Working at relational depth in psychotherapy

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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)

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

- Bohm: ‘Dialogue’
- Stern: ‘Moments of meeting’
- Jordan: ‘Mutual intersubjectivity’
- Laing: ‘Co-presence’
- Rowan: ‘Linking’
- Buber: ‘Dialogue’/‘I-Thou attitude’

What is the experience of relational depth like?

Four facets of relational depth

- Considerable overlap across studies in description of moments of relational depth
- Both quantitative (Wiggins) and qualitative research (Knox, Connelly, Cooper, MacLeod) suggest four, inter-correlated domains:
1. 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

2. Experience of Other: Other as open

- Other as genuine, authentic, real
- Other as understanding
- Other values, acknowledges, accepts me

3. 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…’

4. Atmosphere: Transcendent

- Timelessness
- Magical
- Still
- Altered state
- Spiritual
- Powerful

Moments of RD often take place in silence

I remember one occasion with a girl of seven years old. She was brought along by her father because she had stopped talking. He brought her into my room and he left. She sat on the floor, crossed her legs, and just sat there—not particularly withdrawn but certainly not looking as though she was interested in any conversation. She sat there for a while. Eventually, she started to talk, and she talked about how she didn’t like to talk and she had nothing to say. So I got off my chair and sat there on the floor in front of her. There was no plan that I worked out. She allowed me to touch the tip of her little finger with the tip of mine and gradually allowed me to touch the tips of all her fingers with the tips of mine.

I allowed myself to become completely absorbed in the kinesthetic sensations at the tips of her ten fingers. And then something else took place, you see: nothing happened except a gradually developing movement, dance with the tips of her fingers... It became absolutely imperative that I not lose touch with the tips of any of her little fingers. And I imagine it began to feel as important to her as it did to me. After about forty minutes, I opened my eyes and as I opened my eyes I found her eyes opening just at the same moment, without a word having been spoken. So we withdrew our fingers from each other, and went back to my chair. I said to her, ‘Bring your dad along now if that’s all right with you,’ and she nodded.

He told me later that as he was walking along the road with her towards his car he turned to her and said: ‘What went on between you and Dr. Laing?’ She turned to him and said, ‘It’s none of your business!’ And these are the first words she had spoken in about two months!


Summary

- Commonalities in descriptions of relational depth suggest that it is a real and distinctive phenomena:
  A sense of connectedness and flow with another person that is so powerful that it can feel quite magical. At these times, the person feels alive, immersed in the encounter, and truly themselves; while experiencing the other as open, genuine and valuing of who they are.
Do therapists experience relational depth with their clients?

Therapists’ experiences I
- 97.9% of 140 therapists reported some experience of RD (online survey: Leung, 2008)
- Frequency: 4.06 on 7-point scale (1 = not at all, 7 = all the time)

Therapists’ experiences II
- 100% person-centred therapists could identify one or more experiences of RD (qualitative interviews: Cooper, 2005)
- 90% of therapists working with learning disabled clients had experienced RD (qualitative interviews: MacLeod, 2009)

Differences across therapists
- No significant differences across orientation or gender
- Therapists with greater years in practice report greater frequency of RD: 3% of variance (Leung, 2008)

Summary
- Some therapists have definitely experienced relational depth with clients
- Not clear, overall, what percentage, but possibly quite a lot

Do clients experience relational depth with their therapists?
Clients’ experiences I

- 78.2% of 119 clients had experienced RD (online survey, Leung, 2008)
- Significantly less than therapists

Clients’ experiences II

- Frequency (for those who had experienced RD): 3.87 on 7-point scale (1 = not at all, 7 = all the time)
- Not significantly less than therapists (Leung, 2008)

Clients’ experiences III

- 100% of 14 clients could identify at least one moment of RD (qualitative interviews, Knox, 2008)
- However: ‘Most participants described up to five relationships with other therapists in which they had no experience of relational depth’

Differences across clients

- Trend towards clients in psychodynamic therapy reporting less RD than in humanistic therapy (p = .065) (Leung, 2008)

Summary

- Some clients do experience moments of RD
- Not clear, at all, how frequent – possibly less frequent/much less frequent than 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

Findings
- Therapists’ ratings significantly predicted clients’ ratings
- Female therapists showed significantly more match with their clients’ ratings of connection
- Mean correlation: .67

Variance explained
- Based on mean = .67, overlap between clients’ ratings and therapists’ ratings = 45%

Summary
- Preliminary evidence suggests that relatively high degree of synchrony in experience of connectedness
What is the effect of an encounter at relational depth?

In a study by Wiggins (2012), clients were invited to identify a particular helpful moment in therapy. Each moment was rated for depth of relating using Wiggins’ Relational Depth Inventory. When compared against therapeutic outcomes, it was found that depth of relating is a very strong predictor of outcomes, accounting for around 10 to 30%.

Subjective perceptions: enduring impact

By Leung (2008), clients and therapists were asked, ‘To what extent do you think that these moments of relational depth have had an enduring impact?’ A chart illustrates the responses, with clients generally reporting higher levels of enduring impact compared to therapists.

Immediate effects of a meeting at relational depth

As reported by Knox (2011), 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. These moments were experienced as facilitative, healing, and changing:

- Empowering
- Useful catalysts for change
- ‘Turned everything around’
- Lessened painful feelings

Positive effect on the therapeutic process itself:

- Deepening and equalisation of the relationship
- Greater trust in their therapist
- Being able to be more open and to verbalise their innermost feelings
- Sense that they could go back to these moments of in-depth contact again

Long-term effects

As reported by Knox (2011), long-term effects include:

- 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%)
  - To move on
  - Tackle things more
  - Break their patterns of thinking
- Feeling better
- Improved relationships with others (50%)
Summary

• Emerging evidence that depth of encounter may be a strong predictor of outcomes, also
• Some therapists, and some clients, believe that moments of relational depth have an enduring, strongly positive effect
• More data needed...

Disconnection and distress

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

What facilitates a meeting at relational depth?
Therapist factors

- Therapists need to be experienced as:
  - Genuinely caring/offering something ‘over and above’/a ‘lovely compassionate person’
  - Warm (vs. cold/distant)
  - Open and adaptable
  - Competent/safe/trustworthy
  - ‘Really’ real

(Client interviews, McMillan and McLeod, 2006; Knox, 2008; Knox, submitted)

The ‘really real’ therapist

“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…. [I]t felt like she was giving from her core.”

(Client interview, Knox, 2008)

A relaxed warmth

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

A relaxed warmth

- Therapists’ anxiety seems to inhibit deepening of connection (Cooper, 2012)

Client factors

- Clients need to:
  - Know what they want from therapy/more considered choice of therapist
  - Be ready to engage
  - Choose to relate at depth/Made leap of faith
  - Open up to therapist/allow self to be vulnerable

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

Choosing to relate at depth

“[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.’”

(Knox and Cooper, 2011)
Summary

- Clients report that therapists can facilitate the emergence of RD through being genuinely caring and real
- But the principal predisposing factor is the client’s choice to open up to the therapist

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

Thank you

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Key references