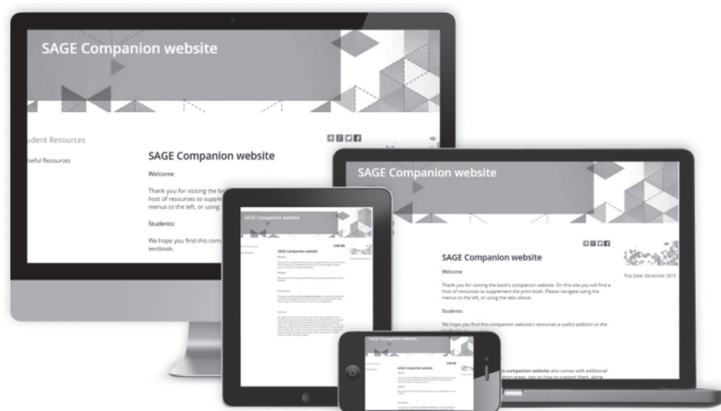


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# Digital tools



Visit <https://study.sagepub.com/counselling> to find a range of online resources for students:

1. Relational Depth Inventory (Therapist Version) – developed by Sue Price; validated self-report measure of the depth of relating of significant therapy moments
2. Relational Depth Inventory (Client Version)
3. Relational Depth Frequency Scale (Client Version) – developed by Gina Saskjia Di Malta; validated self-report measure of the frequency of moments of relational depth
4. Relational Depth Frequency Scale (Therapist Version)
5. Relational Depth Frequency Scale (Generic Version)
6. Chronic Strategies of Disconnection Inventory – developed by Mick Cooper and Rosanne Knox; self-report checklist for identifying ways of disconnecting from deeper relating.

These resources may be useful tools for reflecting on, and researching, experiences of relational depth. They can be used within training, supervision, self-reflection, or research projects. All of the resources are freely available for use, distribution and teaching without further permission; but please do not amend or revise in any way. We would also be very interested to hear about any findings that emerge through the use of these instruments. Contact [mick.cooper@roehampton.ac.uk](mailto:mick.cooper@roehampton.ac.uk).

# About the authors

**Dave Mearns** was formerly Director of the Counselling Unit and Professor of Counselling at the University of Strathclyde, Glasgow. Dave is author or co-author of four other counselling books published by Sage: *Person-Centred Counselling in Action* (Second Edition), *Experiences of Counselling in Action*, *Person-Centred Counselling Training* and *Person-Centred Therapy Today: New Frontiers in Theory and Practice*.

**Mick Cooper** is a Professor of Counselling Psychology at the University of Roehampton and a chartered psychologist. Mick is author and editor of a range of texts on person-centred, existential and relational approaches to therapy, including *Existential psychotherapy and counselling* (Sage, 2015), *The handbook of person-centred psychotherapy and counselling* (Palgrave, 2013, with Peter Schmid, Maureen O'Hara and Art Bohart) and *Pluralistic counselling and psychotherapy* (Sage, 2011, with John McLeod). Mick has led a range of research studies exploring the process and outcomes of humanistic counselling with young people, and is currently researching client agency and its role in the therapeutic process. His recent work has also focused on the interface between psychological and social change, and on integrating a social justice perspective into psychology and counselling. Mick has four children, and lives in Brighton on the south coast of England.

# Preface to the second edition

Mick Cooper, Brighton, November 2016

One of the challenges in writing about relational depth is knowing what you want to say, but not knowing how to say it. So here I am, staring at a blank Word 2010 page, wondering how I can really say what I want to say for the second edition of *Working at relational depth in counselling and psychotherapy*.

What I want to say goes something like this: There is a lot we don't know about relational depth. It's amorphous, hard to tie down, and can't be defined. But it is something amazing and incredible that happens in life and in therapy. It's about moments when we really meet people at a very deep level. Where we feel totally tuned in to the other and we experience a common humanity and sense that, existentially, we are not alone: that we are part of a community, connected with another, thrown into this world together and both striving alongside each other, not alone, to try to find our way. And it is a magical feeling of safety and certainty and excitement and engagement and togetherness. It is about a deep togetherness: *really* together. Not pseudo-together or a superficial meeting but genuinely deep-touching togetherness where we meet the other from deep within our souls and form something new with that other that has never been there before.

It is not always there in therapy. Therapy is not just about relational depth. But when we meet in that deep place in therapy then clients can feel a holding and a loving that they may never have known in their lives.

There is an aloneness in all of us, in clients probably more than most, and when people come to therapy it is often because of a deep aloneness and isolation in their lives: a core that is alone, apart and wandering in the world without connection, grounding and stability. So that when, as therapists, we meet clients at that level of relational depth, something amazing can happen in therapy. They, we, can experience a groundedness in relationship that puts them right back into the heart of community.

And even if it is just for a minute or two, it is a reminder of some shared, common humanity: some shared way of being and connectedness with others that can stay there, in their minds and their bodies, as a reminder of what can be possible; a connectedness with the other, and also a connectedness with themselves – a deep, passionate, grounded, fundamental sense of OK-ness. 'I am OK in the world.'

Relational depth, for me, is brown and rich and sweet and it is the common relational sauce that we get lifted out of and forget that is our home. We come out of it and think that life is alone and we are alone and that no one is there for us, but we forget that common home that is our humanity, our community. Relational depth takes us back there, and whatever therapy people are going through – whether it is person-centred or analytical or CBT – relational depth takes us back into the heart of things and to the heart of what is often most meaningful for us: deep, common, relating; the joy of being with others. It is a reminder of who and what we most fundamentally are.

## Development of the Book

Dave and I worked on the first edition of *Working at relational depth in counselling and psychotherapy* from 2003 to 2005, and the book was published by Sage in 2005. I had been living with my partner and two young daughters in Brighton, working at the university there, when I saw a job advertised in *Therapy Today* (the magazine of the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy) for a senior lecturer post at the University of Strathclyde. Like many English people, my first thought was 'Where's Strathclyde?' Then I realised that the job was with Dave Mearns, co-author of *Person-centred counselling in action* (Sage) which, like many people, I adored. So I thought, 'I'm going to go for it'. When I arrived at the interview and saw the competition for the post, I thought there was no way I was going to get it. But, to my shock, I did. In the autumn of 2002, as we prepared to move up to Glasgow, Dave and I started to email about various projects we might work on together.

Dave had been writing about relational depth since the mid-1990s (Mearns, 1997c). When his publishers, Sage, talked to counselling trainers about what books they would like to see, several had suggested a more detailed text on this topic. For Dave, relational depth was a way of pulling the Rogerian (1957) core conditions (empathy, congruence, and unconditional positive regard) back together again (see Chapter 3, this volume). As a counselling trainer himself, Dave had seen the way that trainees and trainers could end up seeing each of these conditions as separate 'techniques' that got 'implemented' at separate times ('Now I'm doing empathy', 'Here's a bit of congruence', 'This one's

unconditional positive regard'). What Dave wanted to say, I think, is that it is really all one thing. That is, that when you are really there for a client, you are relating in a way that is 'empathically-congruently-accepting', and you cannot pull these core conditions apart like strips of string cheese. What, I think, Dave also really wanted to say is that, in the counselling world, we have become so concerned with getting over-involved with our clients that we have forgotten about the dangers of being *under-involved*: of providing our clients with a relationship that is so cold, impersonal and detached that it can end up doing more harm than good.

For myself, just out of a training in existential psychotherapy at Regent's College in London, I had developed a passion for the dialogical philosophy of Martin Buber (1947, 1958), as well as the relational-existential-phenomenological approach of one of my principal trainers, Ernesto Spinelli (see Spinelli, 2015). More than that, though, at a personal level, I had always had a yearning – and a love – for moments of deep, interpersonal connection. I still don't entirely understand why, but there was something about the richness and sweetness and mystery of these events that really drew me in.

Once Dave and I had decided on the chapters that we would like to write for the book, we mostly got on with drafting our own separate contributions. However, every month or two, Dave and I would meet up in one of the finest Indian restaurants in Glasgow, if not the UK ([www.motherindia.co.uk](http://www.motherindia.co.uk)), to talk about where we were up to. In fact, over spiced haddock and chicken saag, we probably spent more time talking about the person-centred world, but it was a time of closeness and connection between us, and the drafts got done.

As is evident above, Dave and I came to the book from separate places and, in the book, you can see some of the joins. Dave wrote with passion about the need to provide clients with a deeply human, holding relationship, in which they could reveal their innermost selves. I wrote, perhaps more technically, about the evidence-base for a relational approach, and the characteristics of such a practice. Dave's focus was on relational depth as an enduring quality of a therapeutic relationship; mine, from a more phenomenological background, was on specific moments of in-depth encounter. Nearly always, however, our ideas complemented and built on each other. Perhaps the only thing we really disagreed about was the degree to which relational depth was mutual. I thought it was a relationship in which client and therapist provided the core conditions for each other. Dave believed more in the distinctiveness of the therapists' and clients' contributions. Some years later, he wrote that he 'felt uncomfortable' that, in our original text, we had included the suggestion that, 'in the therapeutic relationship, the depth of relationship would be experienced by *both* people' (Mearns, 2013, p. viii). Fortunately, research evidence is now available to see which of us was right; and what it

suggests is that we probably both were – and both, probably, wrong as well (see Chapter 3, this volume).

I was surprised by how well received the first edition of *Working at relational depth in counselling and psychotherapy* was. A few months prior to publication, it became one of the highest-ranked texts on the Amazon.co.uk counselling bestsellers list, and has pretty much stayed there ever since, selling around 17,000 copies by the end of 2016. The book was also adopted as a core or supplementary text on many counselling courses; was the subject of a special issue of the journal *Person-Centered and Experiential Psychotherapies* (2006, Volume 5, Issue 4); and was widely discussed and referenced in the person-centred world and beyond (with around 400 citations to date on Google Scholar). It also played a key role in helping to articulate a 'dialogical' approach to person-centred therapy (Sanders, 2012a). A series of relational depth conferences were also held; and, since its publication, Dave and I have received numerous invites to facilitate workshops on relational depth in the UK and around the world. Perhaps the success of the book came down to the fact that it really struck a chord with therapists about what was often most important in therapy: that, ultimately, what tended to make the difference was not the use of particular techniques, manuals or measures, but a deeply human and humanising relationship.

For me, one of the most gratifying responses to the book was the number of people who went on to develop doctoral- or master's-level research projects on the topic of relational depth (see box on Research on relational depth, below). Much of this was presented or reviewed in a new text, *Relational depth: New perspectives and developments* (Knox et al., 2013). This book, itself, was co-edited by a number of ex-doctoral students (Rosanne Knox, David Murphy and Sue Wiggins), and contains a chapter reviewing the research to that date (Cooper, 2013b). With research on relational depth, and particularly when it's quantitative (i.e., number-based), there is always the danger of losing the essence of what you are trying to study, because you are turning it into something that is defined, measurable and generalised (like trying to catch a butterfly and killing it in the process: Connelly, 2009). But, on the other hand, without research and inquiry, there is the danger that relational depth is not taken seriously in the wider academic, clinical and policy-making spheres. More importantly, perhaps, there is the risk that an understanding of relational depth stagnates and becomes dogmatic, rather than evolving, changing and growing. For me, one of the things that I love most about relational depth is that we do not know the answers: that there are so many 'genuinely unfinished openesses' (Chapter 7, this volume). Relational depth is an idea, a set of questions, and there is so much else to learn. And research can help us progress along that journey. Not towards some fixed, finite understanding of what moments of meeting are, but

into an ever more complex, deeper appreciation of these pivotal experiences in life. Relational depth, as we will suggest in Chapter 3, is fundamentally about being open, and so relating deeply about relational depth means being willing to question, and explore, and revise it. That is something that can be done through personal exploration, practice and theory, but research is also another great way of questioning and revising what we think we know.

## Research on Relational Depth

Since the publication of *Working at relational depth in counselling and psychotherapy* in 2005, research in this area has flourished. Studies have included:

- Clients' experiences of relational depth: in person-centred therapy (Knox, 2008, 2011; Knox & Cooper, 2010, 2011; Tsaoussi, 2014), cognitive analytic therapy (Morris, 2012), mixed therapies (McMillan & McLeod, 2006; Omielan, 2009; Rooney, 2017), online therapy (Treasor, 2017), and school counselling (Gurvitz, 2017).
- Therapists' experiences of relational depth: person-centred therapists (Cooper, 2005b; Loy, 2012), psychologists (Morris, 2009), integrative therapists and trainers (Rooney, 2017), therapists working with learning-disabled clients (MacLeod, 2013), and experiences of relational depth in groups (Wyatt, 2013).
- Therapists' perceptions of factors and methods that facilitate the emergence of relational depth (Baker, 2016; Tangen & Cashwell, 2016).
- Trainee therapists' experiences of relational depth on their courses (Connelly, 2009).
- Quantitative surveys of clients' and therapists' attitudes towards, and experiences of, relational depth in therapy (Leung, 2008).
- Matching between therapist' and clients' experiences of relational depth/connection (Cooper, 2012; Frzina, 2011; Rooney, 2017).
- The development of measures of relational depth (Di Malta, 2016; Wiggins, 2007, 2011; Wiggins et al., 2012).
- Discourse analysis of moments of in-depth connection (Rooney, 2017).

The findings from these studies, up to 2013, are summarised in Cooper (2013b). They are also integrated, where appropriate, into the present text.

Not everyone liked relational depth. In particular it was criticised by advocates of a more classical, non-directive person-centred approach, for being too directive and therapist-centred (Wilders, 2013). Wilders, for instance, argued that when Dave says to Dominic, 'Dom, be here, be here *drunk*, but don't play fucking games with me' (see pages 92, 96, Chapter 5, this volume), he was asking the client to meet him in *his*



world, rather than empathically and unconditionally entering Dom's own lived-reality. No doubt, there was some truth to this criticism: what Dave and I were describing, at least to some extent, did differ from a classical client-centred stance (see below). But did that matter? At the time, I felt a bit upset by the suggestion that what we were proposing lay outside the person-centred field. However, with the increasing acknowledgement of multiple tribes within the person-centred nation (Sanders, 2012b), that criticism seems to have dissipated. And, today, the question of whether a therapy is person-centred or not seems much less important to me than the question of whether it helps clients – whatever the label that is applied to it.

A year or so after the publication of *Working at relational depth in counselling and psychotherapy*, Dave retired from his professorship at the University of Strathclyde. I was really sorry that we did not have more time to work together, but I also knew that it was the right decision for him. As part of this, Dave made a clean break with the world of counselling and psychotherapy – he wanted the new generation of trainers and therapists to get on with it in their own way – and instead focused his energies on other passions in his life, like being a grandfather, touring the Scottish Highlands, and writing action novels featuring Glaswegian senior citizens (see *Smoky bacon crisps: Finding the edge of life* and *Shadow state*).

As a consequence of this, and with his blessing, Dave has left me to do this new edition of *Working at relational depth in counselling and psychotherapy* on my own. In fact, in any case, Dave had mixed feelings about a new edition: he felt we had said what we needed to say. But I was keen to update the book. The ideas, for me, are so important, so integral to our field, that I wanted to keep the book alive; and that meant ensuring that the text was up to date and informed by the latest available thinking and evidence.

## About the Second Edition

So what's new in this edition, written 13 years on from the first? Perhaps the first thing to say is that I have tried very hard to keep the original tone – accessible, personal and passionate – and not to turn it into the kind of structured, densely referenced text that I am more accustomed to writing (e.g., Cooper, 2008, 2017). Dave brought a poetry, richness and holism to the first edition that, I think, made it so good, and I have tried, as far as possible, to maintain that. As part of that, I have left alone the chapters that Dave primarily wrote (Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 8) – aside from the odd tweak or addition to fit in with the newly revised structure. Where I have added in new material of my own, I have tried to ensure that it is easily digestible, personally reflective, and well-illustrated.

I have also tried to add in more clinical material, covering a wider diversity of clients than in the original text.

At the same time, one of the main revisions for this new edition has been to update the research evidence, and to add in new findings, where appropriate. This is partly the new research on relational depth, introduced above (see box: Research on relational depth). Such research has played a key role in developing an understanding of the experience and impact of relational depth, as well as the factors that can facilitate (and inhibit) its emergence (see, in particular, Chapters 4 and 7). This research evidence is particularly valuable because much of it comes directly from the perspective and experiences of clients. In addition, this new edition draws on the growing body of evidence from the psychological, neuroscience and epidemiological fields, which demonstrates the striking relationship between interpersonal processes and mental health (see, in particular, Chapters 1 and 2).

Another change for this second edition is that some of the more rhetorical elements of the original text have been toned down. When I worked on the first edition of this book, I firmly believed that 'It's the relationship that heals' (Yalom, 1989, p. 91). Now, I'm not so sure. Paradoxically, my belief in the centrality of the relationship (as well as my immersion in the therapy evidence-base: Cooper, 2008) took me in the direction of *pluralism* (Cooper & McLeod, 2011), which holds that the therapeutic encounter should always be tailored to the unique needs of the individual client (see Chapter 3, this volume). And, to the extent that different clients are likely to want different things from therapy, it can never be claimed that any *one* thing – relational depth or anything else – is *the* healing agent in therapy. This is not to downplay the importance of relational connection. I firmly believe that, in many instances, it may be the key factor that facilitates change; but in other instances it may not be, and clients may also do very well with techniques, or interpretations, or wholly impersonal methods like online tools. So, today, I would say that deep relational encounters can be incredibly healing for many clients, but they are also not the be-all and end-all of therapy. This change in perspective should be apparent throughout the book.

There are also some minor changes to the formatting of this second edition to try to make the overall narrative more coherent. This includes moving some of the sections around, introducing a few text boxes, and revising some of the terminology.

## Relational Depth: Some Frequently Asked Questions

Over the years – across workshops, lectures and informal discussions – a number of common questions have been asked about relational depth.

This preface seemed a good place to try to address them, to attempt to pre-empt any misunderstandings that might emerge as readers work their way through the book.

What is relational depth?

It's a state of profound contact and engagement between people (see Chapter 3).

So is that something that happens at specific moments, or an ongoing quality of a relationship?

Both. As we explain in Chapters 3 and 4, relational depth can refer to particular *moments* of in-depth encounter (e.g., 'There was a real instance of relational depth with my client today'), and it can also refer to a *relationship* in which there is an ongoing depth of connection (e.g., 'There's a relational depth between my client and me'). This is like the distinction between an 'intimate interaction' and an ongoing 'intimate relationship' (Prager & Roberts, 2004). Of course, moments of relational depth can be considered the 'essential building blocks' of a deep relationship, but they are not the whole thing (cf., Prager & Roberts, 2004, p. 46). For instance, you may feel deeply connected to someone even though you hardly ever see them. Likewise, it's possible to have very intense moments of connection with someone without ever forming a deep, ongoing closeness.

Are moments of relational depth distinctive from 'everyday experiencing', or is there a continuum from shallower to deeper relating?

The question here is whether experiences of relational depth are a *threshold* phenomenon (like being pregnant, where it's either present or not), or a *gradient* phenomenon (like hunger, where you can have more or less of it on a continuum). In this book, we tend to talk about experiences of relational depth as discrete, threshold phenomena. However, what research there is suggests that it is probably closer to a gradient phenomenon. When people are asked, for instance, to rate the depth of relating at particular moments, there is a smooth continuum from deeper to shallower rating, rather than a discrete cut-off between in-depth moments and all the others (Cooper, 2012; Sue Price, personal communication, 5 November, 2016). What we term 'moments of relational depth', then, could probably be more accurately described as moments when the strength of relating is particularly deep.

However, these moments of very deep relating seem to be so powerful and memorable that people often remember them as discrete, threshold-like events.

Is relational depth only relevant to therapy?

No. It can probably be experienced in all walks of life, and particularly with partners and friends; but this book specifically focuses on relational depth in counselling and psychotherapy.

And what about in groups? Can you have 'group relational depth'?

Yes, and Wyatt (2013) has researched and written about this. However, in this book we focus primarily on relational depth in the one-to-one therapeutic encounter.

Can relational depth happen in short-term therapy?

As the client study of Dominic (Chapter 5) suggests, yes. Nonetheless, research also shows that the longer the therapeutic relationship, the more likely it is that there will be moments of in-depth connection (Di Malta, 2016; Leung, 2008).

Does relational depth only happen in person-centred therapy?

No. Research shows, for instance, that clients in cognitive analytic therapy also experience relational depth (Morris, 2012), as do therapists and clients in many other orientations (Di Malta, 2016; Leung, 2008). Relational depth, then, can be considered a 'common factor' across a range of therapies.

OK, but does 'relational depth' really say anything new? Isn't it all there in Rogers' writings anyway?

Yes and no. As Steve Cox rightly puts it, the concept of relational depth is inherent in Rogers, but what we have tried to do is to offer a language and a foundation that 'firms up previously held ideas about relational interactions' (Cox, 2009, p. 219). And, of course, there are many different aspects of Rogers' writings that can be developed: for

instance, his 'prizing' on internal motivations (e.g., Miller, 1983), his focus on emotions (e.g., Elliott et al., 2004), or his beliefs about non-directivity in therapy (e.g., Brodley, 2006). So, in our work on relational depth, what we have done is to take forward the relational elements of Rogers' work and link it with other streams of dialogical and interpersonal thinking.

So is a 'relational depth' therapy any different from 'usual' person-centred therapy?

It depends what you mean by 'usual'. These days, as we said above, most people would agree that there isn't any one, standard person-centred therapy; it's a diverse nation with many different tribes (Sanders, 2012b).

However, if what you mean by 'usual' is a classical, non-directive approach (e.g., Merry, 2012), then a relational, depth-informed approach is a bit different. With the latter, there's a particular emphasis on meeting clients in a two-way, interpersonal dialogue, as opposed to primarily providing for clients a more one-way, reflective space. So, for instance, therapists might be more likely to draw on their own experiences and perceptions, becoming a distinctive 'other' to their clients. Similarly, rather than wholly focusing the work around a non-directive, 'empathic understanding response process' (Freire, 2007), therapists might engage with their clients in a variety of different ways. For example, they might ask questions, probe, suggest exercises, and maybe even offer advice, whatever is seen as having the potential to deepen the level of relational engagement. In addition, because of its focus on genuine human interaction and affirmation, a relational depth-informed therapy might move beyond a 'non-judgemental "acceptance" of the client to a more active, intentional prizing of their being-in-the-world: not just a "however they experience the world is fine", but a deliberate affirmation of their being in all its uniqueness' (Cooper, 2013c, p. 142). In Chapter 1, we will see how these differences can be traced back to subtly different assumptions about human beings' relational needs.

But you can't make relational depth happen, can you?

No, you can't. Partly because it requires two people to make it happen; partly because you can't relate deeply to someone if you're trying to *do* something to them; and partly because clients are likely to 'push back' if they feel pressurised or manipulated (see Chapter 7). But, as a therapist, you may be able to create the conditions when relational depth is more likely to be reached, and that is the focus of our book.

## Does relational depth need words?

No. As you will see in this book (Rick and Dave, Chapter 6; Grace and Anne, Chapter 3), some of the most powerful experiences of relational depth can happen nonverbally.

## Just because one person is experiencing relational depth, does that mean the other one is too?

Research suggests that experiences of relational depth *can* be shared (Cooper, 2012; Rooney, 2017), but that is not always the case. In fact, Rooney found that only about one in three moments of deep connection, as identified by clients, were also identified as such by the therapist. On the other hand, Mick (Cooper, 2012) found about 45 per cent overlap between clients' and therapists' ratings of the depth of connection. What this suggests is that when therapists are experiencing relational depth with their clients, it is more likely that clients will be experiencing this too, but there is no guarantee that this will be the case.

## Surely it would be too much if people were relating at depth all the time?

Yes, agreed. Buber (1958), the existential philosopher, says that we will always move in and out of deep relating (what he calls the 'I-Thou' stance, see Chapter 3, this volume), and that we need to have that distance in our lives as well as the closeness. But if we do not have *any* experiences of relational depth in our lives, that is where problems can start. We'll explore this much more fully in Chapter 2.

## But isn't there a downside to relational depth? For instance, couldn't it make clients overly dependent?

Findings here are mixed. Therapists and clients nearly always describe experiences of relational depth in positive terms. However, there are some studies which suggest that feelings of vulnerability, anxiety or pain can be associated with that depth of connection (Connelly, 2009; Rooney, 2017; Wiggins et al., 2012). In addition, one study found that, in about a third of clients, an in-depth therapeutic relationship had some negative consequences. In particular, clients were left wanting more from their therapists, and perceived their therapists as being withholding (McMillan & McLeod, 2006). This is consistent with evidence that, in unhelpful therapeutic relationships, clients can feel 'relationally abandoned' by their therapists (Bowie et al., 2016). But, the findings of McMillan and

McLeod have not been replicated (Knox & Cooper, 2010), and it may be that such experiences are more the consequence of relational depth not being fully realised, or potential precursors to this experiencing, rather than aspects of relational depth, *per se*. Nevertheless, more research and scholarship is needed here to understand this 'shadow side' of deep encounter.

## Conclusion

I wish I could share with you, the reader, what relational depth means to me. I wish I could tell you about the deep, soul-nourishing feelings of engagement, meaning and joy that come with this depth of connection. I can't – it is an experience beyond words – but that does not mean it is not worth trying. There is an old adage about a policeman who sees a drunk looking for something under a street lamp, and asks him what he has lost. The drunk says he has lost his keys and so they both look under the street lamp together. After a while, the policeman checks with the drunk whether he has definitely lost them there and the drunk says, 'no', he has lost them in the park. So the policeman asks the drunk why he is searching under the street lamp and the drunk replies, 'Because this is where the light is'. So with relational depth: it is the park, it is the place shrouded in darkness, but it is also the place where so much of the important stuff of therapy, of life, may be residing. And we can look under the street lamp – at easily definable and measurable phenomena like therapists' verbal responses – but, in doing so, we may be focusing on only the most visible and surface-level agents of change. This book on relational depth is like taking a torch to the park to try to see more of what's out there. It's an uncertain journey, we do not know what we will find, but at least we may have a sense of looking in the right place. And while the first edition of this book can be likened to an initial foray, this time we are coming back with more torches to light our way. Of course, we will never 'catch' relational depth, hidden behind a bush like some scurrying mouse, but at least we can learn more about its habitat, its terrain. And maybe, in some fleeting moments, we will catch a glimpse of it, and stand – once again – in awe of its power, profundity and beauty. However evasive, however hard to find, it is those experiences of deep relational connection that may be the most meaningful in life, and the most significant in the therapeutic healing process.

## Acknowledgements

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Thanks, as always, to the team at Sage Publications, including Susannah Trefgarne and Rachel Burrows.



# Preface to the first edition

Dave Mearns and Mick Cooper, Glasgow, February 2005  
(minor updates by Mick Cooper, October 2017)

*Mick:* One evening, at the age of about nine or ten, my parents dragged me round to one of their friends' houses for supper. I did not like the friends very much, and liked being dragged away from my evening's television schedule even less. However, I soon became engrossed in one of the games that they had put out for my sister and me. It was a plastic board with spokes on it, and the game was to slot some plastic cogs onto the spokes such that the cogs meshed together. When they did so, the turning of one cog would lead to the turning of them all. I can still remember that feeling of all the cogs turning together – that sense of engagement and connection – and how it contrasted with the looseness of just one cog spinning on its own. When I started counselling, I was reminded of that experience, because of the sheer sense of connection that I experienced with some of my clients. It was not all the time, but at some moments I would have this sense of my client and I being deeply connected to each other: engaged, enmeshed and intertwined. It was as if, when I 'turned', I affected my clients, and, when they 'turned', they affected me. And although, at these times, the pace of the therapeutic work seemed slower, I had a deep sense of genuine human contact. Generally, after such meetings, I would come out of the sessions exhilarated. This was partly out of a relief that I seemed to be enjoying my new-found career, but also out of a sense that, at these moments of meetings, I seemed to be helping my clients in very profound ways. Many years later, and after many theoretical and empirical excursions, I am aware that this desire to connect with my clients is still at the heart of my therapeutic work: nothing, it seems to me, has more healing potential.

*Dave*: 'Will you stop fuckin' loving me!' bellowed Peter, not quite loud enough for anyone to hear because, on that Saturday morning, the 'List D' school (a residential school for young offenders) was empty of anyone but some domestic staff, me and Peter, a boy who had become 14 years old that morning.

I had known it was his birthday and he would 'celebrate' it alone, apart from my greeting and the box of sweets I had bought him. All the other 94 boys were on weekend leave – 75 per cent in the parental home and the others with relatives or friends. Some of the boys had nowhere to go but went with other boys. Peter used to be invited but he had always refused, so they stopped asking him. 'I don't like families – stuff their families', he said. His view about families wasn't surprising – his father was serving life for killing his mother.

Bringing the sweets was a misjudgement, and yet it wasn't. Peter had experienced it as 'loving' him and he didn't want that, or at least part of him didn't want it. The other part of him got stuck into the sweets and offered me one.

That began what, for both of us, was 'Peter's Day'. I told him that he was stuck with me for the day and that I was stuck with him because I was the only staff on duty and he was the only boy. I asked him what he wanted to do that day, knowing that he would give the stock response, 'Dunno' – anything else would be to give too much. 'No, seriously', I said, 'we'll do *anything* you want to do today, providing it's possible, and legal.' It was as well to add the 'legal' because, despite his slender age, Peter had 27 previous convictions and those only recorded his failures.

He looked me straight in the face – in truth he liked me a lot and I liked him. But the secret was not to openly *show* it; that's why the sweets partially annoyed him. 'Anything?', he repeated. 'Anything', I confirmed. 'OK', he said, 'first we'll go to your Students' Union and play snooker then we'll go to the pub at lunch time.' I saw the smallest smirk at the edge of his mouth. 'OK, the café', he said. 'Then, we'll go to the game.' For a moment I wondered if he would be prepared to accept the idea of watching my football team play but that was a false hope – it had to be Glasgow Rangers, of course. That raised a slight problem because their game was against Celtic and it would be a sell-out. 'After the game we can have dinner in a posh restaurant and go on to the casino... OK, I'll settle for a fish supper and back to school!' One of the things Peter and I used well together was our humour.

The day, in the words of the local vernacular, was 'pure dead brilliant'. Some of the students in the Union looked down their noses at this raucous 14-year-old but they kept looking over at our table admiring his skilful play. He beat me by seven frames to one – 'I gave you one', he said, 'I felt sorry for you.' 'I won it fair and square', I retorted; 'I was brilliant in that frame.' The café meal was great, particularly our competition to see who could eat most bowls of ice cream – again Peter won – but this time only by four to three and a half.

It was at the football game that I surpassed myself and earned admiration even from Peter. We walked past all the normal turnstiles to one marked 'complimentary tickets' where we collected two tickets in my name. Early in the morning I had phoned a friend who played for the football team I supported and asked him to fix two tickets for me, but not for his game – he phoned another friend, etc. The tickets were for the Centre Stand, right beside the directors' box. Peter's mouth fell open as soon as we went in and it stayed open most of the afternoon as he kept pointing out injured heroes a few feet away in the directors' box.

His team won 4–2 and we got our fish suppers on the way back to the school, eating them from newspaper, as they should be eaten. Back in the school I took him to the staff room and we had tea together – it was special for boys to be in there.

I was with him at the side of his bed at the end of the day as I had been at the beginning. 'Good night Peter', I said. 'Thanks, Dave', said Peter and he smiled at me. I smiled back at him and left quickly before the frog in my throat reached my eyes.

People like Peter taught me a lot about psychotherapy before I even became a therapist. No matter how 'damaged' they are, there is always a part of them – sometimes a very small part – that does indeed want to be in relationship, even wanting to be loved. The secret is to meet them on their terms.

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Across time and place, and under various different guises, philosophers (e.g., Buber, 1947), psychotherapists (e.g., Laing, 1965), psychologists (e.g., Reis et al., 2004) and many other thinkers (e.g., Bohm, 1996) have attempted to describe an in-depth mode of relating in which two individuals experience a great sense of connectedness with each other. Martin Buber (1947), for instance, has written about moments of 'genuine dialogue' in which 'each of the participants really has in mind the other or others in their present and particular being and turns to them with the intention of establishing a living mutual relation between himself and them' (p. 37). Similarly, Judith Jordan (1991a), the feminist psychotherapist, has written about times of 'mutual intersubjectivity' in which:

[O]ne is both affecting the other and being affected by the other; one extends oneself out to the other and is also receptive to the impact of the other. There is openness to influence, emotional availability, and a constant changing pattern of responding to and affecting the other's state. There is both receptivity and active initiative toward the other. (p. 82)

Of course, it is not only academics and therapists who have attempted to describe such moments of in-depth encounter. Throughout the ages, poets, musicians, novelists, playwrights and artists have too (see, for instance, the contemporary poem 'Reach' in the box overleaf).

## REACH

In the long deep space,  
cliff-to-cliff  
or sky-to-the-depths-of-a-well,  
we touch.

Fingers feather-light but strong,  
eyes locked and faces still.

Despite the wind that almost lifts us off those cliffs.  
Despite the blinding dark of that well.

It can be heavy work  
holding the conjurings of our minds.  
The fury of those waves rushing the cut between the rocks.  
The scent of damp, dark water,  
no way out.

But we stay facing each other,  
oriented towards.

And in the stories we tell,  
climb towards the tempting crack of blue sky above the narrow well,  
walk a solid bridge between the cliffs that separate us.

(Eliza McDonnell, 2017)

In our everyday world, we also have many terms for this experience of interpersonal closeness, such as 'intimacy', 'connection', and 'bonding'. In-depth relating, then, may be an experience common across humanity, and one that many different people – in different ways – have tried to describe.

This is a book about such contact, as manifested in counselling and psychotherapy. It is about those experiences of real engagement and connection that, as our autobiographical extracts suggest, have come to be seen by both of us as the heart of a healing relationship.

The term that we will use in this book to describe these in-depth connections with others is *relational depth*. This is a term that Dave Mearns had developed in earlier texts (Mearns, 1997c, 2003a). He describes the background to the term as follows:

In 1989 Windy Dryden and I published a book entitled *Experiences of Counselling in Action*, looking at the experiences of both counsellors and clients. In the research for that book I was amazed to find how much of the

experiencing of both parties was kept hidden from the other, even in work that both saw as 'good'. When I began to look at the material that was in this 'unspoken relationship' (Mearns, 1994, 2003a) I found that most of the *really* important stuff for the client was in there. The next step was to explore the circumstances where the client might bring it out. There was only one answer to that – the client only brought the really important stuff out when they experienced 'relational depth' with their counsellor or therapist. While this is an exciting quest – to explore and to develop relational depth – the corollary to the discovery is somewhat tense: that much of what 'normally' happens in counselling and therapy hardly scrapes the surface. (Mearns, 2004b)

For the purposes of this book, our working definition of relational depth is as follows:

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.

In using the term 'depth' here, we are not wanting to imply an object-like model of the self in which a person is seen as having some deep inner core. Indeed, from a phenomenological and intersubjective standpoint, the idea that experiences reside inside a person is deeply problematic (see Boss, 1963). Rather, what we mean by 'deeper' is those things that are, phenomenologically speaking, truer and more real for a person: that coincide more fully with the actuality of their lived experiences. What we should also state here is that we do not want to attach any value judgement to the term 'depth'. In other words, we do not see it as superior to more surface ways of being or relating. Clearly, both have an important place in human lives. What we will argue, however, is that *some* depth of relating is essential for optimal human functioning, just as it is often key to the therapeutic process.

In this book, we will be using the term *relational depth* to refer both to specific *moments* of encounter and also to a particular *quality* of a relationship. This first sense we will generally write as 'moments', 'times' or 'experiences' of relational depth. Here, what we mean by 'moments of relational depth' is similar to what Stern (2004) has termed 'moments of meeting', and also has many parallels with Buber's (1947) notion of dialogue. In the second sense, however, relational depth describes not just a specific moment of encounter, but an *enduring* sense of contact and interconnection between two people. Here, there may be many *moments* of relational depth, but there are also likely to be times when there are less-intense moments of contact. Furthermore, where a deep relationship exists between two people, there may be a connection with each other that exists outside specific times of physical proximity. So, for instance, if a relational depth exists

between my sister and me, I may keep her in mind as a valuing and understanding presence. Indeed, I may actually feel her warmth and understanding even when she is not there.

Given our definition of relational depth, it should also be noted that we are seeing this as a phenomenon relevant to the whole spectrum of human encounters and not just limited to the therapist–client relationship. Hence, while this book will focus primarily on relational depth as manifested in therapy, we see this as just one context within which such in-depth meetings can take place.

The aim of this book, then, is to explore the nature of relational depth, and to outline a form of practice that has such relating at its heart. Though, as authors, we come from the fields of person-centred and existential therapy, we see the notion of relational depth as central to the work of therapists from a great many approaches, and this book is written with that diversity in mind. Indeed, it is fascinating to see the increasing numbers of practitioners from other orientations moving in the same direction (see Chapter 1).

Viewed from within the person-centred approach, our aim is to outline and develop a particularly *dialogical* approach to person-centred therapy. This is a *two-person-centred* therapy, or what Godfrey Barrett-Lennard (2005), the distinguished person-centred researcher and author, has termed a ‘client-centred relational psychotherapy’. This is an approach to person-centred therapy in which the primary focus of the work is neither on maintaining a non-directive attitude (cf., classical client-centred therapy, see Merry, 2012) nor on facilitating emotional change (cf., emotion-focused therapy, see Elliott et al., 2004), *per se*, but on encountering the client in an in-depth way and sustaining such a depth of relating.

While such a way of working may already be implicit to the practice and aims of many person-centred therapists – particularly, perhaps, in the UK – we believe it is high time to make such a stance more explicit, as person-centred therapists like Peter Schmid (2006) and Godfrey Barrett-Lennard (2005) are doing. In addition, in developing such a dialogical approach to person-centred therapy, we believe that we can incorporate some of the most exciting contemporary developments in philosophy, psychology, psychotherapy and psychoanalysis into the person-centred world, as well as creating valuable bridges with other, relational and postmodern, approaches to counselling and psychotherapy.

The book itself is divided into nine chapters. In Chapter 1, we will present an array of evidence and perspectives from philosophy, neuroscience, developmental psychology and psychotherapy which suggest that relationality is at the heart of human being. In Chapter 2, we will argue a similar point, but from the perspective of psychopathology. Here, we suggest that many forms of psychological distress are brought

about – or compounded – by a lack of close interpersonal engagement, such that in-depth relational encounters may be a critical element of successful therapeutic work. In Chapter 3 we then go on to look at what these moments of in-depth therapeutic meeting may be like, and in Chapter 4 we will turn our attention to the kind of therapeutic relationship that is characterised by an enduring sense of relational depth. Chapters 5 and 6 illustrate therapeutic work at relational depth through two case studies, and in Chapter 7 we look at how therapists might facilitate such an encounter. Chapter 8 broadens this out by looking at the wider personal development agenda for therapists, and in Chapter 9 we conclude by discussing some of the implications of our analysis.

As authors, our relative strengths, interests and backgrounds mean that we have taken the lead on different aspects of the book. Dave, with his long-standing experience as a person-centred therapist, trainer, supervisor and writer, first drafted the more practical chapters (Chapters 5, 6 and 8) as well as our final discussion (Chapter 9). Mick, on the other hand, with his background in existential and phenomenological therapy and his interests in dialogue, intersubjectivity and psychotherapy research, has taken the lead on the more theoretical and empirical chapters (Chapters 1, 2 and 3) as well as Chapter 7. Chapter 4, which suggests that relational depth can help clients explore their existential issues and concerns, was first drafted by Dave.

To ensure complete anonymity, all identifying features of the clients presented in this book have been changed, and in some instances, the 'clients' are actually an amalgam of several different case-histories. We emphasise the fact that all names are changed, lest people falsely recognise themselves.

We do not distinguish between the terms 'counselling' and 'psychotherapy' (or 'therapy') because everything we say in this book could apply to either activity under most distinctions between them.

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