

Relational Depth and the Person Centred Approach*

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Quietly, almost imperceptibly, the language of ‘Relational Depth’ has entered the world of the Person Centred Approach, as evidenced in recent issues of the PCQ. In the August 2006 edition, for example, reference was made to Relational Depth in the front page article by Simon Spence, *The Amateur Supervisor*; on page fifteen in Nick Baker’s article *Relational Depth: How do we assess it?*, and on the back page, a report on behalf of the BAPCA coordinating group on *Meeting at Relational Depth*, an event that celebrated the work of Dave Mearns in May 2006. I have some serious disquiet about whether or not the concept of Relational Depth is offering anything new to Person-Centred theory and practice, or whether it is a move away from Person Centred therapy. This is what I would like to explore here and specifically the question, what is Relational Depth and what does it have in common with Person Centred counselling and psychotherapy?

This question is made especially hard to answer since in their book entitled *Working With Relational Depth in Counselling and Psychotherapy* (2005) the authors, Dave Mearns and Mick Cooper, oscillate between on the one hand writing about the Person Centred Approach as though it were a separate discipline and on the other hand, suggesting that their work is not only part of, but is also an advancement of, the Person Centred Approach. For example, they state ‘with respect to the person-centred approach, the position being outlined here does not contradict the Rogerian hypothesis’ (2005, p.9). The view of relational depth being connected to the Person Centred Approach, and in particular to Person Centred Therapy, is evident when they state that ‘we are also hoping to present a new slant on the training and practice of person-centred therapy’ (ibid., p.113). To understand where and how Relational Depth at times appears

to merge with, and at other times is at clear variance with the Person Centred Approach, a good place to start is by looking again at the theory behind Person Centred Therapy.

Rogers' proposition that all living beings have a constructive 'for growth' tendency is the rationale behind the Person Centred trust in our clients ability to be in control of the direction, pace, and content of therapy (Rogers, 1959). Rogers believed 'it is the client who knows what hurts, what directions to go' (1961: 11). His Theory of Personality (1959: 221 - 235) has as its central proposition the concept of the actualising tendency in which he describes 'the human infant...[as having] an inherent motivational system' (ibid. p.222)) and the idea that it is the internalisation of external value judgements that is the main cause of psychological harm (p.224).

It is as a consequence of this theory that Person Centred practitioners seek to avoid compounding psychological harm toward our clients by creating a suitable environment, through the congruent provision of empathy and unconditional positive regard, so that our clients may find their own answers to their own questions, and in their own time and place. This radical departure from other therapist-led approaches is absolutely fundamental to the Person Centred Approach, as the client is implicitly and explicitly trusted to be in control of the direction, pace, and content of her or his own therapy. Any external judgement or directivity by a therapist, no matter how kind or seemingly benign its intent, would be counter-therapeutic. It would be an expression of conditional regard and would be an obstruction in the path of the client accessing and trusting her or his own internal locus of evaluation. In summary, the theoretical proposition of the Person Centred Approach is a trust in the actualising tendency, and a belief that it is the potency in a specific psychological environment, which facilitates clients to find their own path to health.

In looking at Relational Depth, and in considering whether it is a part of the Person Centred Approach, it follows that we would need to know whether Relational Depth accepts

these basic theoretical propositions of the Person Centred Approach. Answering this question however is not as easy as it seems. At best I suggest that Relational Depth is confused on this issue. The following statements suggest that Mearns and Cooper do agree that clients should be in control of their own therapy. (ibid.).

(If we are trying to *do* something to someone, we are not genuinely meeting that Other, rather our own needs and desires' (p. 113).

'To fully encounter a client in an in-depth way means letting go of our agenda and being with him, in whichever way he is and in whatever direction he wants to go' (p. 72).

'It is not my place to *push* him [this refers to the client Dominic] towards more fully owning this part of his self. If that is to happen, it will happen faster if I can stay close to him rather than seek to manipulate his process' (p. 86) (italics in original)

These comments re-state the fundamental ideas inherent in Person Centred Therapy.

However, other suggested ways of working proposed by the authors are in direct conflict with the above ideas. (2005)

'what you are actually trying to do is to break that non-communicative cycle' (p. 102)

'an aim in the work was to try to keep the patient grounded' (p. 103)

'I invite him to go back into his experiencing, always aware that he may well have had enough for now' (p. 86)

'At that moment I decided that I would exert myself in our relationship' (p. 109)

Here Mearns and Cooper express a view of the therapist as 'expert', directing and leading the client. It is clear that the ideas expressed through these statements are in direct conflict with the theory and practice of Person Centred Therapy. These more directive statements from Mearns and Cooper, when considered alongside their earlier cited quotes, above, in which the therapist is invited by the authors to 'let go' of agendas and to 'be with' the client, to follow the client, rather than pushing or leading him or her, demonstrate Mearns and

Coopers tendency, apparent throughout the book, to contradict themselves. In comparing these different attitudes, it would appear that Relational Depth lacks any coherent theory, that it is unsure whether to trust the client and follow her or his process, as in Person Centred theory, (Rogers 1959) or whether to wrest control of the therapy away from the client, offering instead, external direction and judgements. Although Mearns and Cooper do seem to accept many of the ideas of the Person Centred Approach, the core of their departure from the PCA lies in this distinction: whereas the sole aim of Person Centred therapy is for the practitioner to congruently offer empathy and unconditional positive regard in relationship with the client, by contrast, the major aim of Relational Depth is to create a relationship of ‘Relational Depth’.

Mearns and Cooper describe this departure from the Person Centred Approach in their own words, first explaining Person Centred practice through an explanation of Person Centred theory.

If we start from the classical Rogerian (1959) position that the need for positive regard is a key driving force in human development – leading people to deny and distort those self-experiences that are inconsistent with the ‘positive regard complex’ then it makes absolute sense that the therapist’s practice should revolve around the provision of unconditional positive regard to the client (p. 9)

They then go on to explain their rationale for their move away from this approach.

If we also hold, however, that human beings have a fundamental need for something more inter-active, and that psychological difficulties arise when a person’s capacity to engage with others becomes disrupted...then this points towards a therapeutic approach in which dialogue and interaction take more centre stage (ibid.)

Having explained their rationale for offering something other than the core conditions of congruence, empathy and unconditional positive regard, Mearns and Cooper go on to describe how their approach to therapy differs in practice, and that they offer a therapy in which ‘it is the *encounter* between the therapist and client, rather than the *provision* of a particular set of conditions *for* the client, that is conceptualised as being key to the healing process’ (ibid.) (italics in original). Although Mearns and Cooper may believe there is therapeutic benefit in the concept of ‘encounter’, it is surprising that their rationale for this way of working is their wish to create ‘dialogue’ and ‘interaction’, since these behaviours are among the outcomes of offering Person Centred therapy within context of the six core conditions (Rogers : 1959).

Out of the multitude of ways in which people adapt or respond to conditions of worth, Mearns and Coopers have chosen to isolate one such response, that of distancing or failure to relate in a deep or intimate way with others, as being a central psychological problem. They state, ‘many forms of psychological distress may have at their root a lack – or absence – of in-depth relating, either with others or with oneself’(p.33). Mearns and Cooper do acknowledge that the ability to relate intimately is not absent in all clients. They also acknowledge that a ‘relational depth’ relationship is not appropriate to all clients. At the same they argue that a major necessity for therapists is to be prepared, and to enter or facilitate this type of relationship wherever possible. Mearns and Cooper’s elevation of emotional distancing into something that they describe as the most significant of psychological problems, leads them to, at times, ditch the core conditions and to replace Person Centred therapy with a very different kind of therapy. It might even be argued, that

because Mearns and Cooper do not suggest offering Relational Depth to *all* clients, there is a need for the Relational Depth therapist to remain in their own frame of reference in order to assess whether a particular client may, at a given time, be ready for this type of encounter. This runs counter to a notion of empathy, when ‘true empathy is always free of any evaluative or diagnostic quality’ (Rogers, 1980: 154).

However the differences between Person Centred therapy and Relational Depth therapy are most apparent when the Relational Depth therapist ditches empathy and unconditional positive regard in an attempt to create a ‘Relational Depth’ encounter. This leads to a variety of idiosyncratic behaviours on the part of the therapist, which may at times be erratic, confrontative, and controlling, as in the examples they give pertaining to the clients ‘Rick’ and ‘Dominic’. (Mearns & Cooper, 2005: chapters 98 and 71). Here, Mearns and Cooper offer, as positive (sic) examples, descriptions of clients being bullied, clients being berated, insisting on entering the space of a client who expressly did not want this, and breaching client confidentiality without permission. In other words, therapists are lauded for confronting their clients with behaviours and interventions, which, in Person Centred terms, offer conditional or negative, regard, and diminish the clients’ ability to develop their own *internal* locus of evaluation.

In the time-worn tradition of ‘the therapist knows best’ the Relational Depth therapist, *in practice* assumes the right to confront or invade or challenge clients if they feel that this ‘encounter’ will help to create a relationship of ‘depth’. Whereas people with a strong internal locus of evaluation, or in a situations where they do not feel vulnerable, might feel free to resist or reject negative or bullying behaviour, clients who feel vulnerable in the relationship and with under-developed internal locus of evaluation, or deeply held conditions of worth, might not only bow to the

therapists control, but also feel apologetic or grateful to the therapist in response to the therapists conditionality.

The section below of Mearns work with the client 'Dominic' is a good example of this dynamic in action

Dominic 8: Like this isn't just a 'game' to you?

Dave 8: I think you *know* that Dom. In fact I *know* you know that Dom

Dominic 9: Yes. 'sober me' knows it, but does 'drunk me'?

Dave 9: I don't know. Does he? Do you?

Dominic 10: Big Question. Maybe I'll need another vodka before I can answer that.

Dave 10: Dom, *be* here, be here *drunk*, but don't play fucking games with me.

Neither you nor I deserve that.

Dominic 11: [Silence]

Dave 11: [Silence]

Dominic 12: You're really *serious* about this, aren't you?

Dave 12: As ever.

Dominic 13: I'm sorry.

Dave 13: Apology accepted. Where shall we start today? (ibid.: 77)

Mearns, in describing his own input in this exchange, writes, 'it expresses a powerful judgement in response to Dominic's glib *Dominic 10.*' and goes on to discuss the power of providing a presence that is 'counter'.

Apart from the obvious negative regard toward Dominic's *perceived* glibness, two other things strike me about this exchange. One is Mearns failure (Dave 13) to recognise that Dominic had *already* started that day. The second is I am struck by Mearns insistence that he, and not his client, be in control of the session. Acceptance

by both men of Mearns' dominance over the content and direction of the therapy can be clearly seen in *Dominic 13* and even more so, in Dave's response 'Apology accepted.'

This therapy excerpt demonstrates very clearly the departure of Relational Depth from the Person Centred Approach. It offers a counter approach to that of the Person Centred approach – one that is acceptant of the therapists control over the client, of negative regard, conditionality and a judgemental attitude. Had Dominic been met by a therapist offering Person Centred Therapy the above exchange might have gone something like this;

Dominic 8: Like this isn't just a 'game' to you?

Therapist 8: Like perhaps I'm serious?

Dominic 9: Yes. 'Sober me' knows it, but does 'drunk me'?

Therapist 9: 'Sober you' trusts me, trusts that I'm not playing a game, but 'drunk you' isn't so sure.

Dominic 10: Big Question. Maybe I'll need another vodka before I can answer that.

Therapist 10: This might be too big a question to answer without taking another drink first.

In my own experience of working with alcohol using clients this type of exploration is not at all uncommon, since being drunk may offer different opportunities for expression, and clients may feel very different, in comparison to being sober. In Dominic's case, he felt less trusting when drunk, and had been expressing this to Dave before being re-directed by Dave away from his own internal locus of evaluation. It is one thing for a Person Centred practitioner to struggle with finding UPR within him or herself, but quite another thing to hold up negative regard as a

model for therapy. Although Mearns and Cooper do not persistently do that in their description of Relational Depth (in fact they often offer beautiful descriptions of UPR to the contrary), they certainly consider these behaviours as, at times, acceptable and even necessary in pursuance of Relational Depth. Instead of helping Person Centred therapists to look inwards, and to ask ourselves, ‘what has got in the way of my empathy?’ ‘why was I unable to hold UPR for a client?’, Relational Depth at times gives free licence to therapists to offer suggestions, change the direction of the therapy, criticise, or, as in the example of Dominic, above, berate clients.

I say that ‘at times’ this leads to a different type of therapy, because part of the muddle that is Relational Depth is that *often* Mearns and Cooper’s description of ‘Relational Depth’ is in fact only a description of Person Centred therapy. For example, they suggest that, ‘(L)istening’ to clients...involves more than providing them with an opportunity to talk. What we mean is really *attending* to the client, and attuning to their being, at an emotional, cognitive and embodied level’ (p.119) (italics in original). One of the clients confirms this saying...

He [the therapist] had to put up with all the rest of my shit.
Instead of being repelled, he even seemed interested in my shit,
like he tried to *meet* the evil me. In the end, that led me to meet
that part of me as well and understand how I had become that
way (p.55)

It may be that Mearns and Cooper fail to see that they are describing Person Centred therapy only because they caricature Person Centred Therapy as a narrow set of skills. For example, comparing Relational Depth with Person Centred therapy they state that the Relational Depth therapist ‘is not simply there as a ‘container’ for the therapeutic work or as an embodiment of a particular set of conditions. Rather, *she is*

there as a real and genuine human being' (p.9) (italics added). This implies that the Person-Centred Therapist working within the core conditions is not also real and genuine. Indeed, throughout their work Mearns and Cooper suggest that realness and spontaneity are new ways of offering therapy that are consistent, not with Person Centred therapy, but with Relational Depth. Somehow Mearns and Cooper have failed to understand, or to experience for themselves, that when we, as real and genuine human beings, congruently offer empathy and unconditional positive regard to an other, then the more, not less, likely we are to have intimacy and closeness with our clients.

Rogers beautifully describes optimal Person Centred meeting at depth with our clients, if all the core conditions are present.

If the therapy were optimal, intensive as well as extensive, then it would mean that the therapist has been able to enter into an intensely personal and subjective relationship with the client – relating not as a scientist to an object of study, not as a physician expecting to diagnose and cure, but as a person to a person (1961:184)

For Rogers a more intimate and deeper relationship was not to be thrust upon clients following a therapist's diagnosis that this was what the client needed, as is implied in Mearns and Coopers work. Rather, it was something that emerged naturally as the consequence of offering a congruent, empathic, and unconditionally accepting environment. 'It means that therapist has been comfortable in entering this relationship fully, without knowing cognitively where it will lead, satisfied with providing a climate which will permit the client the utmost freedom to become himself' (1961: 185).

Perhaps because Mearns and Cooper have failed to recognise how deeply relational Person Centred therapy can be, they constantly give examples of Person Centred therapy without seeming to realise that this is what they are doing. Consequently their book is littered with descriptions of concepts within Person Centred Theory under different names, and as though these were new innovative ideas. For example ‘To work with the dynamics within the person both sides of the conflict need to be engaged equally’ (2005:123) This is a description of traditional, or classical Person centred engagement, but which Mearns and Cooper describe as ‘modern Person Centred Theory....of the interaction of ‘growthful’ configurations and ‘not for growth’ configurations...’

Although the language used by Mearns and Cooper is new, the concept of engaging equally with all the different parts of a client is integral to person Centred therapy. Rogers expanded on this concept in his description of the core condition of unconditional positive regard as follow (Rogers 1989,

‘To the extent that the therapist finds himself experiencing a warm acceptance of *each aspect* (my italics - SW) of the clients experience as being a part of that client, he is experiencing unconditional positive regard....It means there are no *conditions* (italics in the original) of acceptance, no feeling of “I like you only *if* you are thus and so.”.... It is at the opposite pole from a selective evaluating attitude... It involves as much a feeling of acceptance for the client’s expression of negative, “bad,” painful, fearful, defensive, abnormal feelings as for his expression of “good,” positive, mature, confident, social feelings, as much acceptance of ways in which he is inconsistent as of ways in which he is consistent.’ (P.225)

Despite some shared features, there are some truly significant differences between the therapies of the Person Centred approach and that of Relational Depth.

The theory of Relational Depth does offer some very useful and much needed detail to help guide therapeutic practice, making it extremely accessible and attractive to students and trainers alike. However, the spread of these ideas within the Person Centred Approach, alongside the decline in experientially based classical Person Centred therapist training courses is very misleading for inexperienced and trainee therapists, as well as experienced therapists who have not fully grasped the theoretical concepts of the Person Centred Approach. Instead of assisting our understanding of this model of therapy, it confuses and misleads, with contradictory statements and advice, which ultimately offer justification for confrontational or directive ways of working. Possibly the greatest challenge for the Person Centred Therapist is that of attempting to relinquish all power over our clients, in a world where asking for help usually means submitting the authority of the ‘helper’. Person Centred therapy turns this concept completely on its head, in its respect for the authority of the client. Jerold Bozarth expressed this concept thus

The greater the extent that therapists honor the authority of clients as the authority of their own lives then the greater the probability of constructive personality change and problem resolution. As constructive personality change occurs, the client will also be better able to solve his or her own problems
(Bozarth, 1998: 117)

The Person Centred Approach continues to offer one of the most radical and challenging ways of relating to another human being. In contrast, the theory of Relational Depth therapy, places the locus of control with the therapist, confronts

instead of empathising, assesses and offers conditionality instead of offering unconditional positive regard.

In conclusion I would say that the aim of offering Relational Depth is in such conflict with the fundamental proponents of the Person Centred approach, and with the aim of offering the core conditions in their totality that, in my understanding of this, it is outside of the Person Centred Approach and is a move away from, rather than a development of, the radical client-led therapy of the Person Centred Approach.

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