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Understanding in Analysis

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Greg is a reader of Freud and Lacan, and member of both the Earl's Court Clinical Group and the Earl's Court Collective.

Has understanding ever helped anyone get better? In this seminar Greg talked with clarity and directness about understanding in analysis. He looked Freud's and Lacan's ideas about 'understanding' and drew out some of the clinical consequences.

Every Therapy has an idea of understanding and patients have their own view. Understanding ourselves has always been an important part of philosophy. The Oxford Dictionary offers the following definitions.

- To perceive intended meanings.
- Sympathetic awareness and tolerance.
- Mutual agreement.

Cognitive behavioural therapists focus on our cognitive understandings of the self and psychiatrists are interested into the causality that explains us. A person centred therapist will develop an empathic understanding of the client.

Psychoanalysts can be cautious about understanding in therapy. Greg gave a case study where the understanding a client looked for was an affirmation of being badly treated but where the analyst's acceptance of this understanding would not open up the possibility of change.

A therapist's understanding can short circuit exploration and a client can use understanding as a form of resistance. Once the analyst understands the directions of discourse are closed down.

If understanding is not as central as in other forms of therapy then what are the issues of therapeutic work? Greg answered his question by saying that the aim of analysis is change rather than understanding.

From the early 1950s Lacan thought that all the analyst has is the patient's speech. People come into analysis because they have something to say. Speech, even our own internal speech to ourselves, is always speaking to someone else. We are sending a message for someone to receive. Understanding is the reception of the message and perceiving the intended meaning. Therapy is a particular kind of relationship between a speaker and a listener and a particular transmission of meaning.

For Lacan if communication is successful nothing changes, but in analysis what needs to be communicated is constantly changing. What emerges is new meaning rather than intended meaning.

In *Jokes and their relation to the unconscious* (1905) Freud recounts a joke. One Jew says to another *Have you taken a bath?* and gets the reply *Why, is one missing?* This could be a simple misunderstanding but is a funny joke because of the ambiguity of meaning of the word *taken*. The response creates a new meaning. Freud spoke of mistakes and slips of the tongue, the famous Freudian slips. In ordinary conversation these would be literally meaningless. There is no intended meaning to be pursued. Jokes are different in that the response opens up new meaning, a revelation, a surprise.

By contrast to ordinary conversation analysis is a way of listening which neither accepts nor rejects intended meanings. This reveals another intended meaning and reveals another speaker. Many of the techniques of analysis are to do with not understanding.

Analysis makes a new speaker to appear and this new speaker may conflict with the first speaker. This is the emergence of the unconscious and an alter ego. This process also creates another listener. This is the process that underlies projection.

The analyst says little or nothing in sessions. This means the patient has a continuous need to speak. This means that patient put themselves in a dependent position and places the analyst in the transference. Often the transference is to an expert who can solve the patient's problem. This places the patient in a position to start analysis.

As we ended one of our members said she had always found Lacan hard to grasp but in this seminar had had a clear understanding of this aspect of Lacanian analysis. **So thank you to Greg Hynds** for making the complex graspable.