

CHAPTER ONE

Knowing and not knowing are central to intimacy

The topic of knowing and not knowing has been neglected in research on intimacy in couple relationships. Although the couples research literature is rich in material on attraction, love, sex, commitment, decision making, emotionality, and much else, there is little on knowing and not knowing. What do partners know and not know about one another? What does a person not want to know about a partner? What does a person not want a partner to know about her or him? What are their strategies for knowing and not knowing, being known and not known? What is done with the personal secrets, the matters that they would be ashamed for their partner to know, the past that could make the partner uncomfortable?

In some scholarly definitions of intimate relationships, knowing is neglected. In others it is a tacit underlay to what is explicitly included. For example, if acceptance is included in a definition of intimacy, there might be an assumption that acceptance is based on things known about the other, or if mutual understanding is included in a definition of intimacy, there seems to be an assumption that mutual understanding cannot be achieved without the two partners knowing each other well in some regards (for example, Gable & Reis, 2001). Although “knowing” is far from universally included in scholarly definitions of intimate relationships, it is part of some (e.g., Berscheid & Regan, 2005, pp. 225–6; Brehm et al., 2002, p. 4; Chelune, Robison, & Kommor, 1984; Clark & Reis, 1988; Duck, 1994; Harvey & Omarzu, 1999, ch. 3; Harvey & Weber, 2002, p. 101; Hatfield, 1984; Prager, 1995, 1999; Sharabany, 1994; Simmel, 1950, pp. 126–7).

We think of knowing in an intimate relationship as partly a matter of what goes on in each partner separately – the extent to which each of the partners is more or less curious, aware, invested in remembering, and able to remember with regard to the other and the extent to which each partner wants to disclose and be known. We also think of knowing in an intimate relationship as a property of the relationship, partly because knowing and being known (or not knowing and not being known) require a certain

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amount of teamwork. Also, knowing and being known are couple matters because two partners together work out their patterns of interacting, their interaction priorities, their relationship rules, their accountability to each other about what to remember about what has been disclosed in the relationship, and their culture of being a couple. Imagine, for example, one couple who together have worked out an ongoing pattern of sharing a great deal of their inner life, their past, and their daily experience and another couple who only spends a few minutes each day interacting with each other and rarely talks about the past, their inner feelings, or their experiences of the day. Thus, what we focus on in this book is partly a matter of individual thought and experience but also a matter of what goes on between partners as they travel through life as a couple. But then knowing and being known can happen without couple coordination or even partner cooperation. That is, a partner can be known in important ways without wanting to be known, without intending to self disclose, or without even knowing that certain aspects of her or his self are available to be known and are known by the partner.

What are knowing and not knowing in intimate relationships?

We think of intimate knowing as not a simple matter of seeking, giving, and acquiring concrete, unchanging facts, because there is not a fixed inner self or even, we think, a fixed past. Instead, people have inner selves and pasts that are different from situation to situation and are constantly being created and altered through interactions with others and through new experiences. That means that each partner, as knower and person to be known, often change what she or he makes of the past, what memories are accessible, what aspects of the past are put together with what other aspects of the past, what aspects of the past are worth paying attention to or are important to know, what contexts are salient when thinking about a certain aspect of the past, and what language they use to think about or talk about the past.

An additional complication is that there is little time to be known or to know compared to the vast amount of what there is that could be known. A person may feel that her or his life or the partner's life is simple, but in our view there is never enough time to say it all, to ask about it all, to see and hear it all, and to think it all. So we believe that knowing and being known are always partial, selective, and limited. An intimate partner can be the world's expert on a person, knowing more than anyone else does about the person's past, habits, preferences, family and friends,

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work life, thoughts, plans, dreams, health, and much more. A partner can know a person well enough to be quite accurate at predicting what the person will do in many situations. But even the world's expert on a person may be poorly informed. Some people are relatively closed and private. The "expert" may not have learned much because of being rather incurious, rather inattentive, selectively curious, not remembering much, or not remembering accurately. The other is often in situations where the "expert" is not present to observe. And there is always the challenge of there being more that could be known.

Knowing another requires the courage to know what may be uncomfortable to know about the other. As one interviewee said:

A lot of intimacy I guess for me is being able to tap into each other's internal life, and not being afraid of that internal life, which I think a lot of people might be a little afraid of, because your internal life can be pretty messy and conflicted. [18] (we use numbers to identify each of our 37 interviewees, with each interviewee referred to by the same number throughout this book).

But then the issue of knowing and not knowing may often not be about quantity but about whether crucially important specifics are known. One could know millions of details about a partner but still not know something big that is hidden by the partner. In fact, there are in this book stories of relationship-changing surprises when, after years of seeming to know a partner well, something that has been hidden is revealed that radically changes a person's perception of the partner.

We think there are often exchange processes as partners get to know one another, so what one reveals may motivate the other to reveal more, may make it safer for the other to reveal more, and may build up an environment of trust for knowability. The illustration that follows is what one man said when talking about his church community, but he made it clear that the general idea applied to his knowing and not knowing in relationship to his wife ("that person that you've hurt the most").

I picked up almost an overdose of shame and guilt, [and] I saw realities in the church that weren't consistent. So I knew that I wasn't that much different than anybody else, but I kind of use the analogy of undressing. Nobody's undressing in front of each other, so you kind of keep everything real close to the vest, and you keep all your personal life as hidden as you can. But then all of a sudden, somebody can't . . . They get caught in an affair . . . Then everybody knows about it. And so for me, I started identifying that this was gonna be kind of a struggle, and I thought that the way that we could work it out is to try to share things with each other, undress, break down some of the

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barriers, because I learned that there aren't these super-religious people that are better than everybody else. They're just better at hiding things. They're not better at living, and so for me it was to develop, what I wanted to be able to do was say, "Here's who I am? Do you want to be in a relationship with me? This is exactly who I am." So to me, intimacy is knowing the best and the worst of somebody and still being there . . . But then the potential I think to be known, if you could then make progress of being known by that person that you've hurt the most, then I think the potential for intimacy is much greater. [16]

An intimate relationship may generally be one with a great deal of knowing, but as the research reported in this book shows, there are always areas of not knowing. One or both partners may need or want to have areas that are not revealed. Possibly some of what is not revealed might have great potential for long term negative impact on feelings and the relationship. For example, a person might fear that if a certain secret were revealed to the partner, the partner might be extremely upset or even leave the relationship. Similarly, a person may stay away from knowing about areas of the other's life that she or he suspects would be uncomfortable to know or could even make the relationship unsustainable. But then much of what is not revealed and hence not known by the partner is likely to be of minimal importance. It may, for example, be uninteresting material or material of minimal relevance to what counts for the couple in their shared daily life – for example, one of them sharpened a pencil this morning or one of them sees a squirrel in a nearby tree.

A relationship may do quite well for many years with certain potentially important matters never being revealed. In fact, we interviewed people who had potentially explosive secrets or relatively broad areas of not knowing in their relationship, and the partners were still together and seemingly happy with each other. A relationship may also continue and perhaps even do well when explosive secrets are revealed. At the extreme, one woman talked about uncovering many areas in which her husband had lied to her, including his age, his previous marriages, extramarital relationships during his previous marriages and apparently during his marriage to her, and even his parents' names. Although it was hard for the woman when she discovered another of her husband's deceptions, she remained committed to the life she had with him. As she said:

I think I've died so many times. Not only did he lie to me when we were dating, but also he cheated so many times . . . [But] I think I've got a hold of myself and accepted that maybe this is my life. [30]

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She said that he loved her and she loved him, and they were planning to live out their lives together.

What one knows about a partner arises in large part from contact, the ordinary processes of intertwined lives, curiosity, paying attention, and understanding. But, as the following quote indicates, insecurity can also drive knowing. Perhaps the bottom line of knowing for the woman quoted below was the answer to the question: “Does he still love me?”

It seems that I have a short memory for this, because I’ll need to be reminded that I think that I’ve learned these things over and over again, but I keep remembering or relearning . . . that . . . it’s okay . . . that we have differences and that we are a really great couple. We really love each other, and we are very committed to each other. We have a *whole* lot in common and it’s a wonderful journey to be on. But sometimes I get hung up on trying to find solutions or whatever, and have to have those deeper conversations before I just kind of realize that everything’s okay, that there isn’t some sort of crisis. And I think a lot of it has to do with insecurity or build up of fear that maybe our relationship isn’t strong, or just not knowing what’s going on inside of him. [37]

Quotes throughout this book reveal the diversity and complexity of interviewee thought about what knowing and not knowing are. Part of it is that people have their own standards and ideas about knowing and not knowing, so someone could say that she or he knows the other very well, but an observer or the other might be struck about how little the person knows. Similarly someone might say her partner is a stranger to her, but an observer could be impressed by how much she knows about her partner. Then too a person might say that the partner knows her or him very well but also seem to contradict that by saying that the partner does not know something very important about her or him. To illustrate, one woman said that she and her husband knew each other very well, but she had a long and intense extramarital affair early in their marriage, and as far as she was aware, her husband never knew about it. In this book we try to work with our own general ideas of what knowing and not knowing are, and also to respect the ideas of the people we interviewed. So with the woman who had the long term affair, we can say that by our standards there are important ways that her husband does not know her but also that by her standards he knows her well.

To conclude this introductory discussion of our understanding of knowing and not knowing in intimate relationships, it is important to say that “not knowing” is not simple to define or understand. In “not knowing” one may suspect or know a lot. And if one does not know the other in

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some area of potential importance that might be much more about one's ability to know than it is about the other's lack of transparency. Imagine, for example, being partnered with a mathematician whose life is dominated by math problems one cannot understand, or imagine someone who will not let herself know that her husband cheats at card games.

Why intimate knowing and not knowing are so important

We think intimate knowing and not knowing are central to couple life. If a relationship falls apart it seems to us that often it is what is known or not known (or at least what one or both partners believe is known or not known) that constitutes the grounds for the relationship breakup. In fact, the words many interviewees said about relationships that had ended in break-up were about knowing and not knowing. For example, when the woman quoted immediately below was married to a man who did not seem interested in revealing important information about himself to her, she did not have a sense of closeness with him and the comfort that goes with closeness. She wanted to know him and to be known by him, and because that was not there in ways that were important to her, the relationship ended.

What I think really undid my [first] marriage . . . was just the inability to be close, to be engaged . . . You're going to have hardship no matter who you choose . . . and that sense of being really close to someone else is so comforting. [09]

Another woman who talked about the end of a long term romantic and sexual relationship saw the seeds of the ending of the relationship partly in her male partner being very closed about his life.

It felt like he wasn't trusting, and it felt like he was not sharing a lot, and I think I held that against him. [29]

In fact, many interviewees (though by no means all) said it was important to them to know and be known in their primary close relationship.

I would say every relationship I had a need to know and be known. [25]

When I think about our future together and kind of looking back on our life I hope that after however many years that's the one thing he can say when I'm not here is that he did know me. [33]

I think we all pray to know and be known. [03]

Why intimate knowing and not knowing are so important 7

People can find it too threatening to know certain things about a partner, so they might not let themselves know them (Rubin, 1983, p. 21). And since two partners differ in thousands of ways, it is not surprising that in some couples one partner valued knowing more than the other. Someone who values knowing a great deal and is partnered with someone who values knowing less might continue to live with the difference but still find the difference frustrating.

- p: How much do you value having a partner you can know well, and how much do you value having a partner who knows you well?
 s: I've been thinking about that a lot lately (laughs), because [compared to] the woman I'm currently seeing . . . I want to talk about *everything*. I've always wanted to do that, but . . . I find that I'm frustrated when she doesn't ask questions when she'll ask about my day . . . I know she really cares. But she doesn't really dive in much deeper than that. And it's frustrating (chuckles). So I think I value it very much. [34] [In quotes that give interview dialogue, L stands for Liz Wieling, P for Paul Rosenblatt, and S for the person being interviewed.]

Some interviewees talked about arguments and fights connected to not knowing enough. For example, a woman in a long term lesbian relationship talked about squabbles that arose when her partner did not feel known by her. Thus, rather than thinking of conflicts as always arising from disagreement, they can be seen at least some of the time to arise from being not well enough known by the partner.

- l: Do you think [she] feels known by you?
 s: Yeah. I think she does. I think there are moments when she doesn't, and I think those moments probably are [the] roots of fights or struggles. [27]

Another reason why knowing seems to us to be important in intimacy is that it is linked to trust (cf. Murray & Holmes, 2011) and willingness to confide in the partner. Here, for example, is a quote from a woman who linked knowing in her relationship with her boyfriend with the ability to confide in one another:

Emotionally . . . we confide in one another a lot. And I feel like I could tell him any secret I might have, and he would be someone I could trust . . . We were friends . . . and we got to know each other really well before we dated, and so that built trust from the very beginning, and so my trust that I have in him has been very long standing, and it's not going to easily break . . . I gave it a lot of time, too, in the beginning, and getting to know him and feeling comfortable with him. [01]

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Another indicator of the link of knowing with trust and willingness to confide is that in a relationship with someone who one can trust and confide in, one can let down one's masks and defenses. The man quoted immediately below talked about how important it was to him that he could let his masks down and reveal his insecurities to his wife.

I feel like I can be me [with her] and everywhere else in my life I feel like there's some part of me that I either can't reveal or I have to pretend isn't really there, or use some sense of false something in order to mask the fact that at my core I'm afraid of everything. And I'm insecure as all get out . . . She knows that, and she's always been okay with that. And would actually rather have me just be that, and acknowledge it, then try to be what I thought I needed to be. [14]

Many other people we interviewed were like him in that knowing was not simply a thing in itself but was linked for them with acceptance and emotional closeness. For example, the woman quoted immediately below treasured the conversations she had with her boyfriend, conversations where feelings could safely be revealed.

Those are always wonderful conversations, like some of my favorite times being with him, or when we have a long enough conversation to get to the heart of our feelings. That's not an everyday kind of conversation, but when we do, a lot of it is just understanding and accepting and is not about trying to fix or do anything. [37]

And here is another example of the link of knowing and acceptance in a couple relationship.

L: Why [him]? [S chuckles] What is it that keeps you two together?

s: I think we both feel we have a deep understanding and acceptance of who the other person is. [15]

From another perspective, being known by another, one can come to know oneself better, and quite possibly accept oneself more. That is, in A knowing B, B may come to know herself or himself better. There are many ways that this can come about. In the quote that follows it is that her partner helped the interviewee to know what it felt like inside herself to love (another and quite possibly the self) and to enjoy and appreciate life.

In some ways [he] has made me more human, more in touch with feelings, emotions, and life in general. Prior to [him], I was pretty keyed up on achievement, goals, affection, striving, winning. That was my life. I'm . . . very competitive, father and mother that very much encouraged achievement at all costs. My therapist would say . . . "Did they ever praise

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you for being a nice person? Or being giving? Or loving? Or?” (croaky, quiet voice:) No, no . . . (back to normal voice:) We never hugged. We never said, “I love you.” It was all achievement, and we’re all very high achievers. So I look at somebody like [him], and he really basically opened up my heart, because prior to that, (whispering) it was pretty locked in here, kind of very tight. (Back to normal voice:) . . . I get very emotional about it, because . . . all of that . . . whole internal life just kind of opened up. And I realize now that, I always knew it, but now I feel truly what’s important in life . . . So that’s what he gave to me. [18]

Knowing the other well does not guarantee an easy relationship

We do not want to idealize knowing as though all it brings is happiness and light. What one knows can be painful, upsetting, irritating, alarming, offensive, disgusting, or otherwise difficult. And knowing does not, as in the quote immediately below, mean that it is easy to deal with the interpersonal differences one comes to know or the things that one knows the other person does and does not do that are challenging for one.

p: Do you worry about his health?

s: Yeah, I do . . . He doesn’t take care of himself at all . . . He has high cholesterol . . . and he’s supposed to really cut out fried food and eat healthier, salads and whole wheat and all that. He’s *not* doing it. He says, “Well, it’s my body.” I said, “Well, you better buy that long term care insurance then, because honestly I don’t wanna have to have everything I’ve worked for prior to our marriage go to support you in a nursing home because you’re not taking care of yourself.”

p: Do you think he eats fried food in private?

s: Och! Yeah. He told me. Oh, yeah. “Stopped for doughnuts.” [12]

Knowing the other well can be boring. Knowing does not necessarily solve any problems, but may instead create problems. Knowing can even push one to end the relationship. Hence, many interviewees talked about the ways that they or their partner limited what was revealed to the other (a matter discussed throughout this book, but particularly in Chapter 7).

Trust as foundation for knowing

Trust is arguably foundational to relationships that do well (Simpson, 2007). Presumably one key to that is that trust is foundational to knowing based on believing things the partner says. Trust is also foundational to disclosing personal matters to one another. That is, it is easier to reveal oneself to the other if one trusts that the other will understand what one

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reveals and accept it and one. Not only is that our thinking, but some of the interviewees also talked about trust as foundational to knowing in that way.

There is a trust, of course, when you live with someone and let down the wall . . . that you might keep up out in public. Of course there's an opportunity for someone to be critical about that and try and make you feel ashamed or guilty . . . It is kind of a trust when you open yourself up to somebody . . . It's . . . like a gift. It's like, "This is who I am in all my humanity. And, oh, my God. Sometimes I fart in bed." . . . They might make a joke out of it, rather than make you feel bad for doing it . . . It's more like a gift. It's like, "Yeah, I can see you do . . . not so attractive things, and it really doesn't change how I feel about you." [05]

Related to that, as will be shown throughout this book, it seems that in many couples there is something of a shared obligation to be responsible in knowing each other well. The responsibility is partly to get things right, that is, to remember well much of what the partner communicated and to know it rather accurately by the standards of the partner. The responsibility is also to treat what one knows with appropriate confidentiality; that is, to be careful how, when, and whether things known about the partner are transmitted to others. There also seems to be something of a responsibility to respect most if not all of what one knows about the other, as opposed to sneering at it, mocking it, being critical of it, or otherwise treating the knowledge, and the other, in a way that diminishes. And if a partner cannot be trusted to be a responsible recipient of knowledge, then what? Some interviewees told stories of self-censorship, of closing themselves off to a partner in general or in certain areas, because they could not trust the partner with certain information.

- s: The first time [I went back to using cocaine] was probably . . . two and a half years before the relationship ended. So we were still communicating, but now we're fighting all the time. So it went from like really good to all the fighting, till we just don't want to talk, 'cause I don't want to fight. And the way she reacted when I came home crying, 'cause I hadn't done cocaine in years. [But] one night I went out and I did it. And I told her immediately, and she screamed and yelled. It was nothing but anger. There was no empathy . . . I (laughing) was wanting to be, I guess, comforted. And I don't think I ever really got that. So I stopped trusting.
- p: And when you stopped trusting, then you told her less (s: Oh, yeah), 'cause you didn't want to get (s: closed off), you didn't want to get that stuff from her.
- s: Right. [34]