

NWRPA Newsletter February 2021

Unknowing in Psychotherapy

A Zoom talk by David Henderson

Friday 12 February 2021

Summary by Frank Kelley

David Henderson spoke to us about unknowing in this fascinating Zoom seminar. He is a lecturer in the Department of Psychosocial and Psychoanalytic Studies, University of Essex and a psychotherapist in private practice. He is a member of the British Jungian Analytic Association (BJAA) and the British Psychotherapy Foundation (BPF). His website is <https://davidhendersonpsychotherapy.com>

David has kindly given us a copy of his PowerPoint presentation. You will find a downloadable .pdf in our online newsletter archive at <https://www.nwrpa.org.uk/news/>

For David unknowing is integral to our work. Therapists are often at a loss. They do not understand what is happening in the session, what their clients are talking about, or what to make of their own thoughts and feelings. He discussed some of the ways in which *not knowing* is thought of in psychoanalysis and what resources there might be in philosophy and theology to support the therapist's capacity to remain present.

Since working on his PhD David has been preoccupied with thinking about negativity in western philosophy. This began with the Ancient Greeks. Later the writings of *Pseudo-Dionysius* brought together Greek and Biblical currents of negative theology. This includes the concepts of *anagou*, *anagoge*, *aphairesis*, *apophasis*, *hoion*, *hyper*, *exaireou* and *epekeina*. Or in English, uplifting abstraction, negation, denial, as it were, above, beyond, super, to be removed from or transcend and transcend, beyond.

His preoccupation informed his thinking about psychoanalysis where a Jungian approach stands in for psychoanalysis generally. Thinking about negativity links to Freud's ideas about the analyst having evenly hovering attention in the analytic session. Freud's early ideas about transference and free association were about gaps in speech and about the gaps in replies to questions.

There is a similar attitude to negativity for Winnicott who believed that the true self is not knowable. The psychoanalytic idea of identity is that it is a kind of hallucinatory illusion but we need this identity to live our lives.

Leon Ginsberg (1969) wrote that in spite of the tremendous impact of psychoanalysis on humankind it has not been possible to locate psychoanalysis within the fields of knowledge. The subject matter of psychoanalysis is constituted by its negative. In a religious parallel negative theology says our only understanding of God comes from saying what God is not.

Writing to his brothers in 1817, the poet Keats introduced the concept of negative capability as he discussed Shakespeare's creativity. *I mean Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.*

From this viewpoint the self is fundamentally unknowable. During analysis we do not increase our understanding. Over the sessions more of our life and thoughts become uncertain. Much of our speech in sessions is a denial of the transference. In this sense it is a denial of a denial. Our assertions are also a denial of ecstasy. You cannot define being alive.

You can only do it but not define it. Winnicott said patients need to be done with analysis and get on with their lives.

We need to discuss how we don't know about stuff and be more articulate about it. How do you cope with the not knowing we all have to deal with? Psychoanalysis is a kind of ignorance which makes life bearable. In sessions a client can breathe and speak. The greatest sin is to know before we hear. It is a gift of psychoanalysis to offer a space to breathe and speak.

Nicholas of Cusa talked of learned ignorance. We learn how much we can't know. For a therapist more experience should mean less knowing.

Trainee therapists are tortured by not knowing. They also find it painful when all they have learnt may not be of help to their clients. Increasingly psychoanalysts have taken to knowing stuff. Many leading psychoanalysts have acquired knowledge from neuroscience. In the debate about registration they are establishing statements about the skill sets of therapists.

The apocalyptic bit is that there is a crisis in psychoanalysis which is linked to seeing neuroscience as the way forward. This saying too much risks losing the freedom of psychoanalysis.

Thank you to David Henderson. The most used term in the lively feedback from those attending this seminar was *thought provoking*.

You may want to read more about ignorance studies. Please see the illustration below.

