




Research Article

Relational depth in counselling: The perspectives and experiences of counsellors

Patricia Mawusi Amos

Department of Counselling Psychology, University of Education, Winneba, Ghana

Correspondence should be addressed to Patricia Mawusi Amos  pmamos@uew.edu.gh
Received 12 February 2023; Revised 2 April 2023; Accepted 6 May 2023

Relational depth is regarded as one of the key elements in counselling therapy. However, conclusive evidence on when and how to apply it is still lacking in Ghana. This study engaged the qualitative research approach, using the phenomenological design to sample the views of five professional counsellors. The findings are that there should be some observable behaviours, characteristics or traits about the therapist that would make the client feel comfortable to connect with, gender may play a role in establishing relational depth with clients, and greater consideration is given to the experiences and expertise of the counsellor. The study concluded that it would be difficult for counsellors to establish a deep and professional relationship with their clients without a strong sense of trust, privacy, warmth, and confidentiality. It is suggested that counsellors attend workshops and seminars and enrol in higher academic courses and counselling-related programs to achieve relevant competencies and skills. This will help them align with the strains of contemporary counselling demands.

Keywords: Relational depth, counselling, warmth, experiences

1. Introduction

A strong bond according to Obegi (2008) facilitates smooth collaboration, buffers the relationship from the strain of therapeutic work, and is considered a healing element of psychotherapy. Obegi further posit that the bond between client and therapist, a component of the global alliance, is widely believed to play a crucial role in supporting the work of therapy. A substantial body of literature suggests that the quality of the therapeutic relationship is one of the key factors in determining outcomes (e.g. Baldwin et al., 2007; Cooper, 2004; Friedman, 2012; Lo-Coco et al., 2011; Mearns et al., 2000) and many leading psychotherapy researchers consider it second only to the client's own resources and extra-therapeutic experiences in predicting how successful therapy will be (di Malta et al., 2020). This explains why relational depth is considered a crucial part of the therapeutic process. Relational depth explains the feeling of profound engagement between the therapist and the client. The therapist develops higher levels of acceptance and empathy towards the client (Mearns & Cooper, 2018).

Developing reliable solutions to the emotional troubles of the client requires some levels of transparency and openness from the client (Eugster & Wampold, 2016). This explains why it is relevant for the therapist to develop some higher levels of connection with the client. The depth of relation between the client and therapist determines the level of openness from the client. Cooper (2005) conceptualized relational depth as a form of co-existence between the therapist and client, which leads to recommending the best solutions to the problems of the latter. In the views of Mearns and Cooper (2018), relational depth helps the therapist to develop bi-directional encounters with the client which leads to a proper qualitative articulation of the concerns and issues of the client. Kim et al. (2020) also conceptualized relational depth as developing mutual penetration into the client's mind, which further leads to acknowledging the primary causes of the psychosocial challenges of the client. Ultimately, relational depth allows the therapist to develop a second subjective knowledge of the underlying challenges of the client. Wiggin et al. (2012)

highlighted the need to develop receptive feelings and bodily as well as emotional connection with the client in order to generate intuitive responses to the needs of the client. According to Wiggin et al., therapist who develop intense relational depth also immerse the sense of expansion, sensation, perception and awareness on the situation of the client.

Several studies have highlighted the need for relational depth (e.g. Kim et al., 2020; Knox, 2008; Knox & Cooper, 2011; Sandage et al., 2020). However, most of them have failed to provide enough conclusive evidence on whether relational depth generate successful therapeutic outcomes. Existing literatures have also failed to provide conclusive narratives on the preconditions for relational depth. For example, Kim et al. (2020) highlighted experience of the therapist as one of the preconditions for relational depth. In the views of Kim et al., therapists with greater magnitude of depth are required to deploy the concept of relational depth. In the views of Wiggins et al., (2012), developing relational depth with client is often risky since it has potentials to jeopardize the therapeutic outcomes. Novice therapist often get swayed by the emotional connections which ultimately degenerate into developing personality interest in the client rather than focusing on the challenges of the client (Eugster & Wampold, 2016). On another tangent, Knox and Cooper (2011) opines that experience of the therapist does not necessarily set any precondition for relational depth. According to Knox and Cooper, in as much as the therapist has greater professional competences, he or she can develop relational depth with the client regardless of his or her experience. This parallel narrative leaves an empirical gap on whether experience actually serve as a precondition for relational depth or not.

Furthermore, literatures (Knox, 2008; Knox & Cooper, 2011; Kim et al., 2020; Sandage et al., 2020) have not been conclusive on the stance of gender in relational depth. Some literatures such as Kim et al., (2020) argue that the gender of therapist and client play key role in relational depth. According to Kim et al., developing relational depth with same gender led to transparency and openness in the therapeutic process thereby delivering better outcomes. On a different tangent Sandage et al., (2020), opine that, gender difference does not generally determine transparency and openness in relational depth. This contrasting conclusion also leaves a key knowledge gap regarding the role of gender in developing relational depth during the therapeutic process. This study seeks to provide enough evidence on how variables such as experience and gender facilitate the development of relational depth to generate desirable therapeutic outcomes.

1.1. Relevance of the Study

Relational depth is regarded as one of the key elements in counselling therapy (Cooper, 2005; Wilders, 2007). However conclusive evidence on when and how to apply it is still lacking. In Ghana for instance, it would be perceived that long serving practitioners have knowledge of relational depth, but hardly has it been mentioned in either teaching of counselling and also during supervision. From the experience of the researcher as a counsellor educator and practicing counsellor, it would be said that relational depth is either not known or scarcely mentioned by practitioners and even students who have practiced for a while and are furthering their studies in higher education. Studies by experts show that much has been done in other countries regarding relational depth (Cox, 2009; Treanor, 2017; Wilders, 2007). Can the same be said of Ghana? Counselling practice has existed as far back as in the 1970s in Ghana and it is perceived that practitioners have experienced relational depth but little or no review on studies can be seen. This study will therefore serve as the conduit if not the first in opening some discussions and teaching on relational depth and how it can be of help to counsellors during the therapeutic process. It is hoped that it will unearth the characteristics required for a counsellor to possess to ensure that relational depth is experienced in the therapeutic process. Again, literatures on the preconditions of relational depth in counselling therapy is not conclusive enough. This study would contribute to literature by providing empirical narrative to resolving the identified research gap. The outcome of this study would also contribute to practice by way of providing enough evidence on when and how to develop relational depth with clients to deliver best therapeutic outcomes.

The studies will be guided by the following objectives:

1. To identify the characteristics exhibited by counsellors to show relational depth.
2. To ascertain if gender of the counsellor plays a role in relational depth.
3. To establish if the experiences of the counsellor play a role in relational depth
4. To unearth the challenges encountered in exhibiting relational depth and
5. To determine how relational depth can be developed between counsellor and client.

2. Method

2.1. Research Design and Participants

In this study, I focused on counselors in Ghana who are both educators and practitioners, especially those who have worked in the field for at least ten years. The reason for selecting counsellors with ten years and above was that they have practiced for a very long time and may have practiced across genders and across the life span. It was hoped that their experience will produce information that may be needed and will be of benefit for this study. Whitehead and Annells (2016) recommend that 8-15 participants are used in a qualitative study, whereas Creswell and Creswell (2018) proposed 3-5 participants. Given their recommendations and based on the number of counsellors who registered their interest to participate in the study, five counsellors were employed for the study. A purposive sampling technique was then used to select counsellors with ten or more years of practice. The participants are licensed counsellors Two males and three females were identified by the pseudonyms C1-C5.

2.2. Instrumentation

The counsellors were engaged on a one-on-one interview in a confidential environment. Semi-structured interview guide was employed for the data collection. The interview was planned with a protocol that listed eleven questions on the average and grouped under themes and sub-themes. Questions such as "How does gender play a role in relational depth?", "In your view, what are some characteristics of relational depth?" and "Do you think years of teaching and practicing of counselling play a role in relational depth with client in counselling, what can you say about that?".

2.3. Data Collection Procedure

Five days was used for the data collection within a space of two weeks. This is because the counsellors engaged for the study had busy schedules and sometimes trying to meet them for the interview proved futile. Due to physical unavailability of two of the counsellors, an online zoom interview was scheduled. Consequently, the dates set for the interview were not adhered to. Thus, out of the two weeks, five days was used for the exercise. An average of 40mins was used for the interview. As expected of the counsellors, they were friendly, outspoken and attended to the researcher as needed. Before the interview with each of them, a consent form was given to them to register their interest to partake in the study. The form entailed information on confidentiality, use of data for solely academic purpose and the benefits of their responses to counsellor education and practice. The counsellors were informed about the use of audio recording for the interview and reasons why the recording was being done. After each interview, the researcher re-played the recording to confirm the responses given by the counsellors and also a word of appreciation was said to register the researcher's gratitude.

2.4. Data Analysis Procedure

Thematic analysis was employed in analysing the interview data. This technique allowed for the structuring, categorising and interpretation of the transcribed data. The audio recordings were transcribed verbatim using Sonix transcription software. Some of the transcribed data not correctly captured by the software were all corrected and later sent to the counsellors to confirm the information they gave. The transcripts were read several times to gain a thorough understanding of participants' perceptions and understanding of issues. Again, some sub-themes emerged from the interviews, notwithstanding the main themes that guided the study. Therefore, the transcribed

data was uploaded into the Taguette software for analysing qualitative data. The Taguette was used to identify codes, themes, and sub-themes from the transcribed data. The researcher ensured that participants' perceptions and experiences were sincerely captured. During the data analyses, verbatim quotes were used to support findings.

3. Results

3.1. The Perception of Relational Depth

All participants had an idea concerning the subject. While some knew it as relational depth, others termed it as relational moment. Concerning the definition of relational depth or relational moment, participants gave their various views on how they understood it to be and managed to give their way of definition. One of the participants defined relational depth as follows:

"I see relational depth as the crux of every therapeutic relationship, the combination of reflection of contents, feeling and meaning that demonstrates deep empathy and allows my client to know that I really understand them" - C 2

Another respondent referred to it as a deep relationship that exists between the therapist and the client. To this respondent, it is the foundation on which trust for the therapeutic relationship is built.

"It is that deep relationship that exists between the client and the counsellor, so deep that we have a lot of trust, we have accepted each other, we are transparent towards each other, and we share very high levels of empathy between us and I'm thinking that it is the same as the relational depth that we are talking about" -C 5

One respondent explained it as a moment where the client is seen and treated as human and connected with. She indicates it as

"...Okay, so I understand it as a relational moment. So, it's a time where you have to connect with the clients in a very meaningful way. So, this is where you see the client as human. This is not a time to judge but you need to show what we know as the unconditional positive regard. Irrespective of who the client is, you need to recognize the presence and see him as human and be able to differentiate the self from the behaviour you are even coming to help address depending on the case. This is the time that you make clients the center of your attention. It's a state that I call as a profound contact and engagements with the clients. This is where as a therapist or as a counsellor, you become more active, you listen in between conversation, you would have to reflect what clients are saying for the clients to know that you are present..." C 1

Notably, a common pattern of the definitions of relational depth from the respondents is that it is a demonstration of feeling with deep empathy and making meaning of that feeling which allows client to know that the counsellor really understands them and vice versa. It is a deep relation built on trust that shows both the client and the therapist have accepted each other.

Another important thing noted about the relational depth is where the client is shown high level of unconditional positive regard, seen as human whose behaviour or mistakes are differentiated from the self, and not judged. It is the moment when client is made the center of attention.

3.2. The Effects of Relational Depth

From the findings, there are some positive and negative effects on therapeutic relationship, in an attempt to exhibit relational depth. While there seem to be an emotional connection between the client and the therapist which helps them flow easily with each other, it can also be taken in a negative sense that can affect the counselling process.

3.2.1. General effects

As both parties are in good communication, finding solutions is easy; clients are able to open up without fear of being stigmatized or looked down upon. There can also be reluctance if there is suspicion, as the therapist tries to be all nice. For example, some responded stated that:

"...so for the positive, it helps to mould myself and the client together. That is, the clients would sort of connect back to me, and it even helps me to understand what the client is up to or what the real problem is because there are instances where you find a client who is touching on so many problems and not able to lay on the exact issue. So, the moment I'm able to exhibit relational depth, I'm able to understand the clients, I'm able to pick out what is paramount in all the issues that have been presented to me, I'm able to create emotional connection, I can get my client to really tear up because the client has been able to spill the heart's problems out" - C 4

"It helps the relationship to also flow and my client opens up to divulge all information. It's also to a larger extent would increase recommendation from the clients or even from other professionals because of the way you practice. For a particular individual or client, she will connect so well to get to understand you to find solution to the problem and also help you to be empowered and be able to make a well-informed decision moving on" - C 2

This participant also went ahead to mention some negative effect of exhibiting RD as follows:

"...so in terms of the challenge, when it comes to the opposite sex, you need to be very mindful because as you are connecting, as you are giving off your very best, as you're giving off your world, some opposite sex might think that it's a way of maybe demonstrating a romantic affair or maybe demonstrating some love for the opposite sex" - C 2

3.2.2. *Cultural effects*

A striking factor that came up as having effect on relational depth is culture. A participant had this to say:

"...Because I am female and my client is male and they come from a culture that prevents the men from exhibiting their emotions and weakness, though they are feeling it, it might be hard for them to express it... if you have that sense of multiculturalism, then you may be able to help your clients in this regard otherwise, a male client with that cultural background will end up taking his issues back home" - C 3

From the responses given by participants, it can be deduced that relational depth aids in conversation flow and allows clients to open up to the counsellor. It also assists counsellors to closely connect with the clients in understanding their issues better. Culturally, it was deduced that sometimes, the opposite sex issues hinder the client from exhibiting his/her emotions.

3.3. **Characteristics Counsellors Exhibit to Show Relational Depth**

From the findings of the study, most of the participating counsellors mentioned that there should be some observable behaviours or traits about the therapist that would make the client feel comfortable to connect with. In the views of the respondents, body language, trust, and warmth, among others are the characteristics shown that depicts a relational depth of a therapeutic relationship.

3.3.1 *Reflection of feelings*

Some participants were of the view that, once they are able to reflect the client's feelings, it brings about a connection that leads to having a smooth flow of conversation. The client feels understood, get connected, which eventually ends up in establishing a depth of relationship to augment the therapeutic relationship.

Some of the thoughts expressed by the participants are as follows:

"..Sure. So, I've had other clients who when I reflect, they go like oh yes that's exactly how I felt, oh how did you know that? Sometimes I read clients' body language a lot. You see their eyes brightened when they feel like you understand them, or you are summarizing something beyond what they said in a way that connects to their feelings. It sometimes also allows them to just sit deeper in their chairs with the feeling that somebody really understands" - C 3

3.3.2. *Trust*

From the findings, clients are unable to open up until they establish some level of trust. There are some clients, according to the participants, who take time to know whether the therapist is

trustworthy before they open up. Trust is therefore key to clients' ability to connect with the therapist.

"One is trust, if I don't trust you, I can't tell you anything and so I've made that as part of the relationships that I've developed with my client. I tell them that I want to be able to trust them, and I also want them to trust me in the process. So, the trust is one major one." - C 2

3.3.3. Warmth

Some participants believed that being personable, and being true to oneself and the other person is an expression of warmth. It is the moment when clients feel accepted. This has a great effect on relational depth. From the findings:

"So, it's a time where you are warm, you are very personal. You show your true self and it's also a moment where I would say you bracket your preconceived ideas about the clients or about whichever case you've heard perhaps prior to the arrival of the client" - C 4

3.3.4. Empathy

Connecting to the worldview of the client, according to a participant is one key realized to lead to establishing relational depth. According to a participant, certain clients find it very difficult to open up. It therefore takes a deep connection with such clients to open up in order to establish a relationship.

"So, for me to be able to even recognize within myself that I'm showing relational depth, it is when I'm able to maybe get clients to open up. There are certain clients honestly it would take heaven and divine for them to open up. So, if I have someone like that before me, especially if it's a referral case, and I'm told this person will not open up, the moment I could connect I could enter the world view of this client for the client to open up, then I'll say, I've attained my relation or moments" - C 1

In a nutshell, the participants indicated that skills such as trust, warmth, reflection of feelings and empathy are some of the characteristics that clients exhibit to show relational depth.

3.4. Gender of the Counsellor and Relational Depth in Counselling

While it is expected that exhibiting professionalism should not be based on one's gender, it has been found from these interviews that gender can in a way or another affect relational depth. That, an attempt of a particular gender to show some special care to an opposite gender can be misconstrued to be an act of sexual advancement.

3.4.1. It does but it takes longer for males

Some participants were of the view that it takes longer times for males to express feelings, especially in our society, compared to their female counterparts. It therefore takes a longer time to connect well when an opposite gender shows more feeling towards establishing relational depth. One participant had this to say:

"It depends so, if I'm a female and my client is female, generally, our societies allow females to feel emotional, but if I'm female and my client is male it takes a while for them to recognize that it's okay for the male to feel emotional. If I am male and my client is female, there will always be a little hitch there. And if it's male and male, depending again on the ethnicity there could be permission granted or permission withheld." - C 4

3.4.2. Not gender but the person of the therapist

This participant went further to add that it however depends on the person of the therapist and not entirely on the gender effect. That, clients can tell a genuine therapist from a non-genuine one. It therefore depends on the person of the therapist; how genuinely he or she expresses feelings towards a client that makes it easy for the client to connect in order to establish a relational depth.

"I have had both male and female clients, and I have noticed that consistently therapeutic alliance is there. I think it is the person of the therapist. Because I see that if a therapist is not genuine, clients sense it. So, if I say oh I respect you, but I don't act respectful towards you, clients will sense it. Even

children sense these things. And so I may not say to your face but I know I can't trust you, even though you keep saying oh, you can trust me, you can trust me"-C 5

3.4.3. Parental traits

Parental traits, according to some participants help in connecting with clients, in a sense that they are able to see themselves as relating to the clients as their own children. This participant however stressed that it does not necessarily make the relationship a parent-child one, rather, the position or traits of being a parent is what comes to play while establishing a relationship.

"Okay, one thing that has helped me is the fact that I am a mother and I always see myself from that point of view to help me to relate well to the client. Having said that, I don't think I see my clients as a mother-daughter or mother-son. But my position as a mother, what are the needs of the client? If I'm dealing with teenagers, I go back to my children. What were the needs of my children at this age? If I'm dealing with Children? What are the needs of my grandchildren? How would I see them ... I'm a career woman but I can still say that even though I'm a career woman, I've been there a lot for the children for longer periods. When we are all together, I'm listening to them and watching them. So that has translated into the counselling that I do. That anybody who has come and wants to share their pain with me, I need to give them a lot of attention. So, gender, yes! Gender helps a lot in the relational depth that we are talking about?"-C 4

3.4.4. Not gender but the expertise

A participant who was of the view that gender could have no effect on establishing relational depth but rather, depending on the expertise of the counsellor, has this to say:

"I will say no, because if you are an expert and that is, you are always demonstrating it regardless of who you have before you, you are going to still remain you, nothing will change ... I'll go back to say that it depends on several factors. ...if you should have maybe say a counsellor from ages 30 to 35, who is not married and there is also a young lady around, 28, 30, who is not yet married, if such a male counsellor is showing a relational depth, depending again on the individual before him, there could be some misinterpretation ..." - C 2

From the responses given by participants, it was noted that though gender plays a role in relational depth, counsellors believe that the person of the therapist or counsellor, the parental traits and also the expertise of the counsellor counts a lot in the exhibition of relational depth.

3.5. Experience of the Counsellor and Relational Depth in Counselling

The subject matter sought to find out whether the experience in terms of number of cases attended to or years in practice have any influence on achieving a relational depth. The enquiry began with the number of years of practice and followed by the number of cases a therapist handled or attended to clients. The findings had it that experience has a great impact on achieving relational depth. Thus, a previous experience enlightens an individual to know what to do in subsequent cases. Though almost all respondent agreed that every case is unique or sacrosanct, an everyday experience adds to knowing what to do next in a similar situation or even in an entirely different case.

3.5.1. Experience in terms of years of practice

One major discovery to buttress the assertion that previous experience enlightens an individual to know what to do in subsequent client cases, was the fact that experience gives confidence to be able to carry out most task than without it.

"Yes, experience can make you do one of two things; it can make you humble or can make you arrogant. I remember the first time I was working with an American client; I was petrified and one of my professors asked me, what do you want to do? I said, I want to help clients and he said, just be yourself and it felt like he had given me such huge permission"-C 3

"Okay, so if I'm comparing myself with a young career counsellor, let me even say at the PhD level, just finished PhD and has practice for only one year, if I'm comparing myself to that person I'll say the experience that I have will make me a better Counsellor. It puts me in a better position to show

more of the relational depth in my counselling than the young career person ... If I don't have the experience, I may not have been able to help her. I mean not able to understand her needs. From experience, I have seen people in different situations. So that informs how I relate to people from different backgrounds" - C 1

3.5.2. Skill set

Though a participant shares similar sentiments as mentioned by others, there seem to be a different opinion in relation to skill set developed by the individual, regardless of the number of years in practice:

"Well, it will have an effect where the sessions you've had previously, you were able to learn the ups and downs in there, you've corrected the downs in there and moving forward, you are going to apply more of the ups and you are going to correct the wrongs. Then I will say that yes, to a larger extent you've gained experience and it's going to be better. But if still the same method you used in the previous one is persistent, then we are not making any headway here ... you might know all the therapies, but if you don't have the skill, if you've learnt the therapies for say 20 years and you don't have the skill set, you will always fail" - C 5

The respondent went further to explain that:

"Someone might have just completed school but has a natural flare of connecting with people. The person can be successful. So, I wouldn't say it depends so much on the experience; I would say. It depends so much on the skill, but again, you can also gain more experience by observing the skills of others or learn the skills of others, to also be effective when you are using relational depth ... People gain experience, but it could be positive, it could be negative. So, if it's a positive experience as to how to well connect with people, then sure, you'll be able to engage well when it comes to relational depth and be very successful in there. But if the experiences you gained from the past and something that is not a healthier one, moving forward, it's still going to have a significant negative impact on your clients" - C 1

From the narrations, counsellors noted that years of continuous practice and the skills a counsellor possesses aids in relational depth.

3.6. Challenges in Exhibiting Relational Depth in Counselling

While all the participating counsellors were of the view that counselling process becomes effective with client and results are much achieved with smooth therapeutic relationships as a result of relational depth, they were however of the view that it does not go without challenges. Some of the challenges as elicited from the participant are as follows.

3.6.1. Difficult and aged clients

It has been lamented by a counsellor that the issue of the elderly impacts counselling and hence, how difficult it is to reach a relational point with people of certain ages. There is a tendency for clients who are well advanced in age to have difficulty adapting to change and changing with them.

"Yes, there are always some difficult clients. I call them difficult because I think that they are not ready to change. Client that are not ready to change, I think they have a lot of problems. I say so because I have this client currently and he is addicted to so many things. The client's readiness for change. If they are not ready to change, no matter how long you've been counselling, no matter how well you think you have grasped relational depth or therapeutic alliance concept and implementing it, no matter what you know, if they don't want to change, they won't ... Another challenge can be that if you don't establish that alliance early in the relationship, it takes quite a while to get client to agree to do homework and agree to start the change process. So, the timing is also very important. If we don't start it early, it prevents us from making a lot of progress in our relationship" - C 3

This respondent added the age factor of some clients whose actions pose as a great challenge to the therapeutic process. The participant has this to say:

"I can also say maybe a certain age group of people who are set in their ways, and they don't necessarily want to see any change. They are just there because these are older people who are set in

their ways maybe some of them also don't want to change and I'll say that it is much easier to establish a relationship or therapeutic alliance with the younger people than the older people. Again, the older people most of the time come with families or come with their spouses and they are the ones that it's a lot more difficult to establish a relationship with" - C 4

3.6.2. *Opposite sex factor*

A participant who believes that relational moments with the opposite sex come with some challenges which would make the therapist get very cautioned and eventually derail the pace and focus of the therapeutic relationship has this to say:

"So in terms of the challenge, when it comes to the opposite sex, you need to be very mindful because as you are connecting, as you are giving off your very best, as you're giving off your world, some opposite sex might think that it's a way of maybe demonstrating a romantic affair or maybe demonstrating some love for the opposite sex ... for instance, if there's the first time, the fact that person is experiencing such moments with you, the person will be wondering; should I open up, is she being genuine, or she's up to something. So, that could be the one challenge and also where there are cultural differences." - C 1

"...So, the way people perceive a relationship with others, sort of varies and in some cultures being in the presence of a man, say a male therapist, and the way the man will relate to you would communicate volumes to you. In some cultures too, being in the presence of man, the way man will communicate to you will make you see man as a father figure and the woman as a mother figure. In some cultures, and depends on how the relationship is" - C 3

3.6.3. *The counselling environment*

One counsellor is of the view that his environment within which the counselling takes place, greatly impact counselling and hence, relational depth. This counsellor mentioned that a good environment should be a conducive and a trusting one:

"...where the environment is not conducive or it's not a trusting one, regardless of how you demonstrate relational moments, the client would not connect. It will rather ruin the relationship because the client is already having different thoughts about where they find themselves... so in terms of trusting environment, for instance, you bring me to a place where I could see or I could feel the walls are hollow. I could hear people talk from the background, you bring me to a place where I have family members around, you bring me to a place or you asked me to visit you in a place where I work through lots of people, or you bring me to a place where even while we are talking or when we are talking, anyone can just open the door and come in to see me. Because some people, you know, the Ghanaian perception about counselling, something bad has happened that's why I'm getting there, and I also don't want people to know what I am going through. You know we believe in the culture of silence, I don't want people to know what I'm going through. I don't want people to know I'm going to see a counsellor. So, if that environment is not closed up, it's not such that I can hide myself a bit then it's going to impact what I tell you; I'd rather be mute and not share with you" - C 1

3.6.4. *Technological challenges*

Technology has greatly augmented counselling in a sense that clients can even be reached in a distant land, where both counselee and counsellor have not met in-person. One counsellor who seem to have many online clients cited technological hitches as a major setback to achieving relational depth during counselling.

"One, I would say, I've encountered personally has to do with online counselling; technical issues. So, my client said to me. Oh, doc, just when I was going to spill the heart secret out, that is when you freezed. Yes, so it just left, the emotions left, I wanted to cry but I am no longer feeling like doing it and then also, the clients would be like, oh, just when I was trying to understand you, then I had an interruption with the internet" C 4

3.6.5 *Visual distractors*

Similarly, on the issues of technology, the focus of oneself, as in how good looking he or she is on the screen, can be a great distraction to achieving relational depth, according to a respondent. Of

course, everyone would want to look good before others. But too much focus on looks can drift one's attention away from the core purpose, hence losing the opportunity to create or achieve a relational moment with a client.

"... and there is also the visual distraction of seeing yourself or the client seeing themselves on the computer screen... because if at this point, I'm talking to you, I'm seeing myself, I'll be asking myself Oh, is the other person seeing my ponds or my eyebrow. So, it wouldn't make me connect well when it comes to the relational moment. Because I'm seeing myself on the screen" - C 1

As indicated earlier, relational depth does come with challenges. After discussions with counsellors, it came to light that difficult and aged client, the opposite sex factor, the counselling environment, technological challenges and it's visual distractors are some of the few challenges that counsellors face when trying to exhibit relational depth

3.7. Enhancement of Relational Depth between Counsellor and Client

Views were sought from clients on how best relational moments or depth could be enhanced or achieved. Respondent came up with a number of suggestions, among which are, learning and supervision, attending of local seminars and workshops and reading wide.

3.7.1. Learning and supervision

Some of the responses regarding this issue as follows:

"Learning, learning, learning, supervision, supervision, supervision! Learning means you talk your cases over with a supervisor, recognizing that there's confidentiality, learn from other therapists read about the client population you're working with, what research is going on, what is working, what is not working. Allow the clients to teach you, pay attention, don't think that you are so good and every client will like you ... you learn and allow your work to be critiqued, be open about the fact that you don't know everything about yourself. Allow people to speak truth into your life" - C 5

As for the character, if you are a good listener, you have to listen very attentively, and that will lead to empathy. So, you must empathize and accept the client as he is. Some people have come to counselling having done so many socially unacceptable things. You are supposed to receive them as they are. You are supposed to accept them" - C 3

"We need to improve upon the quality of supervision that we give to our students. I think we should also enforce supervision; if we can do something better than we are doing currently to supervise students and demand for sightseeing" - C 2

3.7.2. Training and Reading wide

Much seem to have been placed at the doorstep of training institution; how the training is done, especially when it comes to practice. A counsellor was of the view that much practice be given to students to learn certain skills before venturing into the professional work.

"... I read a lot about counselling. I do read articles about counselling; I like to update my notes. If you look at my notes, I changed them every year and that also has helped me in bringing practice and lecturing together. If you have those two things going, that makes you a better counsellor and puts you in a better position to show great therapeutic alliance" - C 2

"The first point of contact is on the university campus and then you move out. But our students don't have that opportunity. So, pre-practicum is missing. Some of the Universities don't even have a Counselling Centre. So how can they practice? How can the students from that university practice? So, we want to go back there and train them and teach them specifically, the factors that we need and skills that we need to develop for us to become good professionals. So, I'll go back to training. I think we should teach. I think we should go back to the training institutions. I think we need to vigorously teach that ... I always emphasize that we need to do a pre practicum on campus like the university Centre where we did practicum. We want to teach certain skills before a student goes outside into the community to go and practice" - C 4

3.7.3. Local seminars and workshops

From the findings, it is discovered that seminars, conferences and workshops are some avenues for continues professional development. These meetings bring professions from diverse backgrounds where knowledge is shared. It is therefore important for individuals to take advantage of some of this meeting to learn from other professional. One of the counsellors has this to say:

“I also think that the many people who we have already trained, we can organize seminars on some of these aspects in the workshop. We can learn about some of these things that were not taught in class in the local seminars and then we can do seminars that people from other countries can have access to” – C 1

From the excerpts, it was deduced that relational depth can be enhanced by counsellors learning and availing themselves for supervision, training and reading more of materials in their areas of expertise and attending conferences, seminars and workshops. In doing these, relational depth can be exhibited in a smooth and unhindered way irrespective of how clients will position themselves.

4. Discussion

This section of the papers discusses the findings of this study in relation to existing literature. The section's primary focus is to determine whether the study findings agree or disagree with empirical literature on the study issues.

4.1. Characteristics Counsellors Exhibit to Show Relational Depth

The findings of the study on this subject matter suggest that there should be some observable behaviours or traits about the therapist that would make the client feel comfortable to connect with. In the views of the respondents, body language, trust and warmth, among others are some characteristics shown that depicts a relational depth of a therapeutic relationship. These findings agree with that of empirical studies (e.g. Gelso & Hayes, 2018; Holloway & Wampold, 2016; Lambert, 1989). For example, Gelso and Hayes (2018) observed in their study that, clients often times do not give in-depth information about their issues to counsellors unless some level of trust and confidence is established. Holloway and Wampold (2016) in agreement with Gelso and Hayes (2018) explained that the ethical requirements of counselling are largely dependent on confidentiality, trust, and privacy. This explains clients often demand assurance of secrecy before they establish strong relational depth with their counsellors. It is imperative to also note that, clients are likely to withdraw from their counsellors where they feel unwelcomed. For example, this study and other empirical studies such as Baldwin et al. (2007) have reported trust and warm embrace as two of the key moderating factors of relational depth in counselling. Been frank, truthful and true to oneself are all pre-conditions for warm embrace which establish some level of relational depth between counsellors and their clients. According to Gelso and Hayes (2018), counselling is one of the most difficult professions which requires some degree of emotional connections with clients. In the views of Gels and Hayes (2018) which is supported by Baldwin et al. (2007) successful outcomes in counselling largely depends on the ability of counsellors to establish strong bond with clients. Imperatively, developing the required emotional connection and bond with clients requires elements such as patients, trust, confidence and privacy. These elements can successfully be achieved when there is some sense of openness and warm embrace between the client and the counsellor (Kenny, 1996).

4.2. Gender of the Counsellor Playing a role in Relational Depth in Counselling

Gender and relational depth in counselling has received research attention over the past decade. Several studies have tried to investigate whether gender has any significant influence on creating relational depth between counsellors and their clients (Cooper, 2004; Eugster & Wampold, 2016; Lambert, 1989; Odinsky & Howard, 2017). For example, the empirical study of Odinsky and Howard (2017) tried to investigate whether gender of the counsellor or client matter in establishing

relational depth. Interestingly, Odinsky and Howard (2017) observed a similar trend to this study where clients indicated that, they establish swift and easy connection with counsellors with same sex. Imperatively, this study observed that, clients with opposite sex to that of their counsellors took some relatively long time before establishing their required bond and connection with their counsellors. Gender does not actually determine the outcome of counselling (Gelso & Hayes, 2018) however, developing relational depth in the counselling process may be dependent on gender. Gender actually influences the time frame which is required to establish relational depth but not necessarily the counselling outcome (Lo-Coco et al., 2011). Thus, the respondents in this study affirmed that, irrespective of the fact that gender influence the time they require to establish relational depth with their counsellors, they give greater consideration to the expertise of the counsellor. This finding generally connotes with what was observed in the study of Stein and Lambert (1984) where 87% of the clients ranked expertise as the major variable that influence relational depth. As it has already been explained, relational depth is very important in the counselling process. However, several clients often look at the counselling outcome which is largely dependent on expertise rather than gender or sex. Age can also downplay the role of gender in establishing relational depth in the counselling process (Stein & Lambert, 1984). According to Mearns et al. (2000), several clients often consider elderly counsellors as their parents when tend to open up more thereby fostering strong relational depth.

4.3. Experience of the Counsellor Playing a role in Relational Depth in Counselling

Kenny (1996) observed counselling as one of the evolving professions across the globe. The society we live in contemporary times keeps changing. Work-family role conflict in contemporary times put several people under stress and depression. While global phenomenon and issues keep changing, it becomes eminent that counsellors rely on their depth of experience to deal with complex life-threatening issues (Friedman, 2012; Kenny, 1996; Stein & Lambert, 1984). Establishing relational depth during counselling process in this complex intertwined society largely depends on experience of counsellors. This explains why the observations from this study agree with existing literatures such as Kenny (1996), and Stein and Lambert (1984) on the fact that, previous encounters help counsellors to develop strong relational depth with clients. Stein and Lambert (1984) explained that experience provide some leverage for counsellors to draw lesson from previous emotional connection errors and success stories. Experience in this sense becomes the learning curve which assist counsellors to develop strong and sustainable emotional relations with their clients. Counselling is considered as an emotional therapy hence either the counsellor or client is highly susceptible of being carried away in the counselling process. Being carried away through emotional sentiments can affect the counselling outcome (Kenny, 1996). In such situations, the counsellor needs to rely on experience in order to put him or herself on track.

4.4. Challenges in Exhibiting Relational Depth

There are always challenges to almost everything that can bring about positive change. Many counsellors would wish to establish a deep sense of relation with their clients without any hitches. But then, the challenges are enormous. This study unearthed some challenges such as counselling environment, difficult and aged client, opposite sex factor, technological devices, and online detractors. Researchers are of the view that a conducive environment, location of the counselling room, the beauty of the room greatly impact the effectiveness of counselling. The study's report was not different from what previous studies had to say (Dey & Kumar, 2020; Ebenuwa-Okoh, 2012; Kum et al., 2019; Pressly & Heesacker, 2001). Good environment is essential as it enables clients to be safe and comfortable in revealing information. Similarly, issues of difficult client is an issue counsellors do battle with in the counselling environment. Clients who do not want to work on assignment given in therapy, find it difficult to open up due to previous experiences with other practitioners and factors that may not be known to the counsellor; stifles the productivity of the therapeutic relationship. Sometimes, these clients will make practitioners question their own competencies (Clay, 2017; Sutton, 2021). It is expected that in achieving relational depth,

counsellors or practitioners should focus on exclusively interacting with the client and allowing the change to happen on its own (Shallcross, 2010; Softas-Nall & Hanna, 2013).

The study findings on the aged and opposite sex factor is also of great worry in Ghana's practice where culturally, it is expected that the elderly should rather be of help to the younger ones and not vice versa. Given that, elderly clients due to cultural bound issues may feel reluctant to connect with the counsellor who may be younger and similarly, the counsellor may also withdraw. Again, due to lack of training in counselling the aged, it becomes difficult to connect therapeutically due to the issues they present (Fullen, 2018). However, with proper training and high standard of professionalism, relational depth will be achieved (Mathews, 2016; Wood, 2020). Again, opposite sex interaction may also stifle relational depth as the show of warmth, trust and feelings for the clients might result in clients feeling that counsellor is showing sexual intimacy (Kim et al., 2020). Nevertheless, Sandage et al. (2020) is of the view that gender really does not create issues as purported by other researchers. But then, a focused counsellor with the right skill set and experience will be able to overcome such advances. In the worst case, it is expected that a referral will ensue.

Technological advancement has brought a lot of gains in counselling practice. This study is consistent with previous studies which are of the view that technological issues such as bad network can throttle relational depth and invariably ruin the therapeutic relationship (Amos, 2022; Amos et al., 2020; Treanor, 2017)

4.5. Enhancement of Relational Depth between Counsellor and Client

Developing sustainable relational depth with clients can be very challenging. This explains why some studies have researched into how counsellors can develop win-win relational depth with their clients to achieve successful counselling outcomes (Holloway & Wampold, 2016; Kenny, 1996; Obegi, 2008). Essentially, the outcome of this study which indicates training, learning and attendance of workshops and seminars as pathways that help counsellors to achieve relational depth agree with previous studies. For example, Kenny (1996) in his counselling research observed that counselling as a profession keeps changing, hence it becomes imperative that the counsellor learns and align him or herself to contemporary situations. The learning can be achieved through attendance to training, seminars and workshops (Kenny, 1996). Holloway and Wampold (2016) also noted that, upgrading one's knowledge in the counselling field through acquisition of knowledge in higher academic disciplines also help the counsellor to upgrade his or her skills. This process as noted by Obegi (2008) also helps the counsellor to align to recent occurrences. Attendance of workshops and seminars also give the counsellor some level of exposure and helps the counsellor to learn from the experience and expertise of experienced practitioners. Seminars and workshops also open the avenue to counsellors to abreast themselves with current industry practices (Stein & Lambert, 1984).

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

Developing strong bond with client is one of the major elements that influence achieving relational depth in a therapeutic relationship, hence the success of counselling session. However, counsellors are required to be ethically professional in order to leverage on relational depth to achieve the desired outcome for each counselling session. This study together with existing literatures has clearly demonstrated that, counsellors need to develop strong acquaintances with clients in order to delve deeper into the issues of the clients. This explains why the concept of relational depth in counselling has received so much research attention. Practically, developing relational depth is considered as one of the most difficult issues in counselling. However, it is required for clients to fully open up their issues to counsellors. This explains why issues such as trust, confidentiality, warm embrace, and privacy are considered by this empirical study as key variables that influence relational depth in counselling process. This empirical study can conclude based on the arguments presented in the results and discussion that, without strong sense of trust, privacy, warmth and confidentiality, it will be difficult for counsellors to establish deep but professional relationship

with their clients. Gender of either of the counsellor or client in relational depth has also received numerous research attention. The general conclusion that can be drawn on this issue based on the results of the study is that gender does not necessarily influence the ability of counsellors and clients to establish relational depth with each other. Although gender influences the time lapse which is required for clients with opposite sex to the counsellor, however it does not have any significant influence on the development of relational depth. The argument of this study is that, in as much as gender slows down the time required to establish relational depth, counsellors with opposite sex to clients are able to achieve relational depth if they leverage on their trust, privacy, warmth, confidentiality and experience. Since developing relational depth with clients can be very difficult, it becomes eminent for counsellors to always learn and update their counselling skills to align with best contemporary industry practices. Counsellors are therefore recommended to attend workshops, seminars, enrol in higher academic courses and counselling-related programmes to achieve relevant competences and skills that will help them align to the demands of contemporary counselling demands.

6. Limitations of the Study and Suggestions for further Research

Some limitations should be taken into account when interpreting our findings. First, practitioners who have taught for more than ten years were engaged in this study. It is expected that practitioners below ten years of practice would have contributed greatly to this study and brought about valuable information. Future research should engage clients and also early career practitioners to elicit their side of the issue. Second, having knowledge about the concept helps a great deal in achieving the purpose of the study. Unfortunately, few practitioners were willing to discuss the issue of relational depth. From the researcher's point of view, having diverse information from a lot of participants would have revealed a lot of information which may not have been captured in this study.

Funding: No funding source is reported for this study.

Data Availability: The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy restrictions.

Declaration of interest: No conflict of interest is declared by authors.

References

- Amos, P. M. (2022). Digitizing counselling practice: A study of student values and challenges associated with traditional face-to-face counselling and e-counselling modes. *Journal of Pedagogical Research*, 6(5), 174-186. <https://doi.org/10.33902/JPR.202217452>
- Amos, P. M., Bedu-Addo, P. K. A., & Antwi, T. (2020). Experiences of Online counseling among undergraduates in some Ghanaian universities. *SAGE Open*, 10(3). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244020941844>
- Baldwin, S. A., Wampold, B. E., & Imel, Z. E. (2007). Untangling the alliance-outcome correlation: Exploring the relative importance of therapist and patient variability in the alliance. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 75(6), 842-852. <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/0022-006X.75.6.842>
- Clay, R. A. (2017). Coping with challenging clients. *Monitor on Psychology*, 48(7), 55. <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2017/07-08/challenging-clients>
- Cooper, M. (2004). Towards a relationally-orientated approach to therapy: Empirical support and analysis. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, 32(4), 451-460. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03069880412331303268>
- Cooper, M. (2005). Therapists' experiences of relational depth: A qualitative interview study. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*, 5(2), 87-95. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17441690500211130>
- Cox, S. (2009). Relational Depth: Its relevance to a contemporary understanding of person-centered therapy. *Person-Centered & Experiential Psychotherapies*, 8(3), 208-223. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14779757.2009.9688489>
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, D. J. (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Sage.

- Dey, A. M., & Kumar, A. (2020). Physical framework for a counselling environment in India: Thematic analysis of counsellors' perceptions. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research, 20*(2), 336-345. <https://doi.org/10.1002/CAPR.12299>
- di Malta, G., Evans, C., & Cooper, M. (2020). Development and validation of the relational depth frequency scale. *Psychotherapy Research, 30*(2), 213-227. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10503307.2019.1585590>
- Ebenuwa-Okoh, E. E. (2012). Counseling environment as predator of guidance practice effectiveness in Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme. *Educational Research and Review, 7*(6), 133-137. <https://doi.org/10.5897/ERR10.196>
- Eugster, S. L., & Wampold, B. E. (2016). Systematic effects of participant role on evaluation of the psychotherapy session. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 64*(5), 1020-1028. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-006X.64.5.1020>
- Friedman, M. (2012). *The Healing Dialogue in Psychotherapy*. Jason Aronson, Inc
- Fullen, M. C. (2018). Ageism and the counseling profession: Causes, consequences, and methods for counteraction. *The Professional Counsellor, 8*(2), 104-114.
- Gelso, C. J., & Hayes, J. A. (2018). *The psychotherapy relationship: Theory, research, and practice*. Wiley.
- Holloway, E. L., & Wampold, B. E. (2016). Relation between conceptual level and counseling-related tasks: A reanalysis. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 33*(3), 310-319. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0167.33.3.310>
- Kenny, D. A. (1996). Models of non-independence in counselling research. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 13*(2), 279-294. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407596132007>
- Kim, J., Joseph, S., & Price, S. (2020). The positive psychology of relational depth and its association with unconditional positive self-regard and authenticity. *Person-Centered & Experiential Psychotherapies, 19*(1), 12-21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14779757.2020.1717983>
- Knox, R. (2008). Clients' experiences of relational depth in person-centred counselling. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research, 8*(3), 182-188. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14733140802035005>
- Knox, R., & Cooper, M. (2011). A state of readiness: An exploration of the client's role in meeting at relational depth. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology, 51*(1), 61-81. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022167810361687>
- Kum, B. R., Fongod, E. N., & Fongod, N. (2019). The physical environment (setting) and effectiveness on counselling practice in secondary schools in the Douala IV sub division of Cameroon. *European Journal of Education Studies, 6*(4), 246-266. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3345173>
- Lambert, M. J. (1989). The individual therapist's contribution to psychotherapy process and outcome. *Clinical Psychology Review, 9*(4), 469-485. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0272-7358\(89\)90004-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/0272-7358(89)90004-4)
- Lo-Coco, G., Gullo, S., Prestano, C., & Gelso, C. J. (2011). Relation of the real relationship and the working alliance to the outcome of brief psychotherapy. *Psychotherapy, 48*(4), 359-367. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0022426>
- Mathews, M. (2016). The experience of counseling among a Singaporean elderly population: A qualitative account of what clients report as beneficial. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology, 31*, 277-291. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10823-016-9290-4>
- Mearns, D. & M. Cooper (2018). *Working at relational depth in counselling and psychotherapy*. Sage.
- Mearns, D., Thorne, B., Lambers, E., & Warner, M. (2000). *Person-centred therapy today: New frontiers in theory and practice*. Sage.
- Obegi, J. H. (2008). The development of the client-therapist bond through the lens of attachment theory. *Psychotherapy: Theory, research, practice, training, 45*(4), 431-446. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0014330>
- Odinsky, D. E., & Howard, K. (2017). Gender and psychotherapeutic outcome. *Guilford*.
- Pressly, P. K., & Heesacker, M. (2001). The physical environment and counseling: A review of theory and research. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 79*(2), 148-160. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6676.2001.tb01954.x>
- Sandage, S. J., Rupert, D., Stavros, G., & Devor, N. G. (2020). *Relational spirituality in psychotherapy: Healing suffering and promoting growth*. American Psychological Association.
- Shallcross, L. (2010, February 14). *Managing resistant clients - Counseling Today*. Counselling Today. <https://ct.counseling.org/2010/02/managing-resistant-clients/#>
- Softas-Nall, L., & Hanna, F. (2013). Counseling and Psychotherapy With Difficult Clients/Family Members: An Interview With Fred Hanna. *The Family Journal, 21*(1), 117-121. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1066480712456830>
- Stein, D. M., & Lambert, M. J. (1984). On the relationship between therapist experience and psychotherapy outcome. *Clinical Psychology Review, 4*(2), 127-142. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0272-7358\(84\)90025-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/0272-7358(84)90025-4)

- Sutton, J. (2021). *Client Resistance in Therapy: How to Help Difficult Clients*. Positive Psychology. <https://positivepsychology.com/resistance-to-change/>
- Treanor, A. (2017). *The extent to which relational depth can be reached in online therapy and the factors that facilitate and inhibit that experience: A mixed methods study* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Roehampton).
- Whitehead, D., & Annells, M. (2016). Sampling data and data collection in qualitative research methods and appraisal for evidence-based practice. In Z. Schneider, D. Whitehead, G. Lobiondo-Wood, R. N. Faan & J. Haber (Eds.), *Nursing and midwifery research: Methods and appraisal for evidence-based practice*, (pp. 111-126). Elsevier.
- Wiggins, S., Elliott, R., & Cooper, M. (2012). The prevalence and characteristics of relational depth events in psychotherapy. *Psychotherapy Research*, 22(2), 139-158. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10503307.2011.629635>
- Wilders, S. (2007). Relational depth and the person-centred approach. *Person-Centred Quarterly*, 1, 1-4.
- Wood, S. (2020, March). *Working with Elderly Clients* | *Psychology Today*. Psychology Today. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-fraud-crisis/202003/working-elderly-clients>