of the Alliance for Counselling and Psychotherapy. I was still a musician but by then I had trained as a therapist and registered with one of the larger professional bodies. Like Nick, I was concerned about the seemingly inexorable drive towards more and more accreditation, regulation and elitism in the psy field, which seemed to me to have not much to do with supporting clients, and everything to do with the economic ambitions and status anxiety of some professional practitioners. To cut a long story short, Nick asked me to join the Alliance, through which I met Richard House, Denis Postle and Guy Gladstone and was invited to join the "Leonard Piper" IPN group.

The word that springs to mind to describe my relatively short experience of IPN so far is "congruence". The group offers an interpersonal space in which I can be the person I really am, "warts and all", and in which what some have called "false professional selves" are neither a feature or a requirement. It seems to me that it's this prizing and nurturing of personal authenticity which is the great strength of IPN. Although I do think the larger bodies can have a place in the professional landscape, particularly from a client perspective, I don't see any other institution or network built on the kind of authentic, peer group process that IPN embodies, a process in which practitioners with widely differing backgrounds, experience, training and qualifications can meet to both validate and challenge one another as genuine equals. Long may it thrive!

IN CONCLUSION

I hope it will be clear from the foregoing that, for nearly two decades now, the Independent Practitioners Network in the UK has championed an approach to psy accountability that, to quote Brown and Mowbray (quoted in Mowbray, 1995), has striven to be consistent with, rather than betraying, the core values of the peculiar and mysterious work that is psychotherapy and counselling. Nick Totton has been a key figure in the genesis, founding and ongoing development of this unique Network, and it is a pleasure to recognise in the pages of this special issue of *PPI* the contribution that Nick, along with many others, has made to this leading-edge cultural innovation, from the experience and praxis of which the whole field of psychotherapy surely has a great deal to learn.

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Lucy Scurfield is formerly a professional garden designer, and now an integrative therapist and counsellor (UKCP registered). In 2006 she founded Strong Roots, a registered charity (www.strongroots. org.uk) which is a unique and innovative therapeutic garden project in Norwich for people who, typically, are experiencing social exclusion for a variety of reasons, and to which potential participants refer themselves or are referred by both statutory and non-statutory agencies. Important to the development of the project is the support of the Leonard Piper Independent Practitioners Network group, of which she has been a member for over two years.