

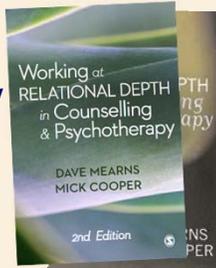
Working at Relational Depth

Mick Cooper
Professor of Counselling
University of Roehampton
mick.cooper@roehampton.ac.uk

Special thanks to all colleagues who contributed work to this presentation:
Ambika Erin Connelly, Anne Deacon, Shiri Gurvitz, Rosanne Knox, John Leung, Gina Saskija Di Malta, Eleanor MacLeod, Gillian Morris, David Murphy, Aisling Treanor, Sue Wiggins

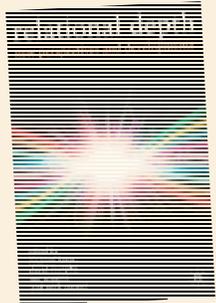
'Relational depth'

- 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)

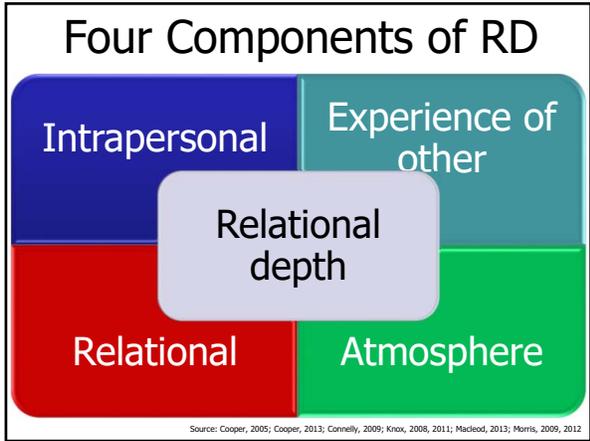


'Relational depth'

Research, theory and practice developed in Knox, R., Murphy, D., Wiggins, S., & Cooper, M. (Eds.). (2013). *Relational depth: New perspectives and developments*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.



What is the experience of relational depth like?



- ## 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

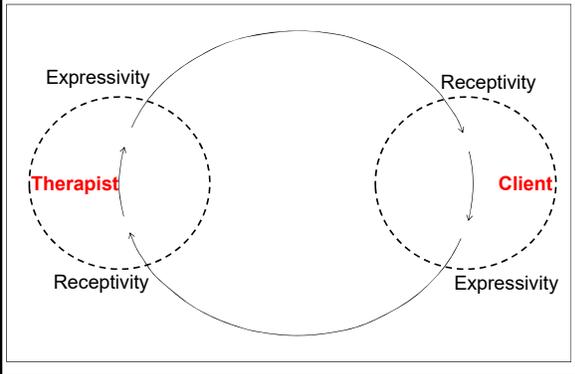
Relational: Connectedness

- 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

Relational depth as co-presence



'Measuring' relational depth?

Relational Depth Inventory (Wiggins, 2012) Depth of specific moments of relating

RDI-2 Client

Client ID _____ Session ____
Interviewer _____ Date _____

Below you are asked about a **particularly helpful moment or event** which you might have had during a therapy session. Please take a minute to think back over your relationship so far with this therapist. Of the events which have occurred so far, select a specific moment or event that stands out in your mind as particularly helpful. Please briefly describe this helpful moment or event below in a few sentences, and indicate about how long ago or in roughly what session it occurred.

Now, with this specific moment or event in mind, please rate how accurately each of the items below fits your experience. Please tick the appropriate box to indicate your answer.

During this specific moment or event...	not at all	a little	moderately	very much	completely
1. I felt a sense of freedom	<input type="checkbox"/>				
2. There was give and take between my therapist and myself	<input type="checkbox"/>				
3. I felt my therapist respected me	<input type="checkbox"/>				
4. I felt I was 'living in the moment'	<input type="checkbox"/>				

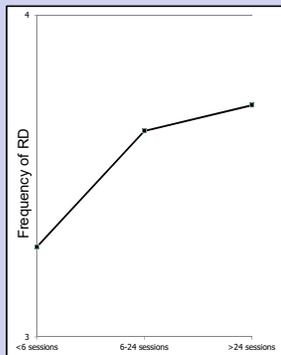
Qualitative Findings

- 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

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 ($n = 6$, 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

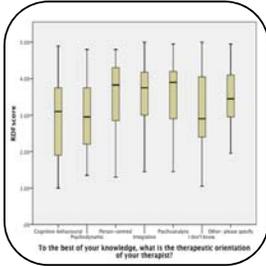
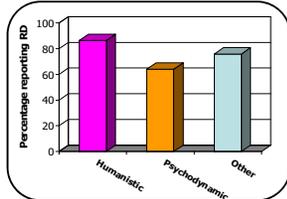
Young people struggled to identify particular moments of 'connection' and 'closeness' with their therapists (but could identify important moments in therapy: primarily significant disclosures) (Gurvitz, 2016)



Moderators: Orientation

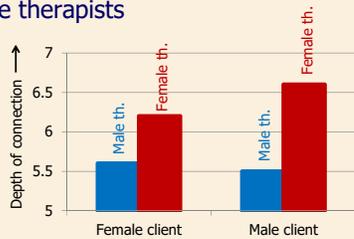
Mixed findings regarding orientation, but some evidence that greater RD in humanistic/person-centred approaches

(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

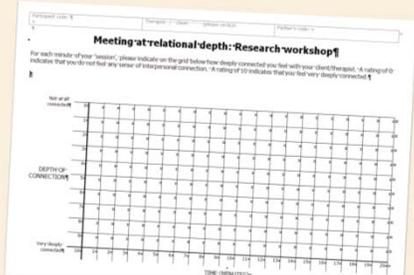


(Cooper, 2012)

Do clients and therapists experience relational depth *at the same time*?

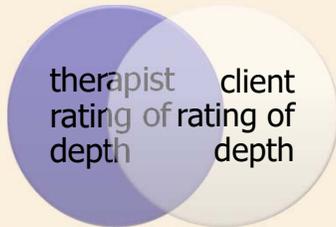
'Analogue' study (Cooper, 2012)

- 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: .67 = approximately 45% overlap in ratings



What is the effect of an encounter at relational depth?

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

- 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 *experience* 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 = unsatisfactorily/frustrating/enraging/untrustworthy relationships; inability to get what one wants from relationships
- Psychosis = internal splitting to replace external relationality



Relational developmental theory: Why do we 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

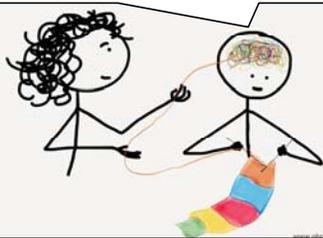
- Genuinely caring/ offering something 'over and above'
- Competent/safe/ trustworthy
- Warm (vs. cold/distant)
- 'Really' real
- Open and adaptable



(Client interviews: McMillan and McLeod, 2006; Knox, 2008; Knox & Cooper, 2010)

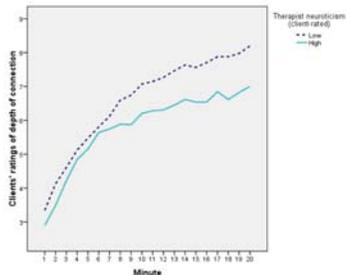
Therapist Factors

'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.'



A Relaxed Warmth

- Therapists' perceived "neuroticism" seems to inhibit deepening of connection (Cooper, 2012)



Client Factors

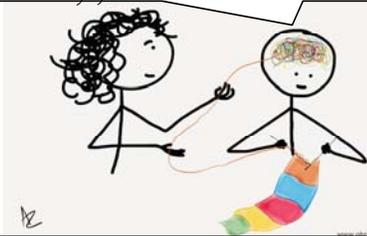


- Know what they want from therapy
- Considered choice of therapist
- Be ready to engage
- **Choose to relate at depth, Make leap of faith**
- Open up to therapist, allow self to be vulnerable

(Client 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

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

Therapists' chronic strategies of disconnection in everyday life (Cooper and Knox, 2018)

Domain	Category	/Participant (<0.15)
Behavioural		1.54
	Physical avoidance	0.45
	Activities	0.26
	Busyness	0.21
	Communication avoidance	0.16
Passive		1.28
	Silence/quietness	0.41
	Victimhood	0.18
	Self-criticism	0.17
	Compliance	0.16
Intrapsychic		0.90
	Mental withdrawal	0.49
	Intellectualization	0.17
Hostile		0.68
	Aggressiveness	0.27
Communication		0.51
	Eye contact	0.18
Disingenuous		0.40
	Facade	0.21
Humor		0.35

Therapists' chronic strategies of disconnection : Presence in therapy

Domain	Category	Mean presence on 1-10 scale (>3)
Passive		3.08
	Rescuing	4.53
	Other-focus	4.18
	Hiding/invisibility	4.00
	Conflict avoidance	3.63
	Compliance	3.04
Disingenuous		3.00
	Formality	3.63
	Superficiality	3.08
	Facade	3.00
Humor		2.85
Intrapsychic		2.83
	Intellectualization	3.72
	Daydreaming	3.15
Communication		2.38
	Talking more	3.00
Hostile		2.15
	Cold, prickliness	3.23
Behavioral		1.66

'External' factors that may affect relational depth



Key references

- Cooper, M. (2005). Therapists' experiences of relational depth: A qualitative interview study. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research, 5*(2), 87-95.
- Cooper, M. (2012). Clients' and therapists' perceptions of intrasessional connection: An analogue study of change over time, predictor variables, and level of consensus. *Psychotherapy Research, 22*(2), 274-287.
- Cooper, M. (2013). *Experiencing relational depth in therapy: What we know so far*. In R. Knox, D. Murphy, S. Wiggins & M. Cooper (Eds.), *Relational depth: New perspectives and developments* (pp. 62-76). Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Cooper, M., & Knox, R. (2018). Therapists' self-reported chronic strategies of disconnection in everyday life and in counselling and psychotherapy: an exploratory study. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling, 46*(2), 185-200. doi: 10.1080/03069885.2017.1343457
- Di Mattia, G. S. (2016). The development and validation of the Relational Depth Frequency Scale. (Psych.D.), University of Roehampton, London.
- Jordan, J. V., Kaplan, A. G., Miller, J. B., Silver, I. P., & Surney, J. L. (Eds.). (1991). *Women's Growth in Connection: Writings from the Stone Centre*. New York: The Guilford Press.
- Knox, R. (2008). Clients' experiences of relational depth in person-centred counselling. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research, 8*(3), 118-124.
- Knox, R., & Cooper, M. (2010). Relationship qualities that are associated with moments of relational depth: The client's perspective. *Person-Centered and Experiential Psychotherapies, 9*(2), 236-256.
- Knox, R., & Cooper, M. (2011). A state of readiness: An exploration of the client's role in meeting at relational depth. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology, 51*(1), 61-81.
- Knox, R., Murphy, D., Wiggins, S., & Cooper, M. (Eds.). (2013). *Relational depth: Contemporary perspectives*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Leung, J. (2008). *A quantitative online study exploring the factors associated with the experience and perception of relational depth*. Doctorate in Counselling Psychology DPsych. dissertation, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow.
- Mearns, D., & Cooper, M. (2016). *Working at Relational Depth in Counselling and Psychotherapy (2nd ed.)*. London: Sage.
- McMillan, M., & McLeod, J. (2006). Letting go: The client's experience of relational depth. *Person-Centered and Experiential Psychotherapies, 5*(4), 277-292.
- Wiggins, S. (2012). Development and validation of a measure of relational depth. PhD dissertation, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow.
- Wiggins, S., Elliott, R., & Cooper, M. (2012). The prevalence and characteristics of relational depth events in psychotherapy. *Psychotherapy Research, 22*(2), 139-158.
