

# What is CAT understanding?

## How Cognitive Analytic Therapy can help teams and groups

The ideas behind Cognitive Analytic Therapy (CAT) were developed in the late 1960s and 1970s by Dr Anthony Ryle in order to provide a new and more effective way to work with clients in the NHS. He drew on ideas from:



- cognitive and personal construct theories (involving recognition of patterns, step by step planning and measurement of change)
- activity theory and dialogism (thinking about the whole way in which we act towards each other and expect others to act towards us)
- psychodynamic theory (with an emphasis on early development and childhood influences, the concepts of 'transference and counter-transference' and the importance of the relationship between therapist and client)

The aim was to find a way to work with clients that is:

- In depth
- Open
- Collaborative
- Focussed
- Time-limited
- Relational

Although CAT started as a one-to-one therapy, its ideas and way of understanding how human beings relate to each other is now being used to understand how people relate in couples, families, teams, systems and in wider society. CAT's relational understanding, and its tools for explaining and mapping out what is going on, can help in situations where interactions are complex; as between communities and professional groups and also when people are working together on complex tasks or where dialogue and communication have broken down. For example, with people who feel marginalised or excluded by society or where there is conflict and mistrust between teams or groups of people.

CAT is a deeply relational approach. It acknowledges that human beings are born primed to relate to each other. What does a baby do when it is alone, cold or hungry? It tries to call another person to help. CAT believes that the way we learn to involve others in our attempts to find out who we are in the world sets up patterns that we continue to use later in life. This relational understanding can provide a powerful way of describing patterns of thinking, feeling and behaving that can lead to distress and conflict, both at a one-to-one and also at a broader level in society.

## Reciprocal Roles

The idea of reciprocal roles simplifies CAT's understanding of the fundamental importance of how we relate to each other. To put it simply, we tend to treat people in the way we anticipate they will treat us, and, from how others relate to us we learn how to relate to ourselves.

For example:

1. If we are fearful of someone and expect aggression or attack we can become defensive and either become fearful, or ready to fight back. This is the reciprocal role:



2. If we look down on a person or a group of people they can experience themselves as dismissed and 'beneath contempt', and can respond to try and gain the upper hand by becoming contemptuous and critical of us. This is the reciprocal role:

Contemptuous (Disgusted)



Contemptible (Disgusting)

It is easy to see how people and groups of people play out these 'enactments' or 'dances' in a way that generates cycles of mistrust and conflict.

## Dialogue – 'No Final Word'

CAT's dialogic understanding of how we make sense of things in the world allows ideas and concepts to remain open and subject to negotiation and change. Everyone's perspective is valuable and of interest and there is an awareness that no-one can really speak from another person's perspective or on their behalf. In this sense, to use a phrase coined by the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin, there is 'no final word' in a true dialogue. This dialogic position is well suited to engagement and giving respect to a range of positions where conflict or polarisation of views is a problem.

## Flexibility

CAT has a breadth, depth and flexibility of application which makes it possible to use these ideas in a number of ways beyond individual therapy. For example:

- As a psychological therapy approach with couples, groups and families
- As a consultation tool with teams around specific cases looking at care plans and risk management, and where teams are experiencing conflict
- As a means of enhancing people's communication skills through understanding relational awareness and relational skills
- As a way of understanding social exclusion, stigmatisation and conflict in society

## Acceptance

By providing a way of mapping out these patterns, CAT allows reflection, observation and dialogue to begin. Once dialogue has started, the unhelpful reciprocal roles begin to disperse and change and constructive and respectful reciprocal roles can begin to replace them, for example:

Accepting difference / Listening



Accepted as different / Heard

ACAT, as a charity, is now seeking to extend the understanding of CAT beyond the realm of formal therapies in order to try to help people with problems such as social exclusion or in those situations where conflict seems ingrained and unchangeable. With this in mind ACAT is making links with other organisations and projects who are currently engaging in this valuable work.