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 (2005/2018): 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'

Source: Mearns and Cooper, 2005, xii

Moments of Relational Depth

Depth of connection

Time

relational depth
A relationship at depth

Depth of connection

Surface-level relationship

Deep relationship

Time

Closely related concepts

• 'Dialogue'/‘I-Thou attitude’—Buber
• "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: Present
• Authentic, real, open
• Exhilarated, empowered, revitalised, alive
• Physical, embodied, electrifying, tingly
• Spontaneous, in the moment
• Immersed, free of distractions
• Feeling OK with self, self-worth, safe
• Insight/experiencing ‘at edge’

Experience of Other: Open
• Other as genuine, authentic, real
• Other as understanding, trustworthy
• Other values, acknowledges, accepts me

Relational: Connectedness
- Closeness, intimacy, togetherness
- Encounter, meeting of minds
- Flowing together, synchronicity
- Bi-directional, reciprocal
- Mutuality, equality
- Interconnectedness: ‘I know you know I know…’
- Blending, at one-ness, union
- Love

Atmosphere: Transcendent
- Timelessness
- Still
- Altered state/Magical
- Spiritual

Relational depth as co-presence

Expressivity

Receptivity

Therapist

Client

Expressivity

Receptivity
‘Measuring’ Relational Depth?

Relational Depth Inventory (RDI)
Depth of Specific Moments of Relating

Relational Depth Frequency Scale (RDFS)
Frequency of Moments of Deep Connection
Do Therapists Experience Relational Depth with their Clients?

Quantitative Findings

- 97.9% of 140 therapists reported some experience of RD
- Therapists’ mean ratings on Relational Depth Frequency Scale = 3.7

Qualitative Findings

- 100% person-centred therapists could identify one or more experiences of RD
- 90% of therapists working with learning disabled clients had experienced RD
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

Do Clients Experience Relational Depth with their Therapists?

Quantitative Findings

• 78.2% of clients reported some experience of RD
• Clients’ mean ratings on Relational Depth Frequency Scale = 3.4

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

• Clients report RD significantly less than therapists
Qualitative Findings

• ‘Most participants of the research were able to identify at least one moment they felt could be described as a moment of relational depth’
• All participants in Cognitive Analytic Therapy could identify moments of relational depth
• …However, ‘many also spoke of having experienced several therapeutic relationships in which they felt there had been no moments of relational depth’.

Source: Knox, 2013; Morris, 2012

Young People’s Experiences

Young people struggled to identify particular moments of ‘connection’ and ‘closeness’ with their therapists

Source: Gurvitz, 2016

Mixed findings regarding orientation, but some evidence that greater RD in humanistic/person-centred approaches

Source: Leung, 2008; Di Malta, 2016
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.

Do Clients and Therapists Experience Relational Depth **at the Same Time?**

**'Analogue' study**
- 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: .67 = approximately 45% overlap in ratings

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

Results

Depth of relating very strong predictor of outcomes

Accounting for 10-30% of outcomes

Subjective Ratings

'To what extent do you think that these moments of relational depth have had an enduring impact?'

![Bar chart showing ratings of subjective impact]

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.

Immediate effects

- 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

- 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%)

Source: Knox, 2008

Self-relational depth

- Self acceptance, self understanding, self transparency

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

- Loneliness = lack of intimacy and closeness
- Depression = lack of interpersonal pleasures, sadness at lack of relating, less buffer against psychological stressors, being outside of community
- Anxiety = being without support
- Interpersonal problems = inability to connect properly, unsatisfying, lack of assertiveness
- Psychosis = internal splitting, lack of support
- Health problems

Therapist as non-interfering, neutral, non-directive crucible for change

Therapist as engaged, present, dialogical ‘other’
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 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

Source: Jordan et al., 2004

What facilitates a meeting at relational depth?
**Therapist Factors**
- Genuinely caring, offering something ‘over and above’
- Competent, safe, trustworthy
- Warm
- ‘Really’ real
- Open and adaptable

Source: McMillan and McLeod, 2006; Knox, 2008; Knox & Cooper, 2010

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**Therapist Factors**

“It felt as though my counsellor, without breaching boundaries, went beyond a professional level of 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.”

Source: McMillan and McLeod, 2006; Knox and Cooper, 2011

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**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

Source: McMillan and McLeod, 2006; Knox and Cooper, 2011
Client Factors

“It 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

How might therapists be more open to meeting clients at relational depth?

Thank you
Key references