The world and I are within one another

Christopher Tovey explores Kenneth Gergen's concept of therapy as 'relational recovery'

This article is for all my fellow independent-minded and reflective practitioners in the world of counselling, psychotherapy and coaching. Who do you think you are? What do you think you are doing? Why and how are you doing it? These are some of the questions I have been asking myself much more frequently since reading an inspiring and challenging book by Kenneth Gergen, *Relational Being*.[1] I have been prompted to reflect more deeply on my present practice in terms of self-awareness, relationships with others and social context.

My personal concerns, often shared in clinical supervision, have been about issues such as personal authenticity, respect for others and awareness of the power dynamics in counselling relationships and in their wider social context.

In March 2018, I wrote an article for *Private Practice,* titled 'Tragic optimism'.[2] I was trying to express clearly how existentialist ideas had fundamentally affected my developing person-centred counselling and coaching practice. One of the concepts that continue to engage and intrigue me about existentialism is what Ernesto Spinelli[3] calls 'existential relatedness' and Gergen[1] calls 'relational being'. It was the existentialist philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty who seemed to capture, for me, this extraordinary notion brilliantly, with the simple phrase: 'The world and I are within one another.'[4]

In this article, I am venturing my own tentative understanding of Gergen's groundbreaking idea of therapy as 'relational recovery'. A concept that has been particularly valuable, for example, in reflecting on some of my past long-term work with two very different clients.

Peter

Thinking about the notion of 'relational recovery' put me in mind of my first encounter with a long-term client, Peter (name changed), who had been diagnosed as autistic. I remember trying to 'bracket-off' my neurotypical prejudices and assumptions about the social difficulties he was describing, in order not to experience his autism as a 'socially defined' disability, instead of enjoying meeting his fascinating and unique individuality. I wanted to understand, and genuinely respond empathically to, his presented 'frame of reference' and worldview in a phenomenological way. My aim was for us to co-operate, on equal terms, facilitating the process of us working together on the joint project of making sense of his unique relationship with the world and others.

Peter was a young man in his late 20s who had set himself a life goal of taking more responsibility for achieving his future hopes of more independence, moving away from his loved and very protective parents, working on increasing his financial self-sufficiency, and eventually finding a marriage partner and having children of his own. However, although he had extraordinary mental abilities and an understanding of some aspects of life and work, and outstanding creativity, he was also very aware of occasional serious problematic difficulties in relationships with other people, and their frequently expressed concerns about some of his unusual behaviour and generally different way of being.

Peter had confided to me that it was extremely helpful to him to feel understood. The development of trust in a deepening therapeutic relationship, his humorous and relaxed storytelling and his creative, sometimes dramatic, problem solving all helped to facilitate a unique form of 'co-action',[1] which Peter perceived, and commented on, as being genuinely helpful to him in achieving his goals. For example, he would sometimes dramatically perform a brief scenario, for my benefit, acting out his apparent misunderstandings, but also demonstrating perception about himself and problematic interactions with others. He once stood up unexpectedly and mimed struggling to push an elephant out of the room. No words were needed from either of us because we had already identified and confronted that particular elephant. We laughed at the relief of my guessing the charade and acknowledging the unwanted metaphorical reappearance of our problem guest. Pretending to take metaphors literally became a familiar running gag for us both. Project 'Getting to know and manage Peter' progressed well until our agreed final session after he announced his engagement to be married.

The whole story

Reflecting over their whole story can sometimes be helpful to clients in taking stock of everything that has happened to them in a lifetime. Isolated incidents and occurrences, when viewed on their own or out of context, can sometimes be distressing to reflect on or ruminate about. In my experience, when clients are encouraged to look back over both distressing and happy memories over the whole lifespan, it is sometimes heartening to them to rediscover aspects of their own experience, which help to make sense of everything that has happened during the course of their life and the decisions and actions they have taken. This process is also always experienced in the context of their relationships with other people.

Ann

Another long-term client, Ann (name changed), approaching 70 when we first met, had been diagnosed with MS some 30 years before, and was struggling with the daunting challenges of serious illness, long-term marital problems and later life changes. She seemed to me to be bravely and determinedly tackling a later life transition from being the victim of severely incapacitating neural deterioration towards being a resilient and

resourceful survivor of traumatic health problems and an increasingly unhappy marital relationship. This client commented that it had been extremely helpful to be able to recall a variety of both happy and unhappy memories from her whole life story during our counselling sessions. For example, she justly took pride in her strength of character as a very independent young women, being highly valued as a work colleague, and finding the pluck to cope with initial open hostility from her husband's family in a different country, where she had then hoped to live. Remembering the person she had been, seemed to help her gain self-confidence about the person she believed she was now becoming. I enjoyed witnessing, participating in and affirming this transformation as a heartening process of post-traumatic growth for this extraordinarily resilient client.

Relational being

In his comprehensive and challenging book about the individually and socially liberating concept of 'relational being', Gergen[1] states that 'whatever problems an individual confronts find their origins in the context of socially engendered meaning.' Thus, therapy is a matter of restoring viable relations – for the client and the sea of relations in which they are immersed – both present and past. He investigates the broad relational context in which the very possibility of therapy – along with its potentials for human change – comes into being. He considers the relational process in the therapy itself. As therapist and client enter a process of co-action, what kinds of practices are invited? What are the potentials and limitations of existing practices?

Gergen reminds us that the relationship between therapist and client is scarcely isolated. What takes place within the therapeutic encounter is first linked to the relational histories of the participants. Here is a meeting of multi-beings. Further, these relationships are embedded within an expanded array of relations – ethnic, religious, professional, and so on. Therapy is but a single relationship, nesting within a potentially limitless and dynamic complex. There is no personal problem, mental illness, or family dysfunction in itself, but only within this complex. Gergen suggests that in many ways the limits and potentials of the therapeutic encounter are established before the participants utter the first word. They come together because it 'makes sense' within the expanded arena of relationship at a particular time in history. Whatever they do together, along with whatever they consider progress, will carry the imprint of this broader matrix of meaning.

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Therapeutic relationship

Gergen tries to understand the relationship between therapist and client, its potentials, and its efficacy. He invites us to think beyond the tradition of 'bounded being', in which the aim of therapy is to cure the mind of the individual client. The metaphors of the therapist as one who plumbs the depths, or serves as a mechanic of the cognitive machinery, must be bracketed. He also sets aside the causal model, in which the therapist acts upon the client to produce change. Rather, we are invited to view the therapist and client as 'engaged in a subtle and complex dance of co-action, a dance in which meaning is continuously in motion, and the outcomes of which may transform the relational life of the client'.[1]

In addition, Gergen contends that both therapist and client enter the therapeutic relationship as multi-beings. Both carry with them the residues of multiple relationships. Therapists bring not only a repertoire of actions garnered from their history of therapeutic relations, they also carry potentials from myriad relations, stretching from childhood to the present. Likewise, clients enter carrying a repertoire of actions, some deemed problematic, put alongside a trove of less obvious alternatives. Gergen's primary question is whether the process of client/therapist coordination can contribute to a transformation in relationships of extended consequence. Can their dance together reverberate across the client's relational plane in such a way that more viable coordination results? This is no small challenge, for the client's plane of relationships is complex and fluid. How, then, is the single circumscribed relationship between therapist and client to achieve significant change?

My present understanding of each client is entirely unique to their different and changing experiences of the world. However, my perception

of our relationships is greatly helped by my understanding of the concept of relational recovery. I believe that I am alongside clients as a genuinely respectful and accepting companion, helping them to make sense of their world, past, present and future, and sometimes to restore or achieve viable relationships with others. I believe that my own ability to engage in the 'subtle and complex dance of co-action', in which meaning is continuously in motion, is greatly enhanced by my determination to bracket off and shelve my own socially constructed prejudices and assumptions about different problematic social situations. In this respect, I occasionally experience an internal conflict between the protective 'professional duty of care' and 'being helpful' instincts, which I confess sometimes motivate me, and my fundamental respect for client autonomy. This developing aspect of self-awareness has often been an enduring theme of my essential monthly counselling supervision sessions, which I experience as both supportive and challenging.

As working therapeutic alliances begin to establish more fully in my encounters with clients, I often experience a mutual learning and development process in which I am genuinely facilitating what Gergen describes as 'a subtle and complex dance of co-action'.[1] As relationships deepen, I open my mind to the possibility that meaning may also be 'continuously in motion' during our interaction.

Relational consequences

From Gergen's perspective, the primary concern of therapy is the viability of the client's participation in relationships, past, present and future. In effect, this brackets the view of therapy as specifically psychological in its focus. It is not mind repair that is ultimately at stake but a form of relational transformation. This is not at all to abandon talk about mental states but to remove mental states as the object of major concern. The question is not whether such talk gets it right, but how it functions within relationships. He states that the focus on relational change has two major fields of concern. The first and most obvious is the caste of daily relationships to which clients return. To what degree is the client's participation in these patterns of relationship enhanced?

My client Peter had been able to share relationship problems vividly with me, and also rehearse ways of coping with the more perplexing aspects of neurotypical behaviour, about which I contributed a little advice when asked. He reported feeling more confident and less anxious about dealing with difficult encounters.

Gergen cites a second and less obvious way in which the therapeutic process affects relationships outside. Specifically, we may view all therapists as social activists. For better or worse, their assumptions and practices enter society in such a way that meanings are altered or sustained. Diagnostic categories are disseminated throughout society and sealed with a professional stamp of approval. People come to understand themselves in just these ways. Common meanings are displaced. 'The blues' becomes depression. The moody child becomes 'bipolar', and intense dedication to work becomes an 'addiction', and so on. It is interesting that as the mental health professions have grown, so have the number of diagnostic categories, along with a number of therapeutic patients, and the annual expenditures on mental health. In Gergen's view, while diagnostic categories may have utility within the profession, there are important respects in which their dissemination within society more generally is 'crippling'.[1]

My client Ann's MS is an increasingly serious health condition, for which she requires and receives specialist medical help, but she clearly does not wish the illness to define in any way who she is. Peter was diagnosed as being on the autistic spectrum but did not consider himself 'disabled', simply 'different' in some ways. He clearly knew which behaviours he needed to adjust to relate better to neurotypical people. He took full responsibility for navigating his perplexing relationship problems in his own inimitable style. I respected him and admired what he was achieving.

According to Gergen,[1] there are many therapists who understand their function as |social activists. Thus, for example, therapists challenge the diagnostic categories, actively participate in resistance against dehumanising treatments, and resist the expansion of pharmaceutical cures. These are not mere troublemakers. They function to unfreeze the taken-for-granted realities. They open

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alternatives that may accommodate the vast variations in society and can lead to more open dialogue. This view of the therapist as social activist also means that the profession should give more concerted attention to the social conditions from which anguish emerges. For example, Gergen proposes that probing the injurious consequences of competitive practices in school and work, the ethos of materialism, and the technological landscape, seems imperative. Societal concerns were central to early therapists, such as Freud, Fromme and Horney. Gergen concludes that they should be no less so today.[1]

The four Rs of therapeutic co-action

For me, reflecting about goals and outcomes, as both a practising therapist and a former client, counselling has often facilitated much more than the recovery of health and psychological wellbeing. For example, the process has often involved searching for meaning in what is happening. In terms of expectations about outcomes from 'talking therapy', we also sometimes set personal goals, which involve changing our own behaviour. Occasionally, talking helps us in our soul-searching efforts to achieve peace of mind, reconciliation with others, recovery from loss, or even redemption, especially in terms of the critical judgments we make about ourselves.

I was reassured that John McLeod,[5] writing about counselling research, concludes that counselling is a complex, multifaceted activity, and suggests that our assumptions about psychotherapy outcomes tend to be embedded in particular ways of seeing or perceiving the counselling process. He refers to Orlinsky,[6] who proposes that there presently exist four distinct types of image or metaphor for psychotherapy, which might influence our expectations as follows:

1. Treatment for psychiatrically diagnosable disorders. (The currently favoured 'drug' metaphor.)
2. An educational process of relearning.
3. A reforming process, or a subtle form of social control.
4. Redemption – a ritual that gives a sense of purpose and justification to those who participate.[6]

In my own developing approach to reviewing and researching counselling practice, I have adapted Orlinsky's useful metaphors into four different Rs, which all therapeutic 'co-action' may involve:

1. Recovery (of relationships and wellbeing).
2. Reasoning (seeking meaning for what is happening to us).
3. Reform (changing our behaviour).
4. Redemption (seeking such 'life goals' as peace, reconciliation and forgiveness in the world).

Relational recovery and my personal and professional development.

I was initially trained in 2008 in the person-centred therapy developed by Carl Rogers.[7] I recall an early-retirement 'post-traumatic' determination to become a kind of 'wounded healer'. I had been significantly helped by person-centred counselling as a client when experiencing long-term acute workplace stress and anxiety, diagnosed by a psychiatrist as depression, as a result of a sort of professional burnout in my last full-time job. Rogers' approach to therapy was unique in focusing entirely upon the quality of the relationship between therapist and client. He cites 'six necessary and sufficient conditions' for therapeutic change to take place, which describe the basis of how the required counselling relationship may facilitate continued growth and development for clients. The resources for this achievement are found primarily within the person. Rogers profoundly believed that all humans are motivated by an internal 'organismic valuing process'.[7]

My own practitioner research over the last three years concerning improving counselling services for adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse, involved an extensive literature review and reflection on Stephen Joseph's[8] interpretation of the concept of 'post-traumatic growth', as described in his valuable and encouraging self-help book: *What doesn't kill us: a guide to overcoming adversity and moving forward.*[8] My own developing approach has been inspired by seven years of voluntary counselling work with survivors. I wrote about these personally transforming experiences in an article for *Private Practice,* titled 'Harvesting hope', published in Autumn 2017.[9] I now have a more existential rationale for counselling and coaching practice that is broadly guided by Spinelli's foundation principles for practice: 'existential relatedness, uncertainty and existential anxiety'.[3]

Joseph's recent publication, *Authentic,*[10] then caused me to revisit and reflect on the importance of relatedness in my work. He believes that 'authenticity' should be at the heart of everything we do and suggests that we should replace the current therapeutic 'quest for happiness', comprehensively critiqued by Emmy Van Deurzen,[11] with a quest for authenticity. I still sense some personal empathy with his proposition. However, authenticity means different things to different people, including a diversity of existential thinkers, such as Merleau-Ponty,[3] Gergen[1] and myself.[2]

Joseph[10] also concludes that authenticity may be a dangerous idea. When people are authentic. they can be awkward, questioning of the status quo and reluctant to be pawns for someone else. He quotes Noam Chomsky in saying: 'Every form of authority and domination and hierarchy, every authoritarian structure, has to prove that it's justified – it has no prior

justification... And when you look, most of the time these authority structures have no justification... They're just there in order to preserve certain structures of power and domination, and the people at the top."[12]

Joseph states that authentic people strive to have power over their own lives and so will always ask those who assume power over them to justify it. The more authentic we are, the more we, as individuals, will demand authenticity in our institutions and leaders. I hope that Gergen would consider both Joseph and I to be ethical 'social activists',[1] in constantly changing and developing ways. My own understanding of the therapeutic counselling relationship, in its social context, has been transformed by Gergen's extraordinary book. I now comprehend much better how 'the world and I are within one another'.[4] I also optimistically hope that each 'subtle and complex dance of co-action',[1] in which meaning is continuously in motion, will have outcomes 'which may transform the relational life of the client'.[1]

About the author

Christopher Tovey is an independent counsellor and coach in private practice with 50 years' previous experience and professional development in care work, including advanced qualifications in continuing education, social work and psychotherapy. He has been practising person-centred therapy for the last 10 years and, in January 2019, at the age of 70, began a full-time counselling research PhD at Warwick University, Centre for Lifelong Learning.

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