

# Core Elements of Integrative Relationship-Based Work

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***“It is time to recall ourselves from the fear-filled lives we inhabit and begin to explore once again what it would be like if we approached one another through love, with delight and pleasure”. Wheatley (1998)***

## Introduction

I came across the quote above by a woman whose work I have admired and found inspiring for some time. It struck a chord with me as it speaks of what we could call the Meta position that gives a perspective from which to view the many conceptual fields and models studied and practiced by psychotherapists, coaches, and supervisors. What I think the movement of integrative work asks of us is that we stay open to a vast range of possibilities to draw from in our coaching, supervision and psychotherapy relationships, and that we do so from the perspective of ‘love, delight and pleasure’. Who chooses the approach, do both of us in the relationship choose from this range, and what really matters to us both moment -by - moment? What guides each of us? Is there a core skill and knowledge base that we all need to draw from whatever we call the work we do?

I agree with Clutterbuck (2009) that we gradually emerge from our reliance on models and tools into a stance of ‘Managed Eclecticism’. Jung once said ‘don’t become a Jungian’. I think what Jung meant by this is that we need to learn what we can and then be ourselves, not a clone of any of our teachers. Who we are as people, what trainings we have undertaken, what stage of life we are at, and what calls us to the work we do, will all play their part in how we work. I will argue here that whatever we do there is a core skill, and a perspective we bring, and it is our capacity and capability to make and sustain resonant/attuned relationships within which mutual influence and learning can take place. Such relationships are essentially a particular kind of attachment relationship.

As counsellors and psychotherapists we learn that the relationships we build are the vehicles of the journey of change we travel in with our clients. We learn about child and adult development and the impact of early life experiences on adult life: the ways in which unconscious drivers can block our creativity and resilience. Whatever model or theory we ascribe to will have its own assumptions about how people change and what part we may play in this process. We have all learned that what makes our helping relationships work is that we both need to be present and willing to engage with whatever is needed from each of us in the relationship. Among the long list of competencies that Coaches place a high value on is Presence as a key skill. Unless their training includes some aspects of child and adult development that includes the effect of early attachment experiences on adult life, some may not realise that presence is a key element of an attuned and resonant attachment relationship.

Perhaps in a sincere effort to carve out a place in the professional fields where relationships are the vehicle for the work, some have been too ready to eschew what the more established professions of Counselling and Psychotherapy have developed as their

knowledge base. In the move to integration it seems to me we are now recognising that there are many overlaps in these fields of work, many core elements that we all share that we would do well to acknowledge and see the value of.

## **My Background**

In this article I wish to explore some key elements of my current approach. Before I do this I give a brief outline of my own professional background. I discuss this more fully elsewhere Adamson (2011).

My background includes psychiatric social work, family and child therapist in a children's psychiatric unit, generic social work attached to a GP surgery, teaching and researching in university, Gestalt and Transpersonal psychotherapy, executive coach, and teaching and supervising across a wide range of professional groups, latterly focusing on supervision of coaches.

From this list you will gather that I have accumulated many different perspectives, tools and ways of working that have been built up over many years. My psychotherapy trainings began in the early 80's, and were completed in the mid 90's. The therapy and coaching fields have changed enormously since then and I have been especially influenced by the work of the interpersonal neurobiologists such as Siegel (2010), and Schore (2003) both of whom are also psychotherapists. Without the willingness of such people, and there are too many to mention here, who go beyond the conventional academic disciplinary boundaries, we would not have access to some really radical and effective approaches to working with people. Paul Brown's work in the field of coaching and neuroscience is known widely now, and he also draws on Siegel's work in his recent book, Brown & Brown (2012). He says 'it is clear that executive coaching is a special and privileged form of attachment'. At the heart of all of this work is the central importance of the attachment/ resonant relationships we build with our clients and with ourselves as vehicles for transformation.

## **Paradigm shift**

It is clear that a considerable number of coaches, counsellors and psychotherapists are already integrating a variety of conceptual fields and interventions in their work. New terms for the work are emerging, new networks being formed and this AICPT Journal is now into its third issue. Those of us who are combining skills and knowledge from fields that have hitherto been seen as separate are meeting fellow travellers on the integrative path, a kind of coming out, and feel we are in good company, 'oh, you are doing this too.'

What is it that this calls us to be doing, being and thinking about as we work in the service of clients who come to us for help with aspects of their working and home lives, and for coaches seeking to follow their calling to give their best as coaches with the help of a supervisor? Will we need to name a new professional field? Will we need to radically redesign the training programmes now spreading across many institutions, and groups of trainers who operate independently? Now that there is a coaching division within the BACP will it become the BACPC eventually?

Change in our fields is rapid and exciting. It is calling us to seek and to find new names for what it is we do so that we can acknowledge and embrace the new learning and apply it to the benefit of all those we work with. It also calls us to seek common ground in terms of

what works in the change process, and what this asks of us in terms of how we approach our work with people. We can recognise that we are all in the business of helping people learn to become more aware of who they really are, free themselves from the echoes of the past, enabled to draw upon their creativity, and respond rather than react to life's challenges.

There are many aspects of my ways of working that are evoked in me by this calling. In this article I wish to address some of them.

### **A secure base**

In our work as coaches and supervisors unless we have established a good rapport with our clients the work we do will lack vitality and ultimately disappoint both parties. Since we first came into the world we have all been learning about others and ourselves through resonant relationships. The importance of rapport and resonance in relationship as the basis for learning and change is the theme I wish to explore here. I will argue that it is central to all work that is relationship based.

Much of what we do in this work is about setting up the best climate for learning and changing, and paying attention when anything might be blocking or interrupting the process. In fact unless the base is secure it will be very difficult to repair and restore any breakdown in the process.

It is important that we remember that our first experience of being in a relationship, in which we learn and begin the dance of reciprocity, or turn taking, is preverbal. In other words we should never underestimate the power of our presence and our capacity to convey non-verbally that we wish to be a partner in the learning journey with our clients.

True presence sets up a resonant relationship in which the limbic centre, containing the amygdala, in the mother's brain, resonates with the limbic centre of the infant's brain. Because we are biologically made for resonance, we are enabled to begin to learn about what it means to be human, to learn to regulate our emotions and to develop the capacity for relationship making and sustaining during the attachment phase of our early development.

The templates we all have for relationship building and sustaining are shaped by our early attachments with our mothers and give particular shape to future relationships. Many researchers from interdisciplinary fields have followed Bowlby's work (e.g. Ainsworth & Co.1978; Schore, 2003; Meins et al., 2001; Siegel, 2007), linking styles of attachment to early brain development, and to the development of internal working models of relationships.

### **Echoes of early learning**

Because this early learning becomes part of our procedural memory and therefore outside our conscious awareness, we are guided by it until we are ready to explore our relationship patterns with someone, a coach or supervisor in this instance. There will inevitably be echoes or patterns of our early learning experiences that appear in our adult relationships. Some of these echoes will hold us back from full participation in all our relationships, some will affect how we work with others, and some will affect our health.

Here the concept of a 'good enough' attachment experience is a valuable reminder, Winnicott (1975). There is no such thing as a perfect attachment experience. What we may come to learn about our own attachment experience and the subsequent effect on the ways we relate to others, will serve us well. Some of us are uncomfortable around highly intellectual clients, others amongst us around highly emotionally expressive clients. Whatever our unique take on relationships, as we develop self-awareness, we can open ourselves out towards new ways of relating to ourselves and to others.

### **Awareness is key, the role of mindfulness**

The capacity for resonant relationships can be developed by a variety of means. Much attention is currently being paid to mindfulness-based practices that offer a route based on a combination of ancient spiritual practices and 21<sup>st</sup> century knowledge about resonant relationships. Minds can be changed within resonant relationships that attend to the flow of information and energy between people, (Siegel 2010).

When we sit with somebody who really listens to us, accepts us without judgment and sees us for who we really are, we become open to whatever this relationship may offer us. Here we could not do better than to learn about adding the 'Time to Think' approach to our contract with clients, (Kline, 1999).

Seigel's (2010) concept of Mindsight is useful here. He has coined this term to highlight the Meta skill we can learn to help us develop relationships that flow and are open to generative learning. At the heart of this idea is that we can learn to monitor and to modify our behaviour, and to attune open-heartedly to the person we are in the relationship with. His research, and that of Schore, (2009), shows that while our early attachment experiences are developmentally powerful in shaping our mental models, our brains have the capacity to go on changing. We can grow new neural pathways that support our new learning, and we can do this when we are in relationships that provide a secure base.

### **An example of coaching**

Margot is a very senior manager who has been earmarked for promotion, to head up a new department and to manage a much larger team than she does at present. She is showing signs of anxiety and distress at meetings to brief her for this new role. The company has high hopes for her but is recognizing that she may need individual coaching to help her get the best out of this opportunity. She is willing to meet with a coach.

At our first meeting she tells me that she has been shocked by how hard she is finding aspects of this proposed change. As we talk together I notice that she becomes calmer than she was at first, her shoulders drop a bit and her voice loses the tight quality it had to start with. I am conscious of tuning in to her to get a sense of what it is like to be her, and to feel concern for her, to open my heart to her. I am using my Mindsight skills to become aware of myself, choosing to offer her my full attention, and to attune to her. I sense that we are resonating by the small but subtle changes I see and hear, as she is calming down. Her body softens as she is breathing more fully, her voice is richer, and she holds her head up and sits back in her chair.

Margot is able to step back from her fear to connect to her grounded self, so that she can draw from her thinking self and reflect on the relationship that so troubles her. As we track

back through her career we see that this is the first time that she has felt she might not cope with what she has always striven for, promotion and more responsibility.

We explore what she feels has triggered her anxiety and discover that the person she will report directly to is seen by many in the company as a man who does not suffer fools gladly. She imagines that she will fail to live up to his expectations and be shamed by him. It turns out that for her it is a combination of fear of this man, and fear that she is not good enough. Margot recognises that he has some qualities that are similar to her father. She smiles and remarks, 'oh that old chestnut again, I thought I had got over that one!' I comment that it sounds like an echo from the past, and ask if she feels ready to let the association go to concentrate on the current reality. After a brief inner dialogue Margot agrees she is ready.

She is becoming mindful of herself and her situation, and I comment on how she is now able to think clearly about her situation, something she could not do while being so anxious. We also reflect on the culture of her company. In her experience there is a high value placed on performance, and the emotional life of colleagues is rarely attended to. She was very surprised that they had suggested coaching for her having noticed her distress. We agreed that although love in the sense of caring for each other's wellbeing seemed largely absent at work, yet they were concerned for her.

Margot resolves to build in time for reflection, to notice when she feels anxious, recall how much difference it makes when she breathes more fully and moves her awareness into her body. She will explore a mindfulness course she has seen advertised in her locality.

She accepts that this transition time is bound to evoke some anxiety, and has identified two colleagues at work she knows she can trust to share her feelings with. She is also aware that revealing her vulnerability to me and in future to her colleagues has enabled her to feel better paradoxically. We complete the series of coaching meetings with Margot saying that she now feels able to head out into her new role with greater confidence than before.

### **An example of supervision**

Jane, an experienced coach, works with senior managers in a range of companies. She shared with me recently that she felt she had made a new kind of attachment to herself. She said that in our work together she has the opportunity to learn to be in a relationship of the kind that can bear to explore the question, 'What is happening right now between us?' without fear of loss of the relationship. She described an incident with a client where she experienced herself withdrawing from him and feeling judgmental about the way he was relating to her. She felt he had come across as hostile and uncooperative. As she re-lived the moment, I asked her what she was now noticing in herself, in her body as well as her feelings and her thoughts. In that moment she noticed her breathing becoming shallow, her chest tightening, and the feeling of being shut out and judged. Here she showed she had learned to tune in to her whole self, to notice the embodiment of the transference experience, and to trust that she would learn from this kind of moment-by-moment discovery. She was then able to reframe these events in terms of data about her client's likely impact on his colleagues at work, a process that helped her understand the difficulties he had been describing in his work relationships.

Within the containment of our supervision relationship with its strong attachment relationship, Jane could also sense that she was triggered in her work by an echo from her

past. She was able to separate out two elements, her own echoes, and those of her client. This enabled her to begin to work from a place of compassion and curiosity with him.

## Conclusion

I have argued here that whatever we may call the relationship-based work we do, a core skill is the capacity to make secure attachment relationships. In such relationships we are all enabled to see ourselves, as we truly are, how we work and use our potential. A combination of many things can help us all to learn, to change, and to be as effective as we are able. Learning for change is best done within a safe and secure relationship that may become a reparative, new kind of attachment for our clients. We all carry echoes of the first learning we did in the attachment phase of our development as infants. With Mindsight we can all develop awareness of these echoes, bring them into consciousness and work to release the energy that has been shut away and unavailable to use. To know ourselves, to love ourselves and to be ourselves becomes possible through an attuned relationship with someone who can see us as we truly are through “the lens of love”, Harrison (2008).



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This article is based on an earlier version published in *The Listener*, a Journal for Coaches, New Series, no. 2. October, 2012, pp. 14-18. Looking at Coaching and Supervision Through the Lens of Love.