

# RELATIONAL DEPTH IN THERAPY: TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT EXERCISES

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July 2012

Since the publication of *Working at relational depth in counselling and psychotherapy* by Dave Mearns and myself (Sage, 2005), I have been invited to deliver workshops on this theme across the UK. Typically, these workshops would be for one day; and usually delivered to post-qualification person-centred counsellors, or to therapists of a broadly humanistic orientation. To be honest, the first few times I delivered such workshops they were not particularly successful. A training event on relational depth promises a lot; but the reality is, given the impossibility of ‘making’ relational depth happen, and also the high level relational training most participants already had, it was not particularly easy to develop a programme of activities that would add meaningfully to what therapists already did or knew. (It was also not helped by the fact that my workshops would tend to come a few months after Dave had delivered one of his enormously charismatic and engaging ‘Masterclasses’ -- by no means an easy act to follow!).

Over time, however, I began to deliver a programme of input and exercises that were generally well received by participants. A key shift here was to be clear for myself, and for participants, that the workshop was about reflecting on, and critically examining, the phenomenon of in-depth encounter; rather than trying to ‘sell’ relational depth, or offering a ‘how to’ guide on making it happen. Such an emphasis also meant that I got much more out of the workshops, exploring with peers questions like:

- How can an in-depth connection be facilitated, if at all?
- What is the nature of an in-depth connection?
- What gets in the way of relational depth?
- What is the impact of relational depth, if anything, on therapy?
- Is relational depth the same as love?
- Do two people in a relationship experience relational depth at the same time?
- Is relational depth qualitatively different from other relational experiences?

For myself, these are all still open questions; indeed, it is my hope (and, I am sure, Dave’s) that, in future years, we will come to much better conceptualisations of in-depth encounter and its role in therapy than Dave and I attempted in *Working at relational depth*. However, these are a number of points that I continue to feel passionate about, and these will be evident in the exercises below:

- Human beings are relational beings: we are deeply affected by our encounters with others -- both in positive and negative ways.
- For *some* clients in therapy (and the ‘some’ is important to me, coming from an increasingly ‘pluralistic’ standpoint, see Cooper & McLeod, 2011)

psychological distress is fundamentally rooted in a lack of relational connectedness.

- For some clients in therapy (perhaps a few, perhaps more), the experience of a deep connectedness with a therapist has the potential to be profoundly healing.
- A flexible, interactive style of person-centred therapy -- where the therapist brings themselves in as a person -- is likely to be of greater value to some clients (and, I would suspect, most) than a rigidly reflective stance.
- Although it may not be possible to train therapists to relate at depth, they can be helped to see what they might be doing that gets in the way of it.

Based on these assumptions, the following exercises are aimed at helping participants take a few steps onwards from an initial training in person-centred and/or relational practices (see Chapters 7 and 8 of *Working at relational depth in counselling and psychotherapy*, as well as the numerous other texts on person-centred and relational practices, e.g., Cooper, Schmid, O'Hara, & Wyatt, 2007; Mearns & Thorne, 2007; Tolan, 2003) to a more focused exploration of 'relational depth' and the relational underpinnings of psychological distress and wellbeing. Although the exercises are somewhat orientated towards person-centred trainees or practitioners, I have found that participants from non-person-centred backgrounds are quite able to engage with the various exercises presented here.

The focus of these exercises is primarily on 'moments' of relational depth (see Chapter xxxx): those times in which we feel a deep sense of connection with another human being, and the relevance that this might have to therapeutic work.

The exercises, below, are presented mainly for trainers, but I have also included individual variations for readers to work through on their own. Together, the exercises here would probably take about two days, so for a one day workshop, I would only deliver some of them. Typically, after a round of introductions, a one-day workshop would start with the 'Experiencing relational depth' exercise, followed by group sharing and some input on how relational depth has been described by others. After a break, we would then go into the 'A life without relational depth' exercise, moving into a large group discussion of the relationship between distress and disconnection; and the potential relevance of relational theories of development for the practice of therapy. After lunch, I find the extended 'Strategies of disconnection' exercise a very powerful way of helping participants explore their own barriers to relational depth; and, if a group feels sufficiently willing, we will move into the relatively challenging 'Interpersonal perception' exercise, followed by large group debriefing and discussion.

Of course, the programme proposed here is only one way of using these exercises; and readers may wish to pick and choose any, some, or none of them; modify and improve them; or combine them with their own exercises. In particular, trainers may note that the above programme is relatively structured -- my own, personal, 'strategy of disconnection' (see below) for dealing with anxiety in relationships -- and others may want to adopt a more free-flowing, mutually evolving approach, particularly given the subject matter!

Obviously, with the very personal nature of some of the exercises here, ground rules around confidentiality should always be in place. Some of the exercises also have the potential to bring up quite powerful feelings of distress, and trainers should ensure that suitable support is available if they are used. As with all training workshops, participants should also be reminded that it is absolutely fine for them not

to participate in any of the exercises, or any part of any of the exercises; and they should also ensure that they only disclose as much as they feel comfortable with.

## **Reviewing relational connections**

### **Introduction**

This is a very simple exercise that can be used at the start of a workshop to warm up participants, while also introducing the idea that the quality of our relational encounters can have a powerful impact on our day-to-day being.

### **Aims**

- To help participants ‘arrive’ at a workshop.
- To generate contact and energy in a group.
- To raise participants’ awareness of how everyday relational interactions can have a powerful effect on their mood.

### **The exercise**

- *Find a partner within the group, ideally someone that you have not met before.*
- *Take 10 minutes each, in turn, to review the relational encounters that you had this morning. This may include:*
  - *‘Real’ others: e.g., your partner, the postperson.*
  - *‘Imaginary’ others: e.g., someone you were having a conversation with in your imagination.*
- *Ask yourself:*
  - *What was the quality of the connection like with that person? (e.g., good, bad, indifferent)*
  - *How did that impact you? (e.g., depressed me, energised me).*

### **Variations**

1. Participants can then be asked to feed back to the group the impact of that morning’s relational encounters.

### **Individual variation**

Take ten minutes or so to reflect on your interpersonal encounters so far today, and how this has impacted upon you.

### **Comments**

Through this exercise, participants generally notice how much of an impact relational encounters can have on their intrapersonal way of being. For instance, an argument with their partner sets them off on a bad mood; a cuddle with their son that morning gives them a warm glow in their heart. This highlights how our ‘internal’ world is not closed or cut off from others, but intrinsically connected to other people in the world.

As Heidegger (1962) and other intersubjective thinkers have put it, our being is always a 'being-in-relationship.'

## Experiencing relational depth

### Introduction

This is an exercise that I nearly always use near the beginning of a workshop on relational depth. It is very good for initiating an exploration of relational depth; as well as for generating interest, energy and relating in a group.

### Aims

- To help participants develop their awareness of the experience of relational depth.
- To help participants make a personal connection to the concept of relational depth.
- To generate discussion and critical reflection around the question of 'What is relational depth?'
- To demonstrate that relational depth is a 'real' and relatively specific phenomenon, with characteristics that are shared across many different people.
- To generate energy within a group.
- To help group participants develop their relationships with each other.

### The exercise

- *Find a partner within the group, ideally someone that you have not met before.*
- *Explore, together, the following question (15 -- 20 minutes):*  
*'If the two of you were experiencing an in-depth sense of connection with each other right now (i.e. experiencing relational depth), how would you know it? For instance:*
  - *What would you be feeling in yourself? (e.g., 'exhilarated')*
  - *What would your experience of the other person be like? (e.g., 'They would seem very open')*
  - *How would the relationship be experienced? (e.g., 'A real sense of cohesion')*
  - *What would the atmosphere be like? (e.g., 'A sense that something magical is taking place')*

*In reflecting on this, you may find it helpful to think about times in which you have experienced a deep sense of connection with another person (not necessarily within a therapeutic relationship) in your life. What was it like?*

### Variations

1. At the end of the pairs' exercise, participants can be asked to feed back to a small or large group.

2. Once pairs have had ten minutes or so to explore the experience of relational depth, they can be asked to write down all, or some of the key, characteristics of this experience. This can be helpful when pairs feed back.
3. If there is more time and the available materials, it can be very interesting to ask pairs, once they have talked/written about the experience of relational depth, to make *an image* of this experience of encounter. They can either do this on their own or with their partner (I tend to give them the option, though doing it with their partner seems more appropriate to the subject matter). I have tended to use A3 paper and crayons, though any art materials can be used. Remind pairs that this is not about making a ‘work of art’, but simply about finding some way of representing this experience for themselves. Ten to 15 minutes is usually sufficient. The images can then be shared in a larger group.
4. Once pairs have fed back their experiences of relational depth, I often input how others have described this experience (see Chapter xxx [Cooper, research]). This tends to draw participants’ attention to the many shared characteristics of this phenomenon.

### **Individual variation**

Take 15 to 20 minutes on your own to reflect on your own experiences of relating to others at depth. Write down what this was like for you, or draw an image of how it feels to meet another at depth. How closely does this match the description of relational depth presented in Chapter XXX [Cooper, research].

### **Comments**

As participants start to feed back to the larger group, I have often noticed how the ‘feel’ of the groups starts to deepen, as participants see connections between their own experiences of relational depth and those of others. I am still struck by how frequently the same words or phrases come up to describe the experience: for instance, ‘mutuality’, ‘synchronicity’, ‘trust’, ‘stillness’, ‘openness’, ‘safety’, ‘warmth’, ‘equality’, ‘no need for words’, ‘aliveness,’ ‘sense of time standing still’, ‘feeling in your stomach,’ ‘a tingling all over’. Also, some great idiosyncratic descriptions always come up: for instance, ‘soup-iness,’ ‘walking on the edge of falling in love’, ‘A feeling of holding each other’s hearts’, ‘Reading each other without words being spoken.’ For me, it really helps to affirm my belief that, although it is by no means clear what moments of relational depth are, there is something there, something that many of us seem to experience, and something that is worthy of further exploration.

## **A life without relational depth**

### **Introduction**

This is a brief exercise, but can be quite powerful (make sure participants are aware that they can opt out at any time). It is a good way of moving from the ‘Experiencing relational depth’ exercise to an exploration of the links between an *absence* of relational depth and psychological distress, as well as the implications of relational depth theory for therapeutic practice (see variations 3 and 4, below, and comments).

Indeed, if time is limited, I will just go straight to these discussion questions, and leave out the first, 'visualisation' part of the exercise.

The basic assumption underlying this exercise is that, for many of us, good interpersonal relationships are central to our psychological wellbeing (see Chapter 2 of *Working at relational depth in counselling and psychotherapy*); and that interpersonal disconnections -- as well as intrapersonal ones -- can be a primary source of psychological distress.

### **Aims**

- To help participants develop an understanding of how important relational depth may be to psychological wellbeing.
- To help participants develop their ability to empathise with clients who may be experiencing isolation and a lack of in-depth relating in their lives.

### **The exercise**

1. *Find a quiet space for yourself, sit or lie comfortably, and close your eyes (if you are happy to do so).*
2. *Imagine what it would be like to live a life without any in-depth connections to others? How would it feel? What would your life be like? In asking yourself this question, you may find it useful to think about times in your life where you have experienced such an absence. (About five minutes).*
3. *Find a partner, and take turns to share your perception of what this experience would/might be like. (About five minutes each-way).*

### **Variations**

1. As with the Experiencing relational depth exercise, participants can be invited to write a few words down after this visualisation to articulate and consolidate their perception of this experience.
2. Inviting clients to make an image of this 'world without relationships' -- again, through crayons or other art materials -- can be a powerful exercise. I generally ask clients to do this on their own, after the visualisation, and this can then be shared with their partner or with a larger group. Participants can also be asked to consider or represent, on this image, the place that a therapist might have when working with clients who are in this state of isolation (for instance, a ray of sunlight in an otherwise totally bleak landscape).
3. Invite participants to form small groups, and to discuss the extent that they agree or disagree with the hypothesis that a major cause of psychological difficulties is a lack of close relating in one's life. A good quote to start this off, based on the work of the feminist psychoanalyst Judith Jordan and her colleagues (Jordan, Walker, & Hartling, 2004), is: 'Chronic disconnection from others is the primary source of psychological distress'. Participants can be asked to take ten minutes or so to decide how true they think this is, perhaps by thinking about:
  - a. Clients they are working/have worked with.
  - b. Themselves.
4. An interesting discussion topic, if there is time, is to explore participants' views on how relational disconnection might come about in people. This can

then lead on to input on relational models of development and disconnection (see Chapter 2, *Working at relational depth in counselling and psychotherapy*).

### **Individual variation**

Take five or so minutes to reflect on what it would be like to live a life without any depth of connection to others. Write this down and/or make an image of it. To what extent do you think that people's psychological difficulties are related to a lack of interpersonal closeness?

### **Comments**

It always strikes me, when doing this exercise, how painful it is to think about a life without connection. I remember a time in my early 20s, travelling through Europe, when I had not had any meaningful connection with anyone for a few days. I was aching with pain -- a real deep, desperate yearning -- and was approaching anyone who looked like they might talk a bit of English to try and establish some connection. So a life that is consistently like that, for me, is almost too awful to contemplate, and many participants in this exercise seem to come to the same conclusion. But I do think that, for some of our clients, that is the reality of their lives -- a deep, painful, aching sense of isolation and disconnection -- and as therapists, who may be used to fairly deep connections with others in our lives, it might be easy to forget that not everyone exists in this way.

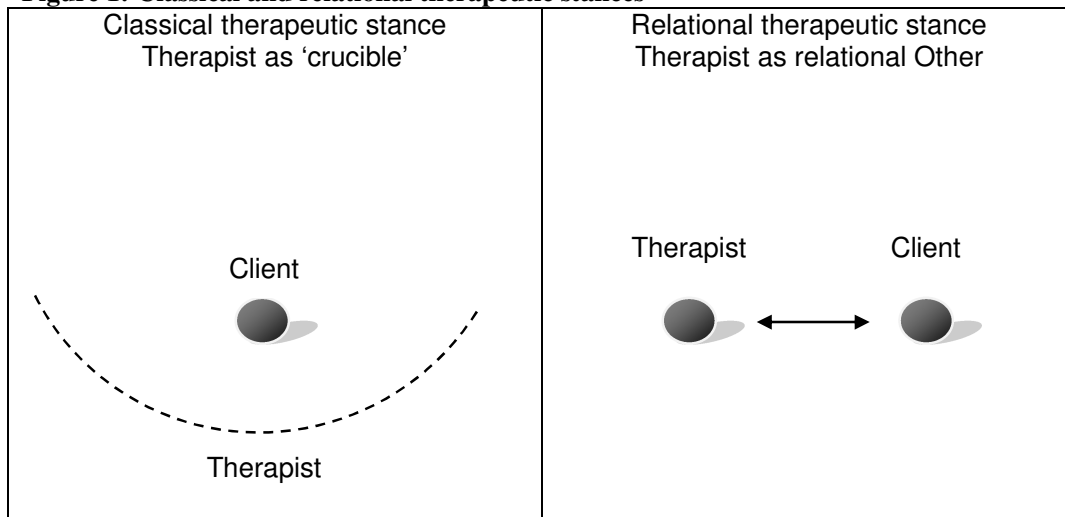
Interestingly, when doing this exercise, some people may say that they can also see the positive side of a life without any connections: a sense of freedom, liberation, not being tied down to anyone. Obviously, it is important to value such contributions, and not to work from the assumption that relational depth is, *de facto*, a good thing.

When working with mainly person-centred groups, discussions tend to pivot around the question of whether psychological distress is primarily caused by disconnections with others, or by disconnections with one's own self. Almost invariably, we come to the conclusion that the two are so interlinked that either, or both, could be the starting point for psychological difficulties. I do tend to argue, however, that in classical person-centred developmental theory (e.g., Rogers, 1951, 1959), the emphasis tends to be very much on *intra*-personal splitting -- between the self-experience and the self-concept -- with very little said, explicitly, about the potential damage that a lack of *inter*-personal relating can do. Indeed, in classical person-centred theory, I have argued, the role of the Other is primarily as the one who *disrupts* our natural, organismic growth; and this contrasts with other relational models of development (e.g., Bowlby, 1979), which speak much more explicitly about a human need for interpersonal relating and attachment. Another way I have put this is to say that, from a relational perspective, there is something that we need for our wellbeing that only others can provide: what Hycner (1991: 61) has termed a deep 'soul-nourishment.' So, from this perspective, it may not be enough for us to just like ourselves, we *need* other people to like us: positive regard is not secondary, learnt need (Rogers, 1959), but a fundamental ingredient of a satisfying and meaningful existence. For me, Martin Buber (1988: 61), the great relational philosopher, puts this most beautifully when he writes:

The human person needs confirmation because man [sic] as man needs it. . . . Sent forth from the natural domain of species into the hazard of the solitary category, surrounded by the air of chaos which came into being with him, secretly and bashfully he watches for a Yes which allows him to be and which can come to him only from one human person to another. It is from one man to another than the heavenly bread of self-being is passed.

This can, then, lead on to a discussion of how person-centred practice, from a relational depth perspective, might differ from a more classical approach (e.g., Merry, 2004; Rogers, 1942). How I tend to think about this is as follows: if we assume that the principal source of psychological distress is intrapersonal splitting, as a consequence of the existence of conditional positive regard (Rogers, 1959), then it makes absolute sense that the most healing thing we can do is to provide our clients with an unconditionally positively regarding context, in which they can begin to ‘put themselves back together again.’ However, if psychological distress is also understood in terms of real, in-the-world splits between self and others, then establishing a specific, person-to-person connection also becomes a key element of helping some clients back into health and wellbeing. This is a subtle distinction but, for me, it is like the difference between providing a ‘crucible’ for clients to do their work, versus providing a more immediate, person-to-person meeting (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Classical and relational therapeutic stances**



What does this mean in terms of actual practice? For me, a relational way of being person-centred, in contrast to a more classical one, may mean:

- bringing more of my own experiences or perceptions into the encounter with the client;
- being less of a mirror and more of an actual other with different views and beliefs;
- moving away from a therapy that is wholly orientated around an ‘empathic understanding response process’ (Freire, 2007) towards one that might involve a variety of different forms of engagement -- asking questions,



probing, giving input, maybe even offering advice -- depending on what particular clients seem to want at particular times;

- moving beyond a neutral, 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.

But are these differences really meaningful? It is at this point in workshops that I often find myself in lively disagreement with person-centred participants. Some feel that I am caricaturing the classical person-centred approach, and that they would do all these things anyway. Some simply can not see what the distinction is all about. Others, though, do get a sense that there is a subtle shift of emphasis here; and that while it is by no means an either/or dichotomy, there is some spectrum of person-centred practice that ranges from a more ‘holding’, non-directive stance to a more active, dialogical one -- and that different clients do best with different emphases at different points in time. And, indeed, I know for myself that, since studying and writing about relational ideas, I have become a different kind of therapist: more ‘just myself’ with my clients, more relaxed and informal, more willing to just ‘get stuck in’ with a client and do whatever might seem helpful at that particular point in time.

## Strategies of disconnection

### Introduction

This exercise is a way in to exploring the question of how we, as therapists, might be able to deepen our relationship with our clients. I used to try an exercise which asked therapists, in pairs (as in the Experiencing relational depth exercise), to look at how they might deepen the connection between themselves there and then. However, in general it produced quite a negative reaction, with some participants feeling that they were being pushed into an artificially ‘deep’ level of relating. An alternative track, then, was to invite participants to explore what *gets in the way of* them relating more deeply with clients, and this generally seemed to work better.

The theory behind this exercise comes from the work of Judith Jordan and colleagues (Jordan, et al., 2004), mentioned above. It starts with a paradox: evidence from the child and developmental psychology field from the evidence (see Chapter 1 of *Working at relational depth in counselling and psychotherapy*) makes it clear that human beings want, and are able, to engage deeply with others from the first moments of life. But then, how is it possible that so many of us can become so chronically disconnected from others, with all the psychological difficulties that can follow? Jordan and colleagues answer this paradox by suggesting that we may develop ‘chronic strategies of disconnection’. These are ways that we may have developed of protecting ourselves from hurts in early close relationships that then become fixed and sedimented, such that we carry on protecting ourselves from intimacy even when, as an adult, that relational depth may actually be incredibly healing. A young girl, for instance, is teased by her mother for wanting closeness and intimacy; so she learns to withdraw from connection, perhaps by removing herself physically, perhaps by detaching herself in her own head. And, as an adult, she continues to withdraw physically or psychologically from the possibility of closeness with others, even when those encounters could provide her with exactly the ‘deep soul nourishment’ that she so desperately craves.

So this exercise invites therapists to think about their own chronic strategies of disconnection, and it goes on from this to invite them to think about whether any of these strategies may be relevant in their therapeutic work. For, without doubt, we will bring into the therapeutic work who we are, and if we have ways of disconnecting from relationships in our everyday lives, there is a strong possibility that these may also turn up in our clinical work.

A personal example: as a child, if I got hurt or upset by my family, I would threaten to leave home and go sit outside the front door of our flat for what seemed like ages (though probably only five minutes or so), before boredom or hunger would take me back inside. As an adult, I can still tend to deal with personal hurt by withdrawing, and by walking away from situations when, in fact, I would often be better off confronting the problem and re-establishing connections. And I can also see how this is sometimes played out in my therapeutic practice. For instance, if a client tells me that they want to end therapy, I am sometimes very quick to agree with them that it is the best thing to do, and that it is really fine with me, rather than inviting them to spend a bit more time exploring their feelings. Essentially, what seems to happen here is that I feel a bit rejected or hurt, and I deal with it by quickly withdrawing from the situation, rather than giving things a bit more time to be worked through, and for a connection to be re-established.

### **Aims**

- To help participants develop an awareness of what might get in the way of them relating more deeply with others, and particularly their clients.

### **The exercise**

1. *Find a partner, perhaps someone you have not worked with so far.*
2. *Take 15 minutes, in turn, to explore this question (with your partner listening and facilitating your exploration):*
  - *'What are your strategies of disconnection?' I.e., what are the ways that you, in your life, pull away from deeper relating with others when, to do so, might actually be more rewarding. (e.g., 'Withdraw emotionally', 'use humour', 'Avoid physical closeness,' 'become compliant,' 'stop listening,' 'become very formal and "professional"')*
3. *Take ten minutes, together, to discuss the following question:*
  - *'To what extent might these strategies of disconnection also be present in your therapeutic work?' For instance, if you use humour to distance yourself from people in your everyday life, do you also use it with your clients?'*

### **Variations**

1. To make the last part of this exercise more interesting, and potentially more revealing, I tend not to disclose to participants that they will be asked this question until the very end of Step 2. Instead, once participants have completed the second part of the exercise they are asked, on their own, to write down the following phrase 'The ways that I tend to disconnect from other people are...' and to list their own, personal answers to it (as identified in the exercise). Once they have done this (usually five minutes or so), they

are asked to replace the term in the phrase ‘other people’ with ‘clients,’ and to consider whether any of their answers still hold true.

### **Individual variation**

Take 15 minutes or so to reflect on your own chronic strategies of disconnection. To what extent do you think these might be present in your therapeutic work?

### **Comments**

It is important to emphasise, at the start of this exercise, that participants are being asked to talk about *chronic* strategies of disconnection -- things that they do, systematically -- to pull away from deeper relating to others; and which are potentially redundant or unhelpful. So it is not about things that they do to keep themselves safe from destructive or harmful relationships, but ingrained patterns that may get in the way of them obtaining deeper, more satisfying levels of relating.

In my experience, some participants are really struck by how commonly their chronic strategies of disconnection are carried over into the therapeutic relationship, while others find very few parallels at all. Of course, both answers are totally legitimate, and it is important to make this explicit to participants, so that they do not feel that they have to search for parallels when none seem to exist. (Indeed, an alternative, and potentially more direct version of this exercise, would be to simply ask therapists how they think they might disconnect from their clients).

## **Developing embodied empathy**

### **Introduction**

This exercise seems to work wonderfully well with some people and others, quite frankly, really do not like it. It seems to work best with individuals in the initial stages of counsellor training, and particularly where they are experiencing a pressure to work in a relatively formulaic, un-spontaneous way (e.g., ‘sit upright,’ ‘reflect,’ ‘don’t ask questions’); or where they are really worried about how they ‘should’ respond to their ‘clients’. Such participants have said that they find this exercise really ‘liberating,’ and helping them feel much more enthusiastic about their work as counsellors, or counselling skills practitioners. On the other hand, some trainees, as well as some more experienced practitioners, can take quite an exception to this exercise. This seems mainly because it invites participants to work, albeit temporarily, in ways that can feel quite restrictive and unnatural.

The exercise is based on the concept of ‘embodied empathy’. This is a term I have used (Cooper, 2001; Mearns & Cooper, 2005) to describe a form of interpersonal engagement that goes beyond a purely cognitive, or even affective, understanding of someone’s world towards a full-bodied resonance with their being. I might experience, for instance, a tightness in my stomach as a client talks about a particularly frightening situation, or a pressure on the top of my head as they describe the stresses that they are under. As with relational depth, embodied empathy does not seem to be something that I can *make* happen, but it may be something that therapists can be more or less open to and, as the research would suggest (see Chapter xxx), it seems to be an important ingredient of a relationally-deep encounter.

## Aims

- To help therapists develop their capacity to empathise with their clients in an embodied way.
- To help participants develop an awareness of their physical being when they are practising therapy.
- To help therapists appreciate the value of, and develop a trust in, their own embodied experiences in relation to clients.
- To help novice therapists become more relaxed and spontaneous in their practice.

## The exercise

1. *Find a partner and a quiet space away from other pairs.*
2. *Decide who will be the talker and who will be the listener.*
3. *The talker should talk about some issue of current concern (approximately 10 minutes) which has some emotional valence (i.e., there is some emotion there, but not so much that it needs a more extended period of talking through).*
4. *The listener should do the following:*
  - *First, sit yourself as comfortably as possible. Let yourself be entirely relaxed, and don't worry about anything you have been taught about how to sit or look when you are counselling.*
  - *As the talker starts to talk, try and let yourself 'breathe in' what they are saying. Give yourself time to resonate, at a physical level, with what the talker is expressing. Just notice what you are feeling physically.*
  - *Try not to worry about what you are going to say. In fact, **don't say anything** -- aside from very brief interjections like 'mms,' 'ahas,' etc.*
  - *The only other time you should talk is if you feel some physical sensation in response to what the talker is saying. For instance, you might experience an aching in your shoulders or a sense of numbness throughout your body, and you should share this with the talker. Don't worry if it seems totally out of place, just give it a go.*
  - *You may not feel any physical resonance for the whole period, and that is fine. Just don't say anything.*
5. *Swap roles and repeat.*
6. *Take 10 minutes or so to discuss this experience:*
  - *How did it feel to listen in this way?*
  - *How did it feel to be listened to in this way?*
  - *To what extent did the physical sensations that you reflected match what the client was experiencing?*

## Comments

When facilitating this exercise, it is really important to remind participants that this is just about *trying something out*, and not a mandate on how they should practice from here on in.

When this exercise does work for participants, they can be really surprised at how accurately their own bodily experiences mirror those of the clients. This can help them to trust, more fully, their own felt reactions to clients, and to draw on them more fully in their therapeutic work -- thus deepening their level of relating. (My

favourite feedback, however, was from a Danish psychologist who, at the end of a relational workshop day, wanted to say how much she had liked this embodiment exercise. Unfortunately, she didn't get her English quite right and instead said to me, in front of a very large group of her colleagues, 'I very much like your body.' The fact that she was psychoanalytically-orientated and had been offering interpretations throughout the day made the situation even funnier!)

## **Interpersonal perception: factors that facilitate, and inhibit, connection**

### **Introduction**

This is probably the most challenging exercise here but, also, the one that has the potential to be the most rewarding and educative. In my experience, it tends to work best with groups of participants who have had previous interactions with each other -- for instance, students on the same Certificate or Diploma training course -- and where there is an opportunity for ongoing processing of what emerges from it. Having said that, I have also conducted this exercise with groups of therapists that formed just that day, and it can still produce some very useful material. Under these conditions, though, it is important to do the exercise as late on in a programme as possible, so that the time for participants to experience each other is maximised (although sufficient time for processing and reflection after the exercise is also essential). It is also essential that participants have had some basic training in therapeutic or personal development work, such that they are able to hear feedback in a non-defensive way, and to share it in a way that is 'owned' and non-critical.

The exercise is based on the premise that it is not just the things that we intentionally do -- whether consciously or unconsciously -- that get in the way of us connecting with others and our clients (as in our strategies of disconnection, above). Also, there may be things about us that are simply there, perhaps just by chance, that make others more wary of connecting with us. For instance, over the years I have come to realise that my physical presence -- as a fairly large-set man, with dark features and a fairly gruff voice -- can be quite intimidating to people, even when, actually, I might be feeling quite frightened or vulnerable myself. So, in developing our capacity to connect with others, it may be quite important to have a sense of how others experience us (see, Cooper, 2005, 2009), such that we can try and address any aspects of ourselves that inhibit contact. Of course, that does not mean that we should change who we are -- for instance, I can't change the fact that I am a large-set man -- but simply being aware of it or, perhaps, finding ways to compensate for it, may be of value: for instance, I might try to communicate my vulnerabilities more fully.

### **Aims**

- To help participants develop their awareness of aspects of themselves that might make others -- including clients -- wary of making contact with them.
- To help participants develop their awareness of aspects of themselves that might make others -- including clients -- drawn towards making contact with them.
- To deepen the level of relating and engagement within a group.

## The exercise

1. *Form into groups of four (if there are not sufficient numbers, groups of three or even two are also fine). As far as possible, try to go into groups with people that you have had some prior interaction with.*
2. *On a piece of A4 paper (landscape orientation), create a three by five grid (i.e., draw two horizontal lines, and four vertical lines, equally spaced apart) (see Figure 2). In the top row of the second to fifth column, have the name of each of your group members. In the left hand column of the second row, write: 'Perceptions of this person that make me want to connect with them...' In the left hand column of the third row, write: 'Perceptions of this person that make me wary of connecting with them...' (if there are three people in each group, have four columns; if two people, three columns).*
3. *Now, for each member of your group, take ten minutes or so to write down, in the relevant parts of the grid, what makes you drawn to, and wary of, connecting with them. In doing so, bear the following in mind:*
  - *Be clear that what you are writing down is your experiences/perception of this person, and not some objective assessment. So it is not about telling someone what their personality or character is 'really' like, but about 'owning' your personal perception or experience of them -- with an acknowledgement that someone else might experience them in a very different way.*
  - *Find a good balance between being honest and being sensitive. You will be asked to share these perceptions with the other person (although, of course, you don't have to), and given the limited time frame for the exercise, it is important that you don't open up a whole set of issues that can not be dealt with in the given time span. On the other hand, the more honest you are with someone, the more useful that is likely to be.*
  - *If you have had no contact with someone, write down your first impressions.*
4. *Now, pair up with one of the members of your group, and one of the pair should take ten minutes to share with their partner -- and discuss -- the perceptions of them that make them drawn to, and wary of, connection with them. Now take ten minutes to do this the other way round.*
5. *Now pair up with another member of your group and repeat Step 4 (this should take 20 minutes per pair). Repeat again with the final member of your group.*
6. *In a large or small group, discuss this exercise (maybe 30 minutes or so). What did you learn about yourself?*

**Figure 2: Example grid for interpersonal exercise**

	John	Ishtar	Zac	Mary
<i>Perceptions of this person that make me want to connect with them...</i>				
<i>Perceptions of this person that make me wary of connecting with them...</i>				

### Variations

1. If there is more time, each time participants pair up (Steps 4 and 5), they can be asked to begin by saying how they *think* the other person perceives them before they get the feedback.
2. The following can be a good question to put into a group or individual exploration: ‘What do you think your client sees when they see you?’

### Individual variation

Take fifteen minutes or so to write down what you think might make other people drawn towards connecting with you, and wary of connecting with you. Is there someone that you can check this out with?

### Comments

With this exercise, it is essential to remind participants that the task is to write down how they *perceive or experience* the other person, and not to be making judgements or assessments of what the other person is *actually* like. As stated above, I would not advise running this exercise with participants who can not clearly differentiate between these two things. (When I ran this exercise with a group of Greek therapists, one of the women exclaimed, ‘But how can I tell someone that they are an idiot!’ I re-emphasised to her that the exercise was about really owning one’s perceptions and experiences, and not making judgements about someone else. ‘Oh, she responded, so I should tell them that I *feel* they are an idiot!’)

Interestingly, the kinds of perceptions that people have of others that make them wary of contact are often things that, on the surface, might seem quite positive:

for instance, 'clever,' 'knowledgeable,' 'beautiful,' 'experienced' or 'confidence.' Sometimes, though, it seems that these perceptions can leave a person feeling intimidated or inferior. Participants also commonly state that they feel wary of contact with another person because they are worried that that person will judge them or think that they are 'silly'; or because they experience someone as very open, honest and direction. On the other hand, the perception of another person as 'withdrawn,' 'shy' or 'nervous' can also lead to a wariness about contact. Two physical features that come up quite often as making people wary of contact are someone being tall, and wearing glasses. 'Male' also seems to come up a lot, as does age differences, though these factors might be quite particular to a counselling context. Interestingly, too, participants often note that the features that make them wary of contact with someone are also the features that make them drawn towards contact: for instance, someone's perceived intelligence or their beauty.

## Conclusion

The above list of exercises is by no means exhaustive of the different ways in which relational depth can be explored in a workshop format. Other things that I, personally, have done for instance are to offer input on particular aspects of relational depth, such as the recent research findings (see Chapter xxx); or facilitate large group discussion on some of the relational depth-related questions identified earlier. 'Supervision groups,' where participants are asked to talk about their level of relating with specific clients can also be very worthwhile; as can presenting case studies. Most recently, I have received ethical approval from the University Ethics Committee of the University of Strathclyde to offer low cost workshops to trained and trainee therapists, in which they are invited to leave completed forms behind at the end of the workshop, for subsequent data analysis and write-up. This has provided some invaluable information, currently being analysed, on the experience and nature of relational depth.

The exercises described above, however, provide the basis for a fairly substantive exploration of relational depth, and one that has proved relatively engaging and enjoyable for most people over the years. For participants who might hope to come away from such a workshop knowing how to create relational depth with their clients, these exercises may prove disappointing. But, in my experience, by far the majority of participants know that this is an unrealistic goal: that relational depth can only be found and not made. The exercises, then, are appreciated as just some very small steps on a very long path towards deeper connections with others.

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