

PC-L5 Theory Support – Relational Depth

Candidates undertaking PC-L5 are required to work at a level of Relational Depth. This is something that needs to be demonstrated and owned in order for candidates to be successful in their assessment for this level. This support document intends to offer an introduction to this important area.

Relational depth within a person-centred approach may be defined as ‘a feeling of profound contact and engagement with another, in which the therapist experiences high levels of empathy, acceptance and transparency towards their clients, and experience their clients as acknowledging their empathy and acceptance in a genuine way’ (Cooper, 2005: 1). Therapists might often describe these moments as including heightened feelings of empathy, acceptance, and receptivity towards their clients; powerful feelings of immersion in the therapeutic work; increased perceptual clarity; and greater levels of awareness, aliveness, and satisfaction. At these times, the therapists also experienced their clients as highly transparent; articulating core concerns and issues; and reciprocating the therapist’s acknowledgement of them in a flowing, bi-directional encounter. Mick Cooper (2005) suggests that in this approach ‘relational depth can be conceptualised as a form of co-presence or a co-experiencing of the person-centred core conditions’.

Such experiences of in-depth connectedness have been conceptualised in many ways across many therapeutic orientations. From the psychodynamic field, for instance, Stern (2004) has described ‘moments of meeting’ in which a ‘mutual interpenetration of minds’ takes place; whilst Ehrenberg writes of the ‘intimate edge: the point of maximum and acknowledged contact at any given moment in a relationship without fusion’. Psychodynamic theorists have also put forward the idea of a ‘third space’ or ‘analytic third’ which is seen as a third subjectivity created by dialectic and by and between the first and second subjectivities; the analyst and analysand (Ogden, 1994).

Gelso (2011) describes relational depth as ‘the personal relationship existing between two or more persons as reflected in the degree to which each is genuine with the other and perceives the other in ways that benefit the other’.

With regard to feminist theory, Jordan writes of ‘mutual intersubjectivity’, in which ‘one 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’ (1991).

Existential and Humanistic therapists, such as Friedman (1985) and Hycner (1991) have also described moments of ‘I-Thou’ meeting and ‘dialogue’ in the therapeutic encounter, drawing upon the work of the existential philosopher, Martin Buber (1958). David Mearns likens such relational depth to Rogers’ (1986) notion of ‘presence’: moments in which the therapist’s ‘inner spirit’ seems to reach out and touch the inner spirit of the other, and she or he is closest to his or her ‘inner, intuitive self’.

The experience of presence has been investigated empirically by Geller and Greenberg (Geller & Greenberg, 2002). Their participants described being fully receptive to their clients in a bodily, emotional and mental way; attending to their own spontaneous, intuitive responses to the client; and extending themselves to the client in a very immediate and congruent way. Therapists also described an immersion and absorption in the present; a sense of expansion, timelessness and an enhanced awareness of sensations and perceptions; a feeling of being grounded and centred; and feelings of warmth, compassion and ‘being there’ for the client.

Examples of Relational Depth

1. In my therapeutic relationship with Jane I felt a deep contact and engagement. I noticed I was feeling a deep and consistent level of empathy and acceptance towards Jane, and this enabled me to relate in a highly transparent way. In our relationship I experienced Jane as acknowledging my empathy and acceptance and I felt I was experienced as fully congruent and real.
2. Meeting clients at relationship depth is a central aim of my therapeutic work, though I can at times struggle to attain such depths of connection. These experiences are characterised by a sense of ease, enjoyment and concentration; an entering into the world of another, and a strong sense of being welcomed and valued there.
3. During the session what the client was telling me was how much I mattered to them – not just the counselling mattered to the client, but methere was a real vitality in that and I knew the vitality of it. I could tell in the way the client was saying it there was something of a knowing who we were to each other in that moment that was really, really clear and important. I felt complete trust of myself and the client as well.

Tutors may choose to hold a case discussion group as part of the course, listening out for and highlighting examples of relational depth when these arise and exploring and understanding the quality and depth of the relationship at this point.

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