What Does It Mean to Know a Client? Personal and Theoretical Reflections

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SYNOPSIS

Traditional theories of counseling and psychotherapy presume that helpers can come to know their clients. However, when subjected to critical examination, questions about knowing others become complex and problematic. Through personal and theoretical reflections, the author attempts to clarify the complex question of 'What does it mean to know a client?'

The question of what it means to know a client is arguably at the heart of the helping encounter. The act of helping would seem to require that the helper come to know things about the person who is requesting help. Indeed, the assumption that one person can come to know another is generally presumed by traditional theories of psychology and counseling. Although treatment orientations emphasise different methods to facilitate knowing (e.g. free association, empathic responsiveness, etc.), virtually all approaches to helping presume that helpers can come to know their clients.

Perhaps, however, we should not take fundamental questions about knowing clients for granted, as traditional theorists have done. Indeed, how can we know if we know someone? What would be the basis for concluding that we know someone? The more one thinks about these questions, the more fleeting the answers become.

Complexities of Knowing

We commonly speak of knowing someone. I know my departmental secretary, my wife, the person I met at a party last weekend, my children, and my mail carrier. If a sceptical questioner were to ask me how I knew that I know these people, I might respond that I have had conversations with each of them, and my knowledge about them is often verified by their responses to me. For instance, I know that my youngest child likes spicy food, and my oldest abhors it, because I have had multiple experiences and conversations with them that have verified these preferences. I know them.

My hypothetical questioner might continue to press me. Does the preference for a certain type of food really constitute knowing someone? If not, what would constitute a full knowing of another person? At what point could you finally proclaim that you know someone? In my defense, I might respond that I know people to different degrees. Knowing is a continuum, not a binary. However, my questioner's dissatisfaction with these responses might lead her or him to raise a whole new set of troubling problems about my claims to know other people.

For instance, my questioner might point out that for me to know someone must mean that elements of the other person's experience are duplicated in my mind. For me to claim, for instance, that I know that my wife

finds animal abuse incredibly troubling, it must mean the following: a) in my wife's mind, there is a specific content related to feelings about animal abuse; and b) this same content has been recreated and stored in my mind. If the two mental contents match, I can claim that I know my wife (at least with regard to this issue). To know someone, then, must mean that there is a match between certain contents of the mind of the person who is known, and the knower. However, my questioner might wryly point out that there is no way to verify that certain contents of my mind accurately correspond to parallel contents of the mind of the person whom I claim to know. We cannot observe the contents of anyone's mind. How, then, can we be sure that this match exists?

I might respond that I know that this match exists because the people I claim to know verify some of the things that I know about them. If I were to approach my wife and ask her if she finds animal abuse troubling, she would say that she does. This, I might argue, is verification of the matching contents of our respective minds.

At this point, my persistent questioner might argue that all of my knowledge claims about other people are dependent upon the communicative vehicle of language. I would be forced to admit that my questioner is probably right about this. I know that my friend identifies with progressive political positions because he has told me so. I know that Thomas Edison was an extremely persistent inventor because I have read about him. I know that the editor does not like my latest article because he wrote me a rejection email saying so. Knowing would seem to be a language dependent phenomenon (Hansen, 2008).

In order for one person to know another, my questioner might argue, language must be an adequate vehicle for capturing and communicating human experience because knowing is always dependent upon language. In order for the contents of my mind to match certain elements of the mind of the person whom I claim to know, language must function according to the following communicative steps: a) some sort of content exists in the other person's mind; b) the other person translates this content into language, which is communicated to me; c) I receive the linguistic communication, interpret the language, and store the associated content in my mind.

However, there are multiple problems with assuming that these steps could ever work smoothly and accurately. Most importantly, rich layers of human experience are certainly lost when they are shoehorned into the 'grunts and squeals' (Frederickson, 1999, p. 252) of language (Spence, 1982). Just like a cheap whistle cannot adequately convey the richness of a symphony, language is arguably a completely inadequate tool to convey the complex dimensions of human experience. Therefore, because knowing is a language dependent phenomenon, it seems absurd to presume that the contents of one person's mind can be accurately transmitted (with all the richness and webs of meanings that accompany even the simplest thoughts) to the mind of another person.

What it means to know a client, then, is not a simple question to answer. The challenges raised by my hypothetical questioner reveal a host of problems associated with the claim that one person can know another. Most people probably do not give these issues much thought. However, something about my intellectual and emotional disposition made this issue very meaningful to me, even at an early age.

Personal and Professional Significance of the Question

Since childhood, before I could articulate the experience, I have felt a strong, underlying sense of isolation. I do not mean isolation in the conventional sense of being alone. I have always had a good number of friends, supportive family, and other people in my life with whom I have felt a close connection. By isolation, I mean a deeply felt sense of fascination and distress that my mind was completely separated from the minds of others. I have always felt like I lived in my head. I was acutely aware that the rich

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interplay of thoughts that I had while walking home from school, for instance, could never be recreated and placed wholly in the mind of another person. No one could ever fully understand me. I was alone.

This sense of existential isolation has always been part of my experience, although it has not always been fully conscious. I never experienced severe distress about it, but it began to well up in my mind as I got older. I believe that my sense of isolation was largely responsible for my choice to become a psychology major at college. While in high school, I heard that psychologists had a number of theories related to understanding the inner life of human beings. Perhaps, I unconsciously reasoned, I might be able to solve the riddle of personal isolation by studying psychology.

Psychology was a fascinating course of study for me. Of all the theorists I read, Sigmund Freud was the one who appealed to me the most. Reading his *Introductory Lectures* (Freud, 1916/1966) and the *Interpretation of Dreams* (Freud, 1900/1953) was an awe-inspiring, life-changing experience. Unlike other theorists, Freud offered sophisticated maps of the mind. I thought that I might be able to use his maps to find my way out of isolation. Furthermore, Freud added a radical, intriguing, and frightening addendum to my sense of isolation: not only was knowing others problematic, people were not even capable of knowing themselves! Freud's map of the mind baited me, but the idea of an unconscious reeled me in. I was hooked.

I subsequently enrolled in a doctoral program in Clinical Psychology. I purposefully chose a program that had a strong psychoanalytic orientation. I spent six deeply satisfying years immersed in Freudian psychology and practice. Along the way, I developed an interest in schizophrenia.

I retrospectively understand my interest in schizophrenia as emanating from the same source as my interest in psychoanalysis. Both interests grew out of my sense of isolation. I found talking with schizophrenics reassuring because the isolated nature of their existence is often obvious. When an individual who suffers from schizophrenia makes a claim that no one else believes (e.g. that he is Jesus Christ) it is obvious that the schizophrenic person is alone in his experience. When we speak with people who generally share our beliefs, in contrast, it is not obvious that isolation is operative. For instance, if a colleague shares her frustration with me about an issue at the university, I nod my head, make an attempt to empathise with her concerns, and provide various signs that I have understood the nature of her frustration. We do not feel isolated because we have a sense that a true sharing of minds occurred during the interaction. What a lie! Schizophrenia, to me, was the boldest and most personally validating statement of what I sensed to be true: we are always alone.

Although the issue of knowing was personally important to me, it is also an important issue for all helping professionals to consider. At its core, the work of counseling or therapy involves an extended conversation between people. In individual counseling, the client comes to the counselor for relief from psychological distress. The counselor attempts to orchestrate ongoing conversations in a way that will help the client overcome the distress. Presumably, regardless of theoretical orientation, the counselor must come to know clients, at least to some degree, in order to help them.

But, how does this process of knowing work, particularly in light of the critique presented in the first part of this article? Is knowing a prerequisite for helping? What is the relevant information about clients that counselors should know? How can counselors be sure that their knowledge about clients is accurate? These are difficult questions, but, in some ways, the entire enterprise of helping depends upon the answers.

Unfortunately, most psychological theorists do not provide us with much help. Most of the great theoretical architects of the helping professions were not concerned about formal philosophical questions. However, it is often possible to detect their implicit assumptions about knowing from reading their work.

What does it mean to know a client?

In my estimation, the most important theorists to plumb the depths of subjectivity were Sigmund Freud and Carl Rogers. Therefore, any consideration of knowing in the helping professions must consider their work.

Freud and Psychoanalysis

Because his intellectual temperament was not suited to philosophical speculation, Freud did not address esoteric, philosophical issues about knowing (Gay, 1988). His implicit assumptions about knowing can be inferred from his work.

The central assumption of psychoanalysis is that mental health problems are caused by unconscious conflict (Gabbard, 2010). Freud initially proposed that the unconscious contained repressed sexual fantasies

from childhood (Gay, 1988). When these fantasies are activated in adulthood, they begin to emerge and express themselves in a disguised, derivative form as symptoms. This conceptualization of symptoms made sense out of conditions like glove paralysis, which Freud theorized was a derivative, symptomatic expression of an unconscious wish to masturbate along with the accompanying inhibitions against doing so (McWilliams, 1999).

Once the unconscious was established as the centerpiece of psychoanalytic theory, Freud had to find a way to access the unconscious mental life of his patients. Knowing someone else's unconscious would seem to be a difficult, if not impossible, task. After all, if a person, by definition, cannot access his or her own unconscious, how can an outsider like Freud gain access to it? The method that he finally settled upon to come to know the unconscious of his patients was free association, a method which was ideologically derived from the principle of psychic determinism (Gabbard, 2010).

As a neurologist, Freud knew that neurons were interconnected throughout the body. Particular neuronal firings regularly triggered other neurons to fire. Neurons, then, were subject to the same deterministic, cause and effect laws that governed the rest of the physical world. Like all physical reality, there were no random events in the brain or nervous system. For instance, if a neuron fires there must have been a preceding event; just like if a ball rolls, something must have pushed it. Ultimately, Freud reasoned, mental life must also be beholden to these deterministic laws because the contents of the mind emanate from a physical foundation – i.e. neurons and the brain. Therefore, if someone is encouraged to speak freely and spontaneously about the contents of their mind, whatever the person says must be interconnected, even if on the surface, the various thoughts seem to have nothing to do with each other. The idea that the psyche was just as determined as the physical world thus gave rise to the technique of *free association* (Eagle, 2011).

Freud then encouraged his patients to lie on a couch and spontaneously report whatever was on their mind without editing the contents – free association – while he sat behind them, out of their field of vision. Going on the assumption of psychic determinism (that all of his patient's thoughts were tightly determined even if they seemed random), Freud focused on inferring the contents of the unconscious from interconnections and slips of the tongue in his patient's free associations. For instance, if a patient talked about her husband and then spontaneously began talking about her father, Freud assumed, based on the principle of psychic determinism, that there must be some connection between husband and father in the patient's unconscious.

It is important to understand basic psychoanalytic concepts, such as psychic determinism, to appreciate Freud's implicit ideas about what it means to know a client. The most fertile ground for inferring Freud's conceptualizations about client knowledge are probably his papers on technique, which grew out of his foundational assumptions about the psychoanalytic process. These techniques were arguably designed to ensure objectivity (Gabbard, 2005).

For instance, Freud recommended that psychoanalysts model themselves after a surgeon 'who puts aside all his feelings, even his human sympathy, and concentrates his mental forces on the single aim of performing the operation as skillfully as possible' (1912/1958, p. 115). Furthermore, 'The doctor should be opaque to his patients and, like a mirror, should show them nothing but what is shown to him' (ibid., p. 118). The various rules that Freud outlined in his papers on method eventually evolved into the three rules for classical psychoanalytic technique: neutrality, anonymity, and abstinence (Gabbard, 2005).

Neutrality means that the psychoanalyst should not side with a particular part of the patient's experience (Gabbard, 2005). If a patient, for instance, is unsure about whether or not to leave his job, the psychoanalyst should listen intently, without offering an opinion about the matter. *Anonymity* refers to the rule that the psychoanalyst should not disclose personal information about him or herself to the patient (Gabbard, 2005). Last, *abstinence* means that the psychoanalyst should refrain from gratifying the patient's wishes and simply listen to and interpret the meaning of the free associations (Gabbard, 2005). For instance, if a patient asks whether the psychoanalyst thought that she was smart, the psychoanalyst should not gratify the request by offering an opinion.

Indeed, Freud's technical recommendations for knowing patients seem very odd. Essentially, he recommended that psychoanalysts should refuse to disclose personal information, withhold judgement on anything that patients say, and refrain from granting requests. All of these technical recommendations are enacted while the psychoanalyst sits, rarely speaking,

> '...traditional psychoanalytic ideas have had a lasting impact... the Freudian mark on humanism is not hard to detect'

behind the couch and out of the patient's view. How can this possibly be a good way to get to know someone?

Consider how different Freud's recommendations are from our usual, intuitive way of getting to know others. If I want to know someone, I will usually ask them questions, offer my opinion about what they have said, and readily disclose personal information. The other person usually acts the same way, and we leave the interaction feeling as if we know each other better. Why do Freud's recommendations about coming to know someone differ so radically from the way that we come to know people in ordinary life?

Two features of Freud's mindset must be understood to answer this question. The first is Freud's implicit response to the question 'What does it mean to know a client?' For Freud, to know a client meant to know the content of the client's unconscious. Second, Freud operated in an era of high modernism, and considered himself a scientist (Gay, 1988). Modernist ideological assumptions about knowing strongly influenced his technical recommendations. Modernism and the psychoanalytic goal of knowing the unconscious must be understood to appreciate Freud's technical recommendations.

The basic assumption of modernism is that human beings can come to know objective truths about reality (Hansen, 2004). The method for ascertaining these objective truths is science (Anderson, 1990). One of the cornerstones of scientific investigation is that observers must not contaminate, influence, or interfere with the scientific process. Otherwise, the findings will not be objective (Hansen, 2006b). Scientists employ various methodological strategies to ensure that their subjective biases do not intrude upon their scientific data. For instance, when testing the effectiveness of a new medicine, a double-blind methodology is often employed (Ary, Jacobs & Sorensen, 2010). For example, one group may be instructed to take a pill that contains a new medicine, while another group may be instructed to take a placebo pill. Conditions are put into place to ensure that neither the subjects nor the person distributing the pills know which subjects are receiving the medicine and which ones are receiving the placebo. By instituting these 'blind' conditions, the risk that the results will be influenced by the biases of the subjects or the person who distributes the pills is severely reduced.

During Freud's lifetime, astonishing discoveries in medicine, physics, chemistry, and many other fields, which had a direct impact on human betterment, were made with the use of the scientific method. Due to these discoveries, the scientific method became idealized at the turn of the century as a way to uncover the secrets of the universe. Freud, being a product of these times, strongly identified with the role of a scientist (Gay, 1988).

Freud applied this scientific mindset to his goal of unlocking the mysteries of the unconscious. Freud's technical recommendations for coming to know clients were designed to ensure scientific objectivity, analogous to a double-blind methodology. Specifically, Freud recommended that psychoanalysts take a neutral stance so that the free flowing speech of the patient would not be influenced by the biases of the psychoanalyst (Gabbard, 2005).

For Freud, then, knowing a client meant to know the client's unconscious. Freud's seemingly bizarre recommendations about knowing make sense in the context of his goal of illuminating the unconscious and his thoroughly modernist ideology. Many (probably most) contemporary psychoanalysts reject Freud's original technical guidelines (e.g.Gill, 1994). However, traditional psychoanalytic ideas have had a lasting impact, even influencing humanism, an orientation that made its mark by rejecting foundational psychoanalytic assumptions.

Rogers and Humanism

Like psychoanalysis, psychological humanism is a fascinating theory of subjectivity that gave rise to specific recommendations for helping people who are emotionally troubled. While the Freudian mark on humanism is not hard to detect, founding humanists, ironically, repudiated the very foundation of

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psychoanalysis (and behaviorism). This is what led some to refer to humanism as the 'third force' (DeCarvalho, 1990, p. 22) in psychology. Like psychoanalysis, the humanistic answer to 'What does it mean to know a client?' cannot be adequately understood unless one has a sense of the historical and philosophical forces that gave rise to psychological humanism.

The psychological humanism that emerged during the mid-twentieth century is a manifestation of an ideology that dates back many centuries. Renaissance humanists, for instance, rejected the notions that human beings should be understood from a divine perspective (e.g. as God's creations) or as scientific objects (Tarnas, 1991). The Renaissance humanists argued that there is something unique and essential about human experiences, which is lost when it is reduced to other phenomena. For instance, feelings of love can be reduced to biochemical processes or be understood as a manifestation of God's love. Both of these reductionistic conceptualisations would miss the point. To be adequately understood, love (and other uniquely human experiences) should be considered holistically, and not reduced to baser phenomena.

This humanistic principle of irreducibility was also present in the ideological assumptions of the mid-twentieth century psychological humanists (Davidson, 2000). The psychological humanists rejected psychoanalysis and behaviorism because these orientations reduced people to psychic structures (psychoanalysis) and stimulus response contingencies (behaviorism) (DeCarvalho, 1990). In this regard, Matson (1971), in prototypical humanistic fashion, proclaimed moral outrage at the very idea of reductionism when he wrote that 'I know of no greater disrespect of the human subject than to treat him as an object – unless it is to demean that object further by fragmenting it into drives, traits, reflexes, and other mechanical hardware' (p. 7).

Humanistic practitioners derived treatment guidelines from their ideology. Like psychoanalysis, the most fertile ground for understanding the humanistic response to the question 'What does it mean to know a client?' lies in the humanistic recommendations for treatment. The person who unquestionably contributed the most to formulating humanistic treatment methods was Carl Rogers.

In his classic and highly influential article 'The necessary and sufficient conditions of therapeutic personality change', Rogers (1957) outlined the core conditions of the humanistic treatment scenario. As indicated by the title of his paper, Rogers presumed that these conditions were all that were needed to promote client change. In terms of the specific conditions that counselors must establish to make treatment effective, Rogers advocated that the counselor should be 'a congruent, genuine, integrated person' who is 'freely and deeply himself' (p. 97). The counselor must also show 'a warm acceptance of each aspect of the client's experience', a condition Rogers referred to as 'unconditional positive regard' (ibid., p. 98). Last, and probably most relevant to the question of knowing, is that counselors must have 'an accurate, empathic understanding' (ibid., p. 99) of their clients. Rogers presumed that if counselors established these treatment conditions, clients would resume their natural course toward growth, fulfillment, and the actualisation process that had been developmentally interrupted.

These conditions for human relating seem much more intuitively plausible than the Freudian conditions. In this regard, if I meet someone new and would like to get to know them, I will try to present myself in a genuine way, attempt to accept and learn about what the other person is telling me, and show some signs that I have understood their experience. Rogers, presented a model that is much closer to the natural way that people come to know each other than the psychoanalytic recommendations for knowing. Notably, some critics (Masson, 1994) have argued that the Rogerian conditions are artificial, false, and intrinsically non-genuine. Masson (1994) argued that no one can genuinely adopt an attitude of unconditional positive regard toward every client, a fact that, for Masson,

makes the Rogerian conditions nothing more than 'playacting' (p. 232).

Playacting or not, the Rogerian treatment conditions betray the humanistic mindset about what it means to know a client. For instance, in contrast to Freudian knowing, which presumes the existence of entire realms of human experience that are difficult or impossible to access (e.g. the unconscious), humanistic knowing has no inherent limitations; the complete individual can potentially be known through empathy. This presumption of the possibility of full knowing is a byproduct of the humanistic ideal of irreducibility.

The Freudians reduced the psyche, chopping it up into topographic realms, psychic structures, and self and object representations. This reductionist map of the mind provided the Freudians with a basis for claiming that certain psychic realms were less accessible than others. The humanists, in contrast, abhorred reductionism. Therefore, there was no basis for the humanists to claim that various parts of the mind had differential levels of accessibility because, for humanists, there were no parts. This humanistic assumption of irreducibility made full knowing a theoretical possibility.

This emphasis on full knowing, though, is not without its problems. For instance, Sass (1989) noted that the humanistic assumption of psychological transparency conflicts with the private nature of subjectivity. Specifically, is it conceivable that we could all have internal, private, psychological universes, yet those universes could also be completely transparent and knowable to an interested, empathic observer? Indeed, this seems like a contradiction in humanistic ideology. Any theory that idealizes subjectivity would also seem to require related theoretical assumptions about the private nature of internal experience, along with limits on the degree to which that experience could be known.

This humanistic emphasis on irreducibility and psychological transparency also means that people are capable of knowing and reporting the full contents of their psyche (Sass, 1989). For example, if a client says 'I hate my boss,' a humanistic therapist would assume that this is an honest report of the person's experience of the boss. In contrast, a psychoanalytic therapist would wonder whether the statement was a disguised, defended version of some unconscious conflict, such as the client's feelings about his father which were displaced onto the boss. Psychoanalysts have been said to operate under the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' (King, 1986: 29), because whatever the client says is presumed to be representative of something deeper in the psyche that is not consciously accessible.

Discussion and Conclusions

For all of their differences, humanistic and traditional psychoanalytic ideologies share a fundamentally modernist base (Hansen, 2006a). That is, proponents of both schools of thought presumed that therapists could come to know objective truths about clients. Traditional psychoanalysts believed that they could accurately infer the unconscious contents of their patients. Humanists, on the other hand, emphasized the importance of '*accurate*, empathic understanding' (Rogers, 1957: 99; italics added). For both schools of thought, therapists are capable of accurately knowing clients if the correct methods are employed.

In keeping with the modernist, scientific template, both humanists and psychoanalysts had methods for keeping the influence of the counselor from contaminating the psychological productions of the client. Traditional psychoanalysts essentially mimicked the detached, objective posture of a scientist so that the data (patient verbalisations) would not be influenced by the observer (psychoanalyst). Humanists, in contrast, placed an emphasis on understanding whatever the client presented (Rogers, 1986). By simply trying to understand what the client is presenting, without adding the counselor's agenda into the process, the humanists presumed that the contaminating influence of the therapist would be kept to a minimum. Therefore, although humanism and psychoanalysis have very different answers to the question 'What does it mean to know a client?' both schools were founded on a scientific ideological template.

There are many theoretical orientations to counseling. Arguably, psychoanalysis and humanism, as comprehensive theories of subjectivity, have the most compelling answers to the question, 'What does it mean to know a client?' Both theories hold out the enticing, hopeful promise of human knowing, albeit with very different assumptions about what knowing entails. Other counseling orientations narrowly define what is important to know. Cognitivists, for example, presume that the important information for a therapist to glean is a client's thoughts (Mahoney, 1991). Traditional behaviorists completely ignore subjective meaning systems and are only interested in stimulus–response contingencies (Skinner, 1974).

In summary, traditional theories of helping offer no unified answer to the question, 'What does it mean to

know a client?' The process of thoroughly considering the question might be the closest that we will ever come to an answer. Indeed, given this brief review, it is reasonable to presume that pure knowing (knowing without any preconceived theoretical biases) is an impossibility. All knowing occurs within the context of particular assumptions, theoretical or otherwise. Therefore, the traditional humanistic ideal of obtaining pure knowledge about clients through authentic, genuine encounters should arguably be replaced by a new ideal: striving for continual awareness of the ways in which our biases shape what we believe we know about others.

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