‘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)
Should we be studying relational depth?

No

I'm quite happy for it to be elusive. There's a fear of— it's like kind of butterfly catching, isn't it? — there's a fear of catching something very beautiful and trying to define what it is. And then— and in that process, losing what it is. (participant in Connelly, 2009)

Yes

• Research and exploration does not need to be definitive, can be exploratory
• Can be one of several means of finding out more
• Willingness to challenge assumptions and be open to world and learning

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 oneness, union
- Mutual, equality
- Trust
- Respect, empathy for other
- Interconnectedness: ‘I know you know I know...’

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

Is it possible to ‘operationalise’ relational depth?

Measures of relational depth
- Three measures of relational depth now established:
  - Relational Depth Inventory (Wiggins, Elliott & Cooper, 2012; \( n = 342 \))
  - Relational Depth Frequency scale (Di Malta, 2016; \( n = 434 \))
  - Relational depth content analysis (Wiggins, Elliott & Cooper, 2012; \( n = 342 \))
- All show excellent inter-item/inter-rater reliability: \( \alpha = .93-.98; \) ICC = .79; with one main factor
- Good convergent validity with the Working Alliance Inventory (correlation = .33-.77)
- Indicates that depth of relating is a measurable, unidimensional phenomenon; related to (but not identical with) the therapeutic alliance

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

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

During this specific moment or event...

1. I felt a sense of freedom
2. There was a feeling of trust between me and the therapist
3. I felt supported by the therapist
4. I felt at ease in the relationship

Client ID: [_____] Session: [_____] Intervenor: [_____] Date: [_____]
Relational Depth Frequency Scale (Di Malta, 2016)
Frequency of moments of deep connection

- Level 3 (RD ‘clearly present’) E.g., ‘There was an interpersonal connection in the moment and my perceptual awareness changed.’
- Level 2 (RD ‘probably present’) E.g., ‘A session where I was able to be myself as a small child and to gain the ability to comfort myself without feeling embarrassed by the process and where I felt emotionally held by the therapist.’
- Level 1 (RD ‘probably not present’) E.g., ‘This situation was a setting about the structure of my family. We did body therapy and I had to assess the different persons and their relations to myself and each other.’
- Level 0 (RD ‘clearly not present’) E.g., ‘I did not feel I was connecting with this client at all.’

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]’

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 ($n = 6$, 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: Orientation
- 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 (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

Maximum matching

Minimum matching
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)

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

- 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 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

- 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)

A lovely, compassionate person

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 & Cooper, 2010)

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

Source: Knox and Cooper, 2011
Key references

• 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.