Working at Relational Depth

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‘Relational depth’

• Term coined by person-centred therapist, Dave Mearns, in 1990s

• Developed by Mearns and Cooper (2005): *Working at Relational Depth in Counselling and Psychotherapy* (Sage)
‘Relational depth’

Definition of Relational Depth

‘A state of profound contact and engagement between two people in which each person is fully real with the Other, and able to understand and value the Other’s experiences at a high level’

(Mearns and Cooper, 2005, xii)
Closely related concepts

- ‘Dialogue’/‘I-Thou attitude’ (Buber)
- ‘Dialogue’ (Bohm)
- ‘Moments of meeting’ (Stern)
- ‘Mutual intersubjectivity’ (Jordan)
- ‘Co-presence’ (Laing)
- ‘Linking’ (Rowan)
What is the experience of relational depth like?
Four Components of RD

Intrapersonal

Experience of other

Relational depth

Relational Atmosphere

Intrapersonal: Present

• Exhilarated, empowered, revitalised, alive
• Immersed, free of distractions
• Authentic, real, open
• Spontaneous, in the moment
• Feeling OK with self, self-worth, safe
• Understanding, accepting of Other
• Satisfied
• Physical, embodied, electrifying, tingly
• Insight
Experience of Other: Open

• Other as genuine, authentic, real
• Other as understanding
• Other values, acknowledges, accepts me
Relational: Connectedness

• Closeness, intimacy, togetherness
• Love
• Encounter, meeting of minds
• Flowing together, synchronicity
• Bi-directional, reciprocal
• Blending, at one-ness, union
• Mutuality, equality
• Trust
• Respect, empathy for other
• Interconnectedness: ‘I know you know I know…’
Atmosphere: Transcendent

• Timelessness
• Magical
• Still
• Altered state
• Spiritual
• Powerful
What facilitates a meeting at relational depth?
Therapist Factors

- Genuinely caring/ offering something ‘over and above’
- Competent/safe/ trustworthy
- Warm (vs. cold/distant)
- ‘Really’ real
- Open and adaptable

(Client interviews: McMillan and McLeod, 2006; Knox, 2008; Knox & Cooper, 2010)
‘It felt as though my counsellor, without breaching boundaries, went beyond a professional level/interest – and gave me such a human, compassionate response – something I couldn’t put a price on... I think I had only expected to receive from her professional self.... It felt like she was giving from her core.’
A Relaxed Warmth

- Therapists’ perceived “neuroticism” seems to inhibit deepening of connection (Cooper, 2012)
Client Factors

- Know what they want from therapy
- Considered choice of therapist
- Be ready to engage
- *Choose to relate at depth, Make leap of faith*
- Open up to therapist, allow self to be vulnerable

(Clients interviews: McMillan and McLeod, 2006; Knox and Cooper, 2011)
Client Factors

“[I]t was a very definite thing within myself, that happened, that I allowed myself be so open, and let my defenses down enough…it was almost as if, I’d got to the point…of no return and I thought, ‘I’m going to go for it.’”

Source: Knox and Cooper, 2011
Do therapists experience relational depth with their clients?
Quantitative Findings

- 97.9% of therapists reported some experience of RD ($n = 140$, Leung, 2008)
- Therapists’ mean ratings on Relational Depth Frequency Scale = 3.7 (Di Malta, 2016): e.g., ‘I experienced an intense connection with [the client]’

1 = Not at all  2 = Only occasionally  3 = Sometimes  4 = Often  5 = Most or all of the time

- In 38% of therapists’ significant events, RD rated as ‘probably’ or ‘clearly’ present (Wiggins, 2012)
Qualitative Findings

• 100% person-centred therapists could identify one or more experiences of RD (Cooper, 2005)

• 90% of therapists working with learning disabled clients had experienced RD (Macleod, 2013)
Moderators

- More experienced therapists, and qualified therapists (cf. trainees) report more experiences of RD
- Therapists report more RD in longer episodes of therapy
- Therapist gender, orientation, age – no significant differences (Leung, 2008; Di Malta, 2016)
Do clients experience relational depth with their therapists?
Quantitative Findings

- 78.2% of clients reported some experience of RD ($n = 119$, Leung, 2008)

- Clients’ mean ratings on Relational Depth Frequency Scale = 3.4 ($n = 220$, Di Malta, 2016)
  
  1 = Not at all     2 = Only occasionally     3 = Sometimes     4 = Often     5 = Most or all of the time

- Both studies suggest clients report RD significantly less than therapists

- In 34% of clients’ significant events, RD rated as ‘probably’ or ‘clearly’ present (Wiggins et al., 2012)

- Therapists rate greater depth of relating at significant moments of therapy ($d = .52$, Wiggins et al., 2012)
Qualitative Findings

• ‘Most participants of the research \( n = 26 \) were able to identify at least one moment they felt could be described as a moment of relational depth’ (Knox, 2013)
• All participants in Cognitive Analytic Therapy could identify moments of relational depth \( (n = 6, \text{ Morris, } 2012) \)
• …However, ‘many also spoke of having experienced several therapeutic relationships in which they felt there had been no moments of relational depth’.
Young people’s experiences

Young people struggled to identify particular moments of ‘connection’ and ‘closeness’ with their therapists (but could identify important moments in therapy: primarily significant disclosures) (Gurvitz, 2016)
Mixed findings regarding orientation, but some evidence that greater RD in humanistic/person-centred approaches (Leung, 2008; Di Malta, 2016)
Moderators: Gender

- Clients with female therapists tend to experience a greater frequency of RD (Di Malta, 2016), and also rate a greater depth of connection (Cooper, 2012), as compared with male therapists.

![Graph showing depth of connection for female and male clients with female and male therapists.]
Do clients and therapists experience relational depth at the same time?
‘Analogue’ study (Cooper, 2012)

- 20 min ‘counselling’ sessions
- *In situ* ratings: Participants asked to rate level of contact every minute during session
Results

- Therapists’ ratings significantly predicted clients’ ratings
- Mean correlation: \(0.67\) = approximately 45% overlap in ratings
Maximum matching

Participants 4002/4001 (r = .97)

Client

Therapist
Minimum matching

Participants 6013/6002 (r = -.28)

Client

Therapist
Consistent with Jamesina Rooney (2016) IPR research ‘We may experience deep connection at the same time with clients OR not’:

• ‘Shared’ Moment of **Deep Connection**
• ‘Shared’ Moment with **Disconnection**
• ‘Unshared’ Moment of **Deep Connection**
• ‘Unshared’ Moment with **Disconnection**
What is the effect of an encounter at relational depth?
Relational depth and outcomes

Clients invited to identify a particularly helpful moment in therapy, and rate on depth of relating using the RDI (Wiggins, 2012)
Then compared against therapeutic outcomes

Results
Depth of relating very strong predictor of outcomes
Accounting for 10-30% of outcomes
RD-Outcome correlation (Wiggins, 2012)

The scatter plot shows a positive correlation between more improvement and more depth, with an $R^2$ value of 0.226 for the linear relationship.

Axes:
- More improvement
- More depth

Scatter points indicate a trend where as improvement increases, depth also increases.
Subjective Ratings

‘To what extent do you think that these moments of relational depth have had an enduring impact?’ (online survey, Leung, 2008)
Qualitative Interviews

Moments of relational depth ‘were seen by participants as highly significant with an enduring positive effect, both on the therapeutic process and long after the therapy had ended.’ (Qualitative interviews, Knox, 2008)
Immediate effects
(Knox, 2008)

• Moments experienced as facilitative, healing and changing

• Positive effect on the therapeutic process itself:
  – deepening and equalisation of relationship
  – greater trust in therapist
  – Increasing openness to verbalise innermost feelings
  – Feeling able to return to moments of in-depth contact again
Long term effects

(Knox, 2008)

• Increased sense of connection to their own selves (85%)
  – greater self-knowledge and self-understanding
  – enhanced self-acceptance
  – greater ability to be their ‘real selves’

• Feel more able and powerful (80%)

• Improved relationships with others (50%)
Disconnection and distress
THE EXPERIENCE OF DISCONNECTION: AN EXERCISE

- Find yourself a relaxed space and, if you are happy to, close your eyes
- Reflect on this question: How would it be to live in the world without deep connections with anyone? What would that experience be like?
- You might want to draw on times in your life when you have not been deeply connected to others

- Share with partner
The distress of disconnection

- From relational perspective, experience of chronic disconnection from others is the primary source of psychological distress.
- I.e., clients’ psychological difficulties often related to problems establishing in-depth connections with others, or lack of experiencing such relationships.
The distress of disconnection

- Loneliness = lack of intimacy and closeness
- Depression = lack of interpersonal pleasures; sadness at lack of relating; less buffer against psychological stressors; isolation and being outside of community
- Anxiety = being without support
- Interpersonal problems = unsatisfactory/frustrating /enraging/untrustworthy relationships; inability to get what one wants from relationships
- Psychosis = internal splitting to replace external relationality
Relational developmental theory: Why do people become disconnected?

- Infants have innate need/capacity to connect with Others
- Where attempts to connect unsatisfying/painful/abusive/frustrating...
- Infant develops *strategies of disconnection* (Jordan et al., 2004) to protect self: e.g., mental withdrawal, inauthenticity, aloofness
- Strategies become chronic and automatic, so deployed in adult life where deeper relatedness *is a possibility*
CHRONIC STRATEGIES OF DISCONNECTION: AN EXERCISE

• Complete the CSOD questionnaire
• Rate the extent that your chronic strategies of disconnection are present in your therapeutic work?
• What other ways, if any, might you disconnect from clients?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>/ Participant (&lt;0.15)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Behavioural</td>
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<td>Hostile</td>
<td>Aggressiveness</td>
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<td>Communication</td>
<td>Eye contact</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Facade</td>
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</table>

Therapists' chronic strategies of disconnection in everyday life (Cooper and Knox, in prep)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Mean presence on 1-10 scale (&gt;)3</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Other-focus</td>
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<td>Cold, prickliness</td>
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<td>Behavioral</td>
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EXPERIENCING RELATIONAL DEPTH: AN EXERCISE

• Pair up with a partner (15 mins)
• What would you be experiencing if you were meeting the other at a level of relational depth right now?
  – Feelings and emotions
  – Perception of the other
  – Experiencing of the relationship
  – Atmosphere
• May be helpful to think back on past experiences of relational depth
Key references