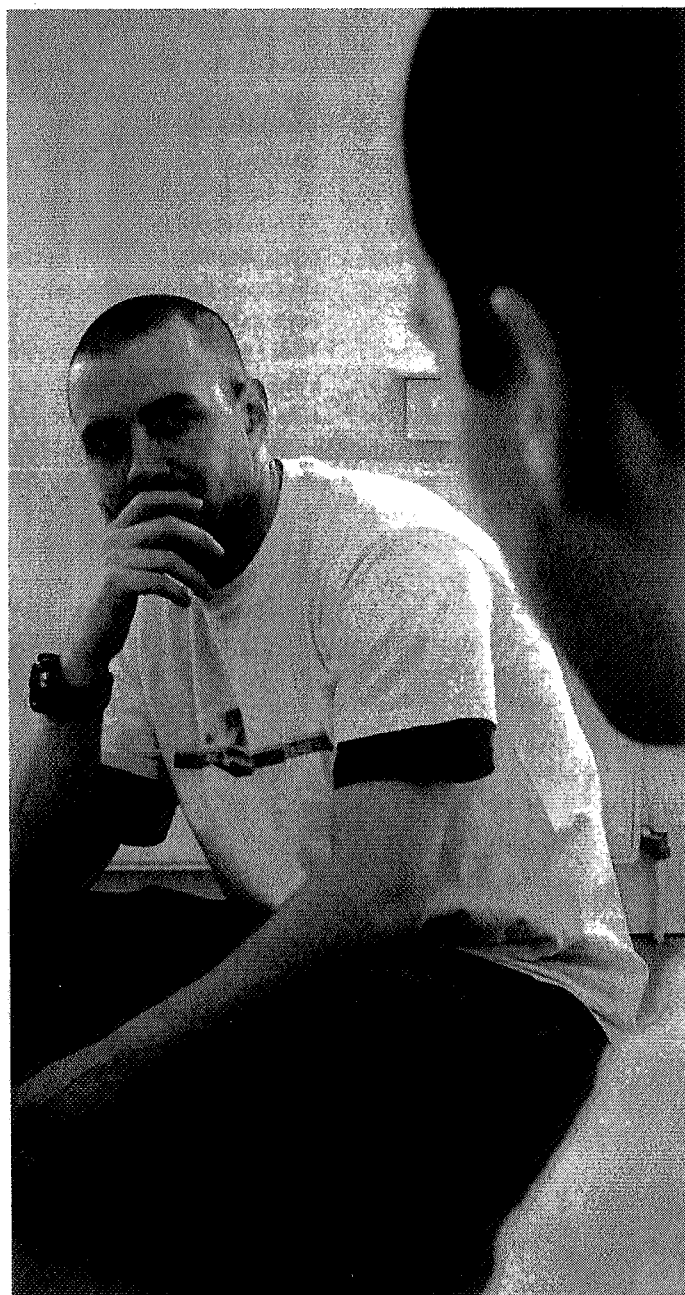


Working at relational depth



Surface-level relational variables are well documented in therapy research. Here, Mick Cooper discusses how the core conditions can become a single way of being to enable the forming of a deeper, more useful relationship

-
- 'Dominic'** I don't know whether to believe myself or not.
Dave Mearns Say more, Dom.
Dominic I'm just so full of crap.
Dave You don't know whether to believe yourself or not.
Dominic I think I'm serious ... sincere. But, really, I'm only a drunk... a fuckin' drunk.
Dave You think that you're serious ... and sincere. But you're really, only, a fuckin' drunk.
Dominic Yes.
Dave A fuckin' drunk – that's all you are.
Dominic *(Tears welling up)*
Dave A fuckin' drunk.
Dominic *(Hits fist on arm of chair in apparent anger ...and cries)*
Dave Dom, you're angry...and you're crying.
Dominic I'm so fuckin' full of shit *(cries)*.
Dave *(Moves to Dominic and puts his arm round him)*
Dominic *(Cries more and more)*
Dave It feels like a lonely place.¹
-

In this extract, taken from the recently published *Working at Relational Depth in Counselling and Psychotherapy*¹, there is a sense in which 'Dominic' experiences a powerful moment of therapy. This 'partial' alcoholic, as he half-jokingly refers to himself, would seem to be getting in touch with a deep-seated sense of self-loathing, and expressing some of the fear, vulnerability and sadness that such an attitude towards himself evokes. Yet the power of this therapeutic moment does not come from the insight or catharsis alone. Imagine, for instance, that Dominic were saying these things to himself on his own. Here, it might seem that he was deepening his sense of self-hatred and shame rather than beginning to overcome it. What seems to give Dominic's words and feelings such therapeutic significance, then, is the fact that he is expressing them in relation to another human being. That is, he is digging down into the very depths of his being and sharing something of this with a person who can receive and understand it. It is the depth of therapeutic relating that gives this moment such power, not the individual expression alone.

In recent years research and theory in the field of psychotherapy and counselling – as well as in related fields, such as psychology and philosophy – is providing increasing levels of support for the idea that the quality of the therapeutic relationship is absolutely central to the effectiveness of therapy. In 1999, for instance, an American Psychological Association Division of Psychotherapy 'Task Force' was set up to conduct the

largest ever review of research on the therapeutic relationship, and its distillation of the evidence came to more than 400 pages². Drawing on the findings of numerous quantitative and experimental studies, it came to the conclusion that 'the therapy relationship...makes substantial and consistent contributions to psychotherapy outcome independent of the specific type of treatment'³.

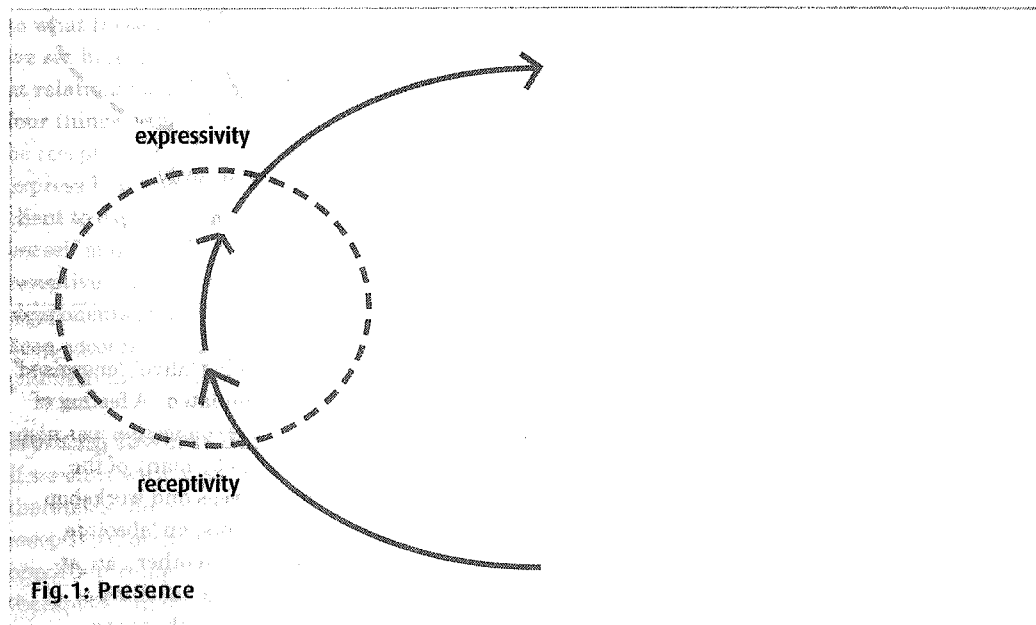
Mike Lambert⁴, probably the world's leading psychotherapy researcher,

psychotherapy world. Not only have recent years witnessed the emergence of various 'interpersonal', 'relational' and 'dialogical' therapies, but many of the dominant therapeutic modalities have all now spawned relational variants¹.

Much of the current thinking and research into the therapeutic relationship, however, tends to focus on relatively 'surface-level' relational variables. The empirical literature, for instance, looks primarily at such variables as the 'therapeutic alliance' or

times of in-depth encounter.

'Relational depth'⁵ is a term coined by Dave Mearns in the 1990s to describe both these moments of meeting and also a relationship in which there is an enduring sense of contact and interconnection between two people. Dave described such relational depth in primarily person-centred terms: as a therapeutic relationship in which the therapist experiences high and consistent levels of empathy and acceptance towards the client and relates in a highly congruent way. One of the things that Dave was keen



came to a similar conclusion when he calculated that the therapeutic relationship accounts for approximately 30 per cent of the variance in therapeutic outcomes. This makes it a factor second only to 'client variables and extra-therapeutic events' (such as the client's level of motivation) in determining the effectiveness of therapy.

New variants

Developments such as these have led to something of a 'relational turn' in the counselling and

levels of 'collaboration' between therapist and client, but pays little attention to the more in-depth feelings of engagement, connection and mutuality that, for many therapists and clients, are the essence of their therapeutic work. Some theorists in the field have begun to describe such experiences – Daniel Stern⁵, for instance, writes of 'moments of meeting' and Judith Jordan⁶ talks of 'mutual intersubjectivity' – but there is still much we do not know about these

to emphasise here is that, although trainees in the person-centred approach are often taught to think about the 'core' conditions – empathy, acceptance and congruence – as separate variables, when they are operating at a high level it makes much more sense to think about them as a single way of being: an 'empathic understanding that is genuinely accepting' or a 'genuinely empathic acceptance'.

More than presence

Within the person-centred

literature, this coming together of the three 'core' conditions has been equated with 'presence'⁷. James Bugental⁸, an American 'existential-humanistic' psychotherapist, also uses this term, and very helpfully distinguishes between an 'accessibility' side of presence (what we call 'receptivity') and an 'expressivity' side.

other's being in an on-going, interpenetrative cycle (see diagram two). In therapeutic terms, then, we are not simply talking about a time when the client is expressive and the therapist is receptive. Rather, we are talking about a time when the therapist receives the client's expression, and the client knows that the therapist knows that the

physical resonance with their clients at these times (this is very similar to what both Babette Rothschild and myself have described as embodied empathy^{9,10}).

Another common experience at these times was a sense of being very immersed in the therapeutic work: a feeling of being free from distractions

connectedness with others.

Value to the client

Clearly, however, if the experiencing of relational depth was of value to the therapist alone, its importance within the therapeutic domain would be relatively limited. What, then, might be the value of a relationally deep encounter to clients? First, an intimate therapeutic encounter may well serve as a 'corrective relational experience' for clients who have experienced a lack of connectedness in their earlier years. If, as suggested above, human beings have a basic need to engage with others, then the frustration of this desire through non-engaged parenting could lead to a deep sense of loss or dissatisfaction with life. For such a person, then, the experiencing of an in-depth connection with their therapist could be deeply rewarding, and not just in the immediate present, but also in the hope this engenders for relationships in the future. Indeed, if the client can learn, through establishing an in-depth relationship with their therapist, how to relate more deeply with others, then these are skills that the client could take into the outside world and use to forge more satisfying and fulfilling interpersonal relationships: relationships which would also act as buffers against psychological distress.

Second, and closely related to this, the experience of in-depth connectedness may help a client move beyond a feeling of being totally alone in the world (a feeling often associated with psychological distress) and towards a sense that at least one other person knows what is going on for them. And although this is only one other person, the difference between feeling

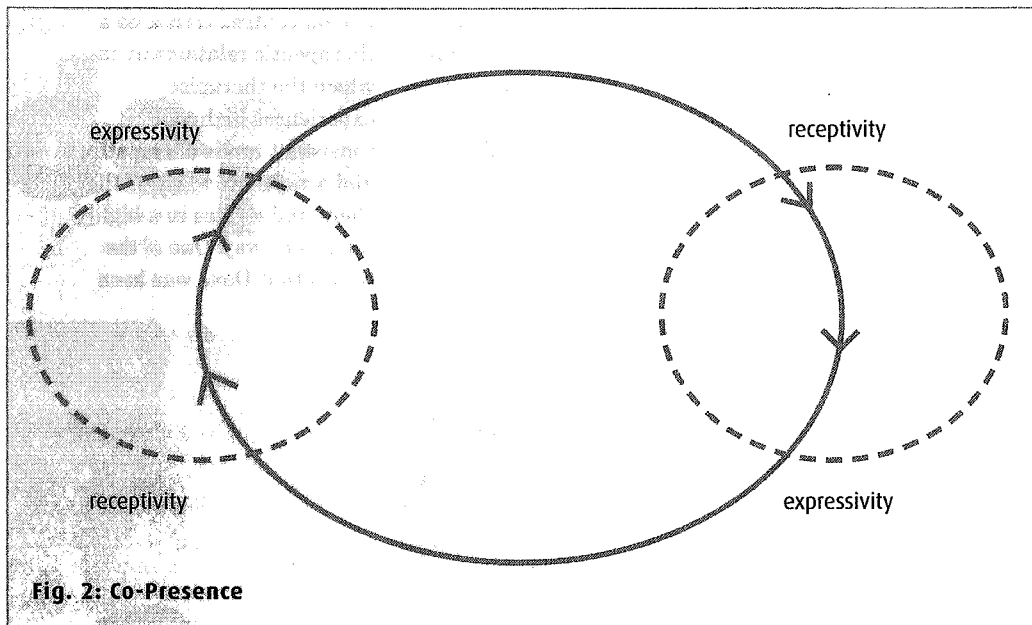


Fig. 2: Co-Presence

'Receptivity' refers to the willingness to allow what happens in a situation to matter to oneself: to 'take in' and receive the world; whilst 'expressivity' refers to a willingness to share oneself in a situation (see diagram one).

There is one major difference, however, between 'presence' and 'relational depth'. Relational depth, by its very nature, requires two people to be involved: it is a fundamentally dyadic phenomenon. In person-centred or humanistic terms, then, we might think of relational depth as a 'co-presence', a relationship in which both people are able to receive the other and express to the other who they are. More than that, though, relational depth refers to a time when two people are able to receive the essence of each

therapist has received his or her expression, and the therapist knows that the client knows that the therapist knows, etc.

Evidence

When we interviewed therapists for our relational depth book and also facilitated workshops on the subject, one of the things we were struck by was how many therapists could readily identify such experiences with clients. What was even more striking, however, was the commonalities in terms of how this way of relating was experienced. Not only, for instance, did nearly all the therapists talk about experiencing high levels of empathy, congruence and acceptance in these moments of relational depth, but many of them also talked about experiencing an in-depth,

and of being 'alive', 'energised' and 'stimulated'. A feeling of deep interconnection was also described by many of the interviewees and workshop participants: an 'absolute trust of each other', an 'at-one-ment', a 'touching of souls'. (Here, there are many parallels with John Rowan's concept of 'linking' at the transpersonal level of therapy¹¹). Several therapists also described how satisfying these moments of relational depth were. Indeed, for one or two of the counsellors we interviewed, it was these moments of connectedness that sustained them amidst the challenges and isolation of the therapeutic work, and this raises some interesting questions as to whether some therapists may actually come into this line of work to experience a sense of

totally alone and experiencing some sense of connectedness to an other can be immense.

Experiencing relational depth may also be important in helping clients change how they relate to themselves. For many clients, psychological problems may be closely related to an attitude towards themselves (or a 'part' of themselves) that is critical, derogatory, de-personalising and objectifying. So in experiencing relational depth with another, they may come to internalise a more accepting, empathic and honest relationship with themselves: one in which they are more willing to listen to, and engage with, all their different 'sides'.

A sense of safety

In these ways, an encounter at relational depth may be of direct therapeutic value for a client. But the clinical significance also derives from the change these encounters may make to the on-going therapeutic relationship. Experiencing the therapist at relational depth can give the client a sense of safety that far exceeds the norm for therapeutic relationships. Through that sense of safety the client can begin to explore aspects of their self that are, for them, the most profound – aspects that they can rarely face and would never share with another. Now the therapy may begin to tackle the 90 per cent of material that, in more surface-level therapeutic relationships, never sees the light of day. In this deepened conception of a 'relational' therapy there is the potential to work with clinical populations where the conflicts are so severe that some clinicians would even discount the possibility of establishing a therapeutic relationship. An example is Dave's work with a mute, war-traumatised client in chapter

six of *Working at Relational Depth in Counselling and Psychotherapy*, where it is Dave's willingness to be there for the client day in and day out that appears to facilitate a therapeutic breakthrough.

So how can therapists go about facilitating a meeting at relational depth? One thing is clear: therapists cannot make such a meeting happen, partly because it requires two people, and partly because it is the kind of phenomenon that seems to be chased away the more it is chased after. Having said that, there are some things that therapists can do to make its emergence more likely, and diagram two provides some useful clues as to what these might be. What we see here is that a meeting at relational depth requires four things – the therapist to be receptive, the therapist to express him or herself, the client to express him or herself and the client to be receptive – and each of these components of a relationally-deep encounter has the potential to be facilitated.

Working towards depth

If we start with ways in which therapists can enhance their receptivity, perhaps the most important thing that therapists can do here is to listen more fully to their clients. Many students who come on to counselling training courses think that listening is the 'easy bit', but what we mean by listening here is so much more than just providing the client with a space to talk (which can be difficult enough, itself!). By listening, we mean really attending to the client, attuning to their being in an emotional, cognitive and embodied way. In our new book, Dave and I introduce the term 'holistic listening' to refer to a kind of listening that 'breathes in' the client. This is a 'beholding' that takes

'Experiencing the therapist at relational depth can give the client a sense of safety that far exceeds the norm'

in all the different elements of what a client is expressing and the relationship between them, rather than focusing down on one or two aspects of their narrative. A real receptivity to the client also requires therapists to let go of their theories about why the client is the way they are and any desires to 'do' something to the client (even if it is to help them). By contrast, it requires the therapist to let the client impact upon them: to be open and responsive to the unique human being they are meeting there in the room.

Therapist receptivity

Contrary to the stereotype of the docile and ever-reflective person-centred counsellor, however, diagram two shows us that a meeting at relational depth also requires the therapist to be expressive of who they are – to bring themselves in to the relationship. Clearly, this needs to be in relation to the client (ie it would not be appropriate for a therapist to say to their client, 'Do you know what time my bus home is?') but it also needs to be genuinely from the therapist rather than from any

therapeutic role. In being receptive to his or her client, the therapist is likely to experience a range of thoughts, feelings and bodily sensations, and the communication of these back to the client – when done in the service of the client – can bring about the most powerful moments of connection. One of the therapists that we interviewed gave us the following example, which powerfully reflects the embodied form that relational depth often takes:

'This client was telling me about an experience in her youth, and as she was telling me about it, I got an extreme sensation in myself of my energy draining, and I just felt myself suddenly nearly collapsing. It was quite profound. So I told her. I said, "Something has happened to me just now and I'm feeling really depleted." She immediately made a connection for herself and said that she experienced herself as neglected at that time in her life and of neglecting herself. She talked about that for a wee while and then she moved back to

'Presence is something that one can do on one's own... relational depth is a fundamentally dyadic phenomenon'

connect with me, and she said, "You really felt that, didn't you?" and that was a profound experience with the two of us.'

Client expressivity

In terms of helping clients to be more expressive within the therapeutic relationship, perhaps the most important thing that therapists can do here is to try and make the therapeutic space as 'safe' as possible. For many clients, the idea of sharing with another person their deepest, most personal experiences is profoundly anxiety-provoking. Such a client, then, is likely to keep their therapist at arm's length until they feel that they can fully trust that person to do no harm.

How can a therapist earn such trust? First, by not trying to force the client to say or do anything; in other words, genuinely respecting the client's self-protective processes. Second, by ensuring that their stance towards their clients is as non-judgemental as it can be, such that their clients will be less afraid of opening up. Third, by trying to be a relatively stable, dependable and predictable presence to their clients, someone who they have a sense will not behave in chaotic or out-of-control and damaging ways. Hence, whilst facilitating a meeting at relational depth means being real, it also means maintaining appropriate boundaries.

This might be by agreeing contracts, sticking to time limits, and not socialising with clients – for without that, clients may find the therapeutic situation too unpredictable and unsafe to allow their therapist in, in any real sense.

Client receptivity

Finally, there is the question of how therapists might help their clients be more receptive to them. This is, perhaps, the area in which therapists have the least potential to affect change: it is virtually impossible to make someone more receptive to you. Indeed, looked at in this way, maybe one of the biggest barriers to effective therapy is that clients will sometimes 'refuse' to take their therapists in, and there is very little therapists can do about this. Nevertheless, by creating a safe environment, clients may come to trust that their therapists will not violate them, and hence begin to open themselves out to an encounter with another.

Here, then, are some steps that therapists can take to make a relationally-deep encounter more likely, but there is no doubt that offering this possibility to every client, no matter how 'hard to reach' they are, poses considerable challenges to the therapist. These challenges are not just in the immediate therapeutic moment, but in terms of the therapist's on-going personal

development.

In a later article to be offered to *therapy today*, Dave Mearns will outline our work on the 'developmental agenda' for the counsellor or psychotherapist. ■

Mick Cooper is a senior lecturer in counselling at the University of Strathclyde. He is co-author, with Dave Mearns, of Working at Relational Depth in Counselling and Psychotherapy (Sage, 2005).

On the 18 May 2006, the University of Strathclyde will be hosting a one-day conference entitled 'Meeting at Relational Depth' to celebrate the career of Professor Mearns, who has recently retired. See www.strathclydecounselling.com and click on 'Dave Mearns conference'

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WORKING AT RELATIONAL DEPTH IN COUNSELLING AND PSYCHOTHERAPY

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Drawing from their own practice, interviews with therapists and a diverse range of theoretical and empirical sources, the authors address the key question of how therapists can meet their clients at a level of relational depth. They show how different aspects of the therapist combine to facilitate a relationally-deep encounter, highlight the various personal 'blocks' which may be encountered along the way, and introduce new therapeutic concepts such as holistic listening which can help therapists to meet their clients at this level.

Two powerful case studies a client with a drink problem and a traumatized client have been selected to illustrate key aspects of working at relational depth. Like many of the ideas discussed in this book, the case studies represent a challenge to, conventional thinking about the therapist-client relationship and the nature of the therapeutic process.

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Dave Mearns is Professor of Counselling, University of Strathclyde. His previous books with SAGE include Person-Centred Counselling in Action, Second Edition (with Brian Thorne), Developing Person-Centred Counselling, Second Edition and Person-Centred Counselling Training. Mick Cooper is Senior Lecturer in Counselling, University of Strathclyde. His previous publications include Existential Therapies (SAGE Publications, 2003).

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