CHAPTER 10

Establishing common ground to achieve therapeutic goals

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Healthcare professionals can normally assume that their patients are rational people and approach verbal interaction with the patient as they would with any fellow human being. Common ground is context shared between S (speaker, writer, signer) and H (audience) where S utters U (utterance), evoking context C1 (the 'world and time spoken of') so as to bring about in C3 (the 'situation of interpretation' from H's point of view) H's understanding U in terms of the relevant beliefs that S holds or purports to hold uttering U, i.e. speaking of C1 in C2 (the 'world and time spoken in' or situation of utterance from S's point of view).

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1. The significance of common ground

Human language is characteristically a form of social interactive behaviour. It may occasionally have other functions, but the motivation for its coming into existence (see Allan 2003; Dunbar 1996) and by far the majority of its usage is when S (speaker, writer, signer) addresses utterance U to audience H for an unbounded number of perlocutionary and illocutionary purposes such as to establish or maintain a social relationship, to inform, question, demand, warn, apologize, condole, and so forth. Many of these illocutionary purposes will be practised by healthcare professionals who need to identify from patients the malady that afflicts them, to offer treatments and to explain the prognosis and healthcare procedures. To achieve these ends, empathy building is often necessary in order to establish and then maintain the social relationship between healthcare provider and recipient; in other words, the fostering of inclusion and active participation to achieve the desired therapeutic goal.

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The roles of S and H will switch between healthcare professional and patient. S and H are mutually aware that, normally, their interlocutor is an intelligent being. S does not need to spell out those things which are obvious to the sensory receptors of H, or such that H can very easily reason them out using the knowledge that each of us develops from birth as we experience the world around us. Both S and H employ communicative competence, that is, knowing the language and the conventions for its use. Such shared understanding is the framework for what constitutes common ground. Our understanding of linguistic utterances rests on an assumption of common ground. For instance, when S points to something visible in the situation of utterance and says *Isn't that nice?* there is an assumption that H understands English and can also see whatever is indicated by 'that'. Asking *Do you live in Brisbane?* assumes that 'Brisbane' will be understood as referring to a certain recognizable location. Some common ground is universal: knowledge of the sun as a heavenly body that is a source of light and warmth, of rain as (among other things) a source of fresh water replenishing the earth, the physiological and socio-cultural differences between the sexes. Some common ground is very restricted, for example when a healthcare professional asks *Do you remember what I recommended on your last visit?* Usually, S can readily assess the probable common ground with H, and chooses his or her words accordingly. This requires S to make assumptions about H's capacity to understand U well enough that S's expressed intention in the message is, in S's opinion, more or less correctly interpreted by H (Allan 1986/2014, Colston 2008, Lasersohn 1999: 173). S's assumptions here are S's estimates of the common ground between S and H with respect to U; this is something S is aware of but not normally conscious of except, perhaps, when communicating with someone for the first time – and not often then. Estimated common ground includes assessment of H's competence to understand U, and it motivates such things as choice of language and language variety, style and level of presentation – because, for instance, addressing a young child or a person with dementia must be differently managed from addressing a knowledgeable adult. Normally, common ground allows meaning to be underspecified by S, so that language understanding is a constructive process in which a lot of inferencing is expected from H – even in healthcare situations.

These are linguistic aspects of common ground and S must also make assumptions about H's weltanschauung – the framework of ideas and beliefs through which H makes sense of and reacts to the world. Such assumptions will affect S's choice of utterance topic and manner of dealing with it. H also makes assumptions about the common ground with S, basing it on H's assessment of U in the context of utterance and of S as a person. S's appraisal of common ground with H and H's judgment of common ground with S are unlikely to be identical: all that is required is that the overlap in S's and H's assessments of mutual common ground enables

S to be satisfied that H understands U well enough for S's communicative purpose to, in S's judgment, succeed. This will apply to each utterance in a discourse such that the relevant common ground is dynamic and typically accretes. As conversation proceeds the common ground develops (Stalnaker 2002: 701): if, where X, Y, and Z are interlocutors, X says φ and Y says χ then, normally all of X, Y and Z (keeping score in terms of Lewis 1979) will know that X either subscribes to or purports to subscribe to φ and Y to χ, whether or not the other interlocutors also subscribe to φ and χ. Furthermore, as I have said, the roles of S and H will alternate among interlocutors. The situation is again complicated by the fact that, when uttering U, S will sometimes address more than one person and so is required to assess common ground with an audience of any number of people.

2. Common ground and its near synonyms

What I am calling common ground is sometimes referred to using other labels. For instance in Allan (1986/2014) I referred to it as 'context'.

Duranti (1997: 27ff) includes sensitivity to cultural and procedural knowledge as aspects of 'contextualization' (cf. Gumperz 1982: 131), later pointing out that

> *speakers design their speech according to their on-going evaluation of their recipient as a member of a particular group or class.* [… And] *speakers change the content of what they say depending on whom they identify as their primary recipient.*
> (Duranti 1997: 299f. His italics.)

This is a reaction to S's perception of common ground with H. S must be capable of presenting different material to different audiences according to the task to which U is put in such a way as to try to hold audience interest (though this is not likely to be an issue in healthcare interactions). S will often modify common ground by acting out a persona taking a certain stance on what is being said (revealing S's footing, in terms of Goffman 1981: 128) and may present as not only the animator, but also the author and principal – or not – of what is said in U (ibid. 145, 167, 229). This is one means by which S can manipulate the common ground.

Common ground, or a part of it at least, constitutes what Lewis (1969: 56ff) referred to as 'common knowledge' within a population, a term adopted by Stalnaker (1973) who comments: 'this background of knowledge or beliefs purportedly shared by the speaker and his audience constitute the presuppositions which define the context' (p. 448). Presuppositions are relevant to common ground: S might be said to presuppose some common ground with H and vice versa; but although presuppositions constitute a part of common ground, there is more to common ground than them alone.

Abbott (2008) correctly asserts that novel items may be introduced into common ground if they are noncontroversial, as in Grice (1981: 190):

> For instance, it is quite natural to say to somebody, when we are discussing some concert, *My aunt's cousin went to that concert*, when one knows perfectly well that the person one is talking to is very likely not even to know that one had an aunt, let alone that one's aunt had a cousin. So the supposition must not be that it is common knowledge but rather that it is noncontroversial, in the sense that it is something that you would expect the hearer to take from you (if he does not already know).

Lewis (1979: 340) spoke of H 'accommodating' to such introductions. I see this as a predictable part of a personal relations frame/schema/script.[1]

Lewis's 'common knowledge' is essentially similar to Schiffer's 'mutual knowledge*',[2] described as follows:

> For example, all "normal" people know that snow is white, know that all normal people know that snow is white, know that all normal people know that all normal people know that snow is white, and so on *ad infinitum*. (Likewise, I should think, for all or most of our common general knowledge; so if *S* and *A* mutually know* that each is "normal", all of the general knowledge that each has in virtue of being a "normal" person will also be mutually known* by them.)
>
> (Schiffer 1972: 32)

As Schiffer recognized, an intractable problem with 'mutual knowledge*' is that it is infinite; in other words, both S and H will be processing an utterance ad infinitum – which is obviously contrary to fact. This problem has been resolved on an ad hoc basis by arbitrarily limiting the number of recursions to three or four on the basis that both Schiffer (1972) and Lewis (1969) claim that the infinite recursion only applies to the theoretical chain of implications and not to its practical application in cognitive processing.

This is a blatant fudge and, as we shall see, it is possible to dispense with the problem altogether.

Just as Lewis (1969) assumes that 'common knowledge' implicitly defines a community (group) wherein the knowledge is common, so does Schiffer

1. For example, receptionist, doctor, nurse, medical couches and medical instruments occur in the frame and scripts of a doctor's office; waitpersons, tables, and food are part of a restaurant frame and script.

2. Schiffer uses the asterisk to mark the phrase a term of art. Schiffer (1972: 131) makes explicit the essential similarity between 'common knowledge' and 'mutual knowledge*' though it is sometimes claimed (e.g. on http://www.gametheory.net/dictionary/MutualKnowledge.html) that 'common knowledge' lacks the recursive aspect of 'mutual knowledge*' described immediately below.

(1972: 131) explicitly assign this property to 'mutual knowledge*'. The identification of community is a relevant aspect of common ground; as Enfield (2008: 235) writes: 'The management of common ground is directly implicated in our perpetual attendance to managing personal relationships within our social networks'.

'Shared knowledge refers to knowledge that is possessed by all interlocutors; whether the interactants are aware of each other's awareness of this state is not relevant' (Holtgraves 2002: 125). However, Prince (1981: 230) does not agree:

> [G]ivenness in the sense of 'shared knowledge' may be described as follows: Givenness$_k$: The speaker assumes that the hearer 'knows,' assumes, or can infer a particular thing (but is not necessarily thinking about it).

In a remark that applies also to 'mutual knowledge*' with its runaway recursion, Prince then rejects 'shared knowledge' on grounds that it 'is taking the position of an omniscient observer and is not considering what ordinary, nonclairvoyant humans do when they interact verbally' (Prince 1981: 232); she prefers 'Assumed Familiarity' (233) which she further divides into seven categories that are not germane to this essay.

Following Grice (1981: 190 = Grice 1989: 65) Stalnaker referred to 'common ground', described as 'presumed background information shared by participants in a conversation' (Stalnaker 2002: 701) or 'what speakers [take] for granted – what they [presuppose] when they [use] certain sentences' (ibid. 702). It is abundantly clear that, although one might educe differences among them (see Lee 2001), the terms *common knowledge, mutual knowledge*, shared knowledge, assumed familiarity, presumed background information* and *common ground* are describing essentially the same thing: the most significant pragmatic constituent of communicative competence.

Communicative competence is the knowledge and application of how and when to use utterances appropriately and it combines with grammatical knowledge of semantics, syntax, morphology, and phonology in the production of utterances to generate a coherent text comprehensible to the intended audience. Communicative competence is debilitated in dementia, for example note the incoherent cohesion in (1).

(1) **Therapist:** A stitch in time saves nine. What does that mean?

Schizophrenic: Oh! That's because all women have a little bit of magic in them. I found that out. And it's called, it's sort of good magic. And nine is a sort of magic number. Like, I've got nine colours here you will notice. I've got yellow, green, blue, grey, orange, blue and navy. And I've got black. And I've got a sort of clear white. The nine colours, to me they are the whole universe; and they symbolize every man, woman, and child in the world.

(Rochester and Martin 1979: 94f)

There is an obvious failure in (1) to achieve an acceptable degree of shared understanding between therapist and patient.

3. Defining common ground

Stalnaker defines common ground thus:

> To accept a proposition is to treat it as true [...] It is common ground that φ in a group if all members *accept* (for the purpose of the conversation) that φ, and all *believe* that all accept that φ, and all *believe* that all *believe* that all accept that φ, etc. (Stalnaker 2002: 716)

Stalnaker rightly adds temporary assumptions, probable presumptions, and pretended beliefs to what is mutually known as a potential part of common ground. He points out that X may believe of Y that Y mistakenly believes that φ is a common belief, while X does not (ibid. 708). Colston (2008: 160) allows for false beliefs where because φ is said to have been previously spoken of or done in X's presence, X may come to falsely believe that φ occurred, even though it did not. However, in Stalnaker's definition there is the unsatisfactory infinitely recursive definition taken over from Lewis' 'common knowledge' and Schiffer's 'mutual knowledge*'. It is adopted with minor changes by Kecskes and Zhang (2009) without amending or mitigating this fatal flaw – fatal, because (as I have said) it requires that for both S and H an utterance is processed ad infinitum, which is contrary to fact.

Clark (1996 Ch.4) describes and defines common ground, basing it on a presumption of awareness (p. 93f): X is aware of the world around him/her and is aware of being aware of it, in other words, X is not asleep, in a coma, stoned out of his/her mind, or the like. X is also aware that an interlocutor Y is aware in a similar way to X; likewise, for Y in respect of X. The shared basis for mutual awareness is not a sharing of exactly identical facts and suppositions, but there will be a substantial overlap. Clark's account of shared common ground (Clark 1996: 94f) can be paraphrased as in (2).

(2) i. Every member of community K is aware that B (the basis for believing a set of propositions) holds true.[3]
ii. B indicates to every member of K that every other member of K is aware of B.
iii. B indicates to every member of K that φ.
iv. φ is common ground in K.
v. [Reflexive common ground:] Every member of K has the information that φ and that (v).

The awareness condition is applicable to all human interactive behaviour. Although (2)(v) appears to side-step the recursion ad infinitum which vitiates Schiffer's 'mutual knowledge*' and Stalnaker's definition of common ground (as well as that of followers like Kesckes and Zhang), it nonetheless creates an endless loop by recalling itself.[4] Clark's 'principle of justification' seeks to avoid the recursion and looping problems with common ground:

> In practice, people take a proposition to be common ground in a community only when they believe they have a proper shared basis for the proposition in that community. (Clark 1996: 96)

However, this fails to specify the grounds for belief in a shared basis for φ, which take it back to the procedure in (2). The only recourse is to revise (2).

4. The interdependence of common ground and context

Allan (2001; 2013; 2023) proposed a revised definition of common ground, see (3).

(3) a. Common ground for any community K of two or more people is that every member, or almost every member, of K believes some fact or set of facts F.
b. F can be expressed as a proposition or set of propositions Φ believed to be true (or purported to be true) within K.
c. A member of K (m_K) is presumed to know or believe Φ (F) by (almost) every other member of K.
d. A member of K knows/believes that (a), (b), and (c) are purported to be true.

(3)(a)–(d) define the basis for common ground. Common ground is interdependent with context. The context of a language expression comprises C1, C2, and C3. C1, 'the world (and time) spoken of' by S, is a mental model of an actual or recalled or imagined world. C1 captures what is said about what at some world – a possible world accessible from C2 (see below). A model of the world (and time) spoken of is the content of a mental space which can be readily associated in a variety of ways with other worlds (and times) occupying other mental spaces. C1 is largely identified from co-text. C2, 'the world spoken in', is the situation from

3. In other words, B is a certain state of affairs that is held to be true/accurate/correct/factual.

4. Every member of K has the information that φ and that every member of K has the information that φ and that every member of K has the information that φ and that every member of K has the information that φ and that every member....

S's point of view (derived from S's weltanschauung) in which U is expressed. C2 captures who does the saying to whom, and where and when this takes place. C2 normally determines the social relationships and conventions that S is expected to follow and, in consequence, sets the standard for the psycho-social appropriateness of what is said. C3 is a corresponding situation of interpretation in which H seeks to understand the meaning of U in the context (C1+C2) in which it occurs (the interpretation from H's point of view, deriving from H's weltanschauung). In face-to-face interaction, C3 is approximately identical with C2 but perceived from a different point of view. Continuing (3):

e. Both S and H are members of K.
f. S utters U to H in context C2. U expresses a state of affairs, a possibly singleton set of propositions, Φ_U.
g. When a member of K (m_K) applies knowledge of F (that is, belief in the truth/existence of F) in order to interpret U, i.e. the state of affairs expressed in Φ_U, m_K can presume that others in the community will also be able to apply knowledge of F (belief in the truth/existence of F) in order to interpret Φ_U.
h. The existence of F, Φ_U, and the application of knowledge of F to interpreting Φ_U is what constitutes common groundfor members of the community K. Once attended to, Φ_U becomes part of F, incrementing the common ground. In other words, S's utterance U pragmatically entails that S presupposes either (A) that Φ_U is already part of the conversational context (C1+C2) at time of utterance (in other words, it is in the common ground), or (B) that the audience (primarily H) is prepared to add Φ_U, without objection, to the context against which U is evaluated – thus extending the common ground.

(e) establishes the basis for initiating an occurrence of common ground within some particular context of utterance wherein S utters U to H, see (f). (g) initiates the evocation of common ground relevant to U. (h) explains how Φ_U, what is said in U, increments the common ground. Continuing (3):

i. Part of the context, namely C1, is the world (and time) spoken of, constituted by the topic of discourse revealed by the co-text of U, namely, what has been said and what is said, including text that follows U. This is effected (α) via the semantic frames and scripts evoked by the various constituents of U and (β) S's attitude to what is spoken of or the persons addressed as this is revealed by the locution. (α) and (β) contribute to identifying what S's purpose might be in making the utterance, which is the effective meaning of U.
j. Part of the context, C2, is, from S's point of view (deriving from S's weltanschauung), the situation in which U is expressed. C2 captures who does the saying to whom, and where and when this takes place. C2 normally deter-

mines the social relationships and conventions that S is expected to follow and, in consequence, sets the standard for the psycho-social appropriateness of what is said. Together with C1, C2 is what governs whether a term of address like *bitch* is, from S's point of view, used as a slur or an expression of camaraderie and whether or not a particular form of words is polite (or not). In other words, C2 includes what is known about S and the perlocutionary effect of this and similar uses of the constituents of U.

k. Finally, C3, is a corresponding situation of interpretation in which H seeks to understand the meaning of U in the context C1+C2; this is the interpretation from H's point of view, deriving from H's weltanschauung. In face-to-face interaction, C3 is closely similar to C2, though they differ in point of view. So far as possible, S predicts common ground with H in order to shape utterance U for maximum comprehensibility. Where C3 is very different from C2 such that H does not share many of S's system of beliefs and assumptions, the context is disparate from S's presumed common ground. Although H may be well able to understand what S intended to mean, U can have reduced comprehensibility and its psycho-social appropriateness may be differently evaluated from the way S expected to be understood.

(i) elaborates the world (and time) spoken of in U, identifying it as C1, part of the context which establishes the co-text. (j) establishes C2 as the situation of utterance from S's point of view. C3, as established in (k), is the context from H's point of view. C3 may be simultaneous with C2 but they may be in different locations (as with a telephone conversation or video conference), or they may be at different time points in which case it is likely the locations will also be different, though this is not necessarily the case.

These differences between C2 and C3 potentially lead to H misinterpreting S's intended meaning.

5. Conclusion

In this essay, I have described a pragmatic agenda for healthcare professionals who seek to foster inclusion and active participation through shared understanding of their therapeutic goal by establishing common ground with patients. Healthcare professionals can normally assume that their patients are rational people and thus approach verbal interaction with the patient as they would any interaction with a fellow human being in different circumstances. Difficulties will arise when communicating with young children or people with dementia because the normal assumptions about rational responses may not hold; regrettably, I have no

help to offer in such circumstances. What I have been describing in this essay is the set of conditions that exist in the vast majority of interactions among human beings such that healthcare professionals are made aware of what is involved when establishing common ground with a client.

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