Working at RELATIONAL DEPTH in Counselling and Psychotherapy
Dedication

This book is dedicated to Tony Merry (1948–2004), a much-loved pioneer of the British person-centred movement, whose warmth, humour and contribution to the approach will be long remembered.
PRAISE FOR THE BOOK

‘The importance of the relationship between the client and their counsellor or psychotherapist has long been recognised as constituting the cornerstone of effective therapeutic work. However, in recent years there has been a tendency to take the significance of the therapeutic relationship for granted, and to understand the dynamics of this relationship in terms of an alliance between the practitioner and person seeking help, in which each participant negotiates and agrees how best they can work together. In this book, Dave Mearns and Mick Cooper provide a fresh and challenging new perspective on the therapeutic relationship. By using the concept of relational depth, they are able to move beyond a vision of the relationship as merely a backdrop to therapeutic work, and to begin to explore the moments when the possibility of being able to relate more fully to another person can have a life-enhancing impact. Grounded in a person-centred approach to counselling and psychotherapy, the book articulates the meaning of relational depth by drawing on ideas from psychodynamic, postmodern, existential, cognitive, developmental and social psychological theory and research. The authors powerfully combine vivid case material and careful conceptual analysis to examine different aspects of relational depth and to show how it may be facilitated, and weave in a fascinating discussion of the interaction between therapeutic context and the types of relationship that can be created between therapist and client. This is an important book. It integrates concepts and practices from a range of approaches to therapy, and offers a convincing and original perspective that has the potential to inform practice, training and research for many years to come.’

John McLeod, Professor of Counselling
Tayside Institute for Health Studies,
University of Abertay Dundee
‘Timely, informative, challenging and a delight to read … Mearns and Cooper have provided a valuable template with which to consider and reconsider the dialogical qualities of the therapeutic encounter.’

Professor Ernesto Spinelli, Senior Fellow, School of Psychotherapy and Counselling, Regent’s College, London

‘This is one of those rare books which will attract a wide readership because it operates at so many different levels. It is, by turn, scholarly, dramatic, challenging, prophetic, practical, intensely personal and yet with implications which, if taken seriously, could transform the whole field of counselling and psychotherapy.

Dave Mearns and Mick Cooper are courageous enough to proclaim boldly that the heart of therapy lies in the real meeting and connection between human beings and then undertake the task of putting into words the nature of encounters which can often feel beyond language. They explore the profound implications of conceptualising human nature as essentially relational and what this means both for the development of the person and for the work of the therapist. They dare to employ such words as intimacy and love and to take us into the moment-to-moment process of therapeutic relationships which demand every last ounce of a therapist’s integrity and commitment.

This is a book which has about it an inspirational quality which will leave few readers unmoved. It also raises disturbing questions about many current trends both in society at large and in the profession of counselling and psychotherapy itself. Do not read this book if you want a quiet life and undisturbed sleep.’

Professor Brian Thorne, co-founder of The Norwich Centre, Norwich
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PREFACE

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, but soon became engrossed with 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; and 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 to 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, 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 was much slower, I had a profound sense of genuine human contact. Generally, after such meetings, I would come out of the sessions exhilarated, partly out of a relief that I actually 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 a very profound way. 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 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 cafe’, 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 cafe 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 their newspapers 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 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 wants to be loved. The secret is to meet them on their terms.

Across time and place, and under various different guises, philosophers (e.g. Buber, 1947) psychotherapists (e.g. Laing, 1965; Schmid, 2002) and numerous 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, the Jewish existential philosopher, 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’ (1947: 37). Similarly, Judith Jordan, 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. (1991a: 82)
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 well as by many other contemporary therapists (for instance, Ehrenberg, 1992; Friedman, 1985; Hycner, 1991; Jordan, 1991a; Schmid, 2002; Stern, 2004) – as the heart of a healing relationship.

Such experiences of engagement can be very difficult to put into words. How does one describe, for instance, those moments of connection and intimacy with a client when each person’s words seem to flow from the other’s and all self-consciousness is lost? Such an encounter can feel beyond language, and to put words on to the moment can feel like cheapening the depth and profundity of the experience. And yet, to not talk about such experiences because of their indefinability would be like the drunk who searches for his keys under a lamppost even when he has dropped them further down the street, on the grounds that that is where the light is! Without doubt, it is easier to talk about and operationalise such aspects of therapy as ‘homework compliance’, ‘levels of therapeutic alliance’, or even ‘frequency of self-disclosures’, but none of these components, it seems to us, captures the essence of what therapy is all about. For us, therapy is about a real meeting and connection with another human being, and even if such experiences are difficult to put into words, the attempt seems eminently worthwhile.

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 has developed in earlier texts (Mearns, 1997c; 2003a). He gives a background to the term from a recent lecture:

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, 2004c).
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 (see Chapter 1), the idea that experiences reside ‘inside’ a person is deeply problematic (see Boss, 1963; Cooper, 2003a: 37–9). Rather, what we mean by ‘deeper’ is those things that are, phenomenologically speaking, ‘truer’ and more ‘real’ for a person: that coincides 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 ‘presentational’ 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. In other words, just as we might use the term ‘intimacy’ to refer both to a specific experience (e.g. ‘I felt really intimate with John last night’) and to a particular type of relationship (e.g. ‘My relationship with John has always been very intimate’), so we will use ‘relational depth’ in both senses. This first sense we will generally write as ‘moments’, ‘times’ or ‘experiences’ of relational depth. In this respect, 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; 1958) notion of ‘dialogue’ and the ‘I–Thou’ attitude. 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 will 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 relational depth exists between two people, there will be a connection with each other that exists outside of specific times of physical proximity. So, for instance, if a relational depth exists between my sister and myself, 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 psychodynamic and cognitive practitioners (see Chapter 1) moving in this same direction.

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 recently termed a ‘client-centered 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 Grant, 2004; Merry, 2003) nor on facilitating emotional change (cf. ‘process-experiential therapy’ and ‘emotion-focused therapy’, see Elliott et al., 2004; Greenberg et al., 1993), *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 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 (2001a) and Godfrey Barrett-Lennard (2005) are doing. Finally, 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 contemporary findings from the psychotherapy research field, as well as recent developments in the fields of philosophy, developmental psychology and psychotherapy itself, which suggest that the quality of the therapeutic relationship, for the majority of clients, is likely to be a key factor in the success of the therapy. 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 in therapy, again, may be a critical element of therapeutic success. In Chapter 3 we will then go on to look at what these moments of in-depth therapeutic contact 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 will then illustrate therapeutic work at a level of relational depth through two case studies; and in Chapter 7 we will look at how therapists might facilitate such an encounter. In Chapter 8 we will broaden this out to look at the wider personal development agenda for the therapist, and in Chapter 9 we will conclude by discussing some of the implications of our analysis.

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

As part of the preparation for this book, we conducted in-depth qualitative interviews (Kvale, 1996) with eight experienced person-centred therapists and trainers. We asked them about their experiences of meeting clients at a level of relational depth, and also related questions such as how they experienced their clients at these times and what they saw as the therapeutic value of these encounters. Data from this study is presented primarily in Chapter 3, although the responses of our interviewees have informed numerous aspects of this book.

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. Where a person’s ‘story’ is extensively used, in all but one case we consulted the person and invited them to choose an alternative name. We emphasise the fact that all names are changed, lest people falsely recognise themselves.
We have used female pronouns throughout this book to refer to therapists and male pronouns for clients. This convention allows for more direct language and reverses the normal power imbalance.

We do not distinguish between the terms ‘counselling’ and ‘psychotherapy’ because everything we say in this book could apply to either activity under most distinctions between them. For our part we are equally happy to be known as ‘counsellors’ or ‘psychotherapists’, recognising that the different labels tend to refer to different contexts rather than differentiated operations.

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Dave Mearns and Mick Cooper
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Note

1. A ‘LIST D’ school in Britain is a residential school for young offenders.