

The Real Relationship in Psychotherapy

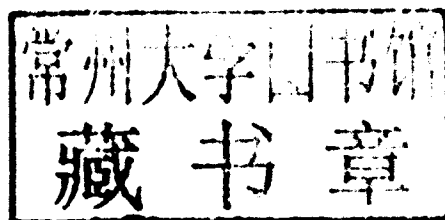
The Hidden Foundation of Change

Charles J. Gelso

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PREFACE

When I first started writing about the therapeutic relationship a few decades ago, the concept of the real relationship was perplexing to me. I had a hard time grasping how it fit within the matrix of relational factors in psychotherapy, especially transference and the working alliance. Was it merely the opposite of transference? Was it any different from the working alliance? Because of my fundamental questions, when Jean Carter and I wrote our early conceptual pieces (Gelso & Carter, 1985, 1994), Jean took the lead on the sections that focused on the real relationship. She believed that the real relationship was an important and distinguishable component of the overall therapeutic relationship, and her abiding belief helped me continue forward in exploring the real relationship.

From my early questioning, and tied very much to my experiences as a practicing psychotherapist and psychotherapy supervisor, clarity began to emerge about this concept. I gradually came to see that in every psychotherapy relationship there exists a person-to-person connection that is different from the work relationship (the working alliance) as well as different from, but not merely the opposite of, the transference and countertransference relationship. This personal part is generally not at center stage, but it is a key aspect of the connection between therapist and patient. I further came to

believe that this person-to-person element is more or less a part of each communication between the psychotherapy participants, especially those communications that are directly or indirectly about each other and their relationship.

The real relationship is a controversial concept. It resonates with some therapists, but others express serious misgivings. This has become very clear as my collaborators and I have presented our ideas and research findings to journal editors and at conferences. In this book, I seek to clarify the controversy as well as to clarify why the concept of real relationship is an important, perhaps vital, one in psychotherapy of every persuasion.

One of the problems with the concept of real relationship is the term itself. The term “real” implies that there must be something that is unreal, too. Indeed, in my first theoretical article about the therapeutic relationship, Carter and I (Gelso & Carter, 1985) used the term “unreal” relationship to capture the patient’s transference. This was probably not a good idea. As I shall discuss in this book, everything about the relationship is real in the sense that everything exists. The term real relationship, though, seeks to capture the genuine and realistic part of the relationship and communications within it. However, because of the problems with the term real relationship, in recent years I have been using the term personal relationship in conjunction with real relationship. Students and laypersons, as well as fellow professionals, seem to more easily accept the term personal relationship. However, some take issue with that term, too, because it seems to connote a nonprofessional relationship. Other terms have been used to get at the processes that I seek to capture, for example, the new relationship, the realistic relationship, the I–thou relationship. Each is problematic. After struggling with this question of terminology for a quarter century or so, I have concluded that there is no one term that fully and satisfactorily captures the process I am seeking to capture without carrying unwanted excess baggage. I believe that we shall just have to live with this, and I suspect that we can indeed do so, while keeping mindful that the processes or substance the term depicts are far more important than the term itself!

In this book, I seek to provide a thorough treatment of the real or personal relationship, beginning with the relational context in which it is embedded and the history of the concept of real relationship (Chapter 1), and following with an exploration of its two fundamental elements, genuineness and realism (Chapters 2 and 3); the theory of the real relationship that I have framed over the years (Chapter 4); examples of the manifestation of the real relationship in the actual therapy experience (Chapter 5); the measurement and empirical study of the real relationship (Chapters 6 and 7); and a summation of some key points in the final chapter (Chapter 8). Because I want each chapter to stand mostly on its own, the reader will note more redundancy in this book than in the typical textbook. There is overlap in the content across

chapters, and some case examples are repeated as they fit the material being discussed. I expect that the overlap will not detract from the process of reading the book, but of course the reader will be the final judge of that.

Although this is a scholarly work, I have also made the writing and presentation less formal than typical journal articles and books I have written. My intent is to speak to practicing psychotherapists and therapist trainees as much as to researchers and theoreticians, and it is my hope that at least some of the material dovetails with the reader's experience and thus comes to life. Because of this intent, the empirical parts of the book (especially Chapters 6 and 7) are presented in a nontechnical way, and the statistical elaborations are kept to a minimum.

I express my deep appreciation to the wonderful group of colleagues with whom I have had the good fortune to work over the years in studying the real relationship. As mentioned, Jean Carter took a major role in our early formulations of the real relationship. Jeffrey Hayes, too, contributed substantially in our book on the psychotherapy relationship (Gelso & Hayes, 1998). During the last several years, Jairo Fuertes, Frances Kelley, and Cheri Marmarosh have contributed enormously to the empirical study of the real relationship. I recall many years ago when Jairo was a graduate student in my seminar on the therapeutic relationship. His resonance to the concept of the real relationship and its importance spurred me on at a time when I had many doubts. His views influenced me more than I believe he realized. My graduate students currently and in the recent past also have been a major influence on this work, questioning in a way that has helped me stretch my thinking as well as supporting and actually conducting research on the real relationship.

I also express my gratitude to my daughter, Catherine Bayly, for her keen editorial eye and her meticulous and extremely helpful copyediting. I also thank Kalea Matsakis for her valuable feedback. APA production editor Harriet Kaplan's exceptionally careful and helpful editing of the final proofs is deeply appreciated. Finally, I extend many thanks to Susan Reynolds of the American Psychological Association for believing in this work and for guiding me through the proposal and final manuscript.

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The Working Alliance

During the past 3 decades, the working alliance has been vigorously theorized about and empirically investigated as an element that is vital to all therapies (e.g., Bordin, 1979; Horvath, 2006; Samstag, 2006). There is strong research evidence indicating that a sound working alliance contributes significantly to successful psychotherapy across the different theoretical approaches to treatment (Horvath & Bedi, 2002). The roots of this construct reside in the very beginnings of psychoanalysis. Sigmund Freud was certainly touching on something very similar to the current conception of the working alliance when he wrote about the importance of enlisting the patient as a collaborator and when he referred to the “friendly and unobjectionable transferences” that were necessary if analysis were to succeed (S. Freud, 1912/1953a). Although there were a number of key psychoanalytic papers on the alliance over the first 7 decades of the 20th century (see Gelso & Hayes, 1998), Greenson’s (1965, 1967) work stands apart because, first, he theorized about a *working* alliance and, second, he sought to differentiate it from transference (and countertransference) and the real relationship. Regarding the term *working* in working alliance, this importantly signifies the purposive and collaborative effort on the part of therapist and patient in their therapeutic efforts (Gelso & Samstag, 2008; Meissner, 2000). As Greenson (1967) suggested, the working alliance is an artifact of the treatment in the sense that the sole purpose of its existence is to further the work of therapy. This relatively transference-free component emerges *from* the real relationship, which is more basic and general and, as I elaborate later in this chapter, exists any time two or more persons encounter one another.

Given these parameters, Gelso and Carter (1994) defined the *working alliance* as “the alignment or joining together of the reasonable self or ego of the client and the therapist’s analyzing or ‘therapizing’ self or ego for the purpose of the work” (p. 297). In focusing on the reasonable side of the patient and the analyzing/therapizing side of the therapist we rely on the psychoanalytic concept of the *split* in the ego (Sterba, 1934). Thus, the ego is seen as having both reasonable/observing capacities and experiencing capacities (or sides). Although both sides are necessary for effective therapy (or living), the working alliance stems from the reasonable side, which itself allows us to stand back and reasonably observe ourselves and our experiences. The joining together of the patient and therapist’s reasonable sides allows each to observe, understand, and do the work of psychotherapy in the face of the many emotional obstacles and resistances that impinge on virtually all therapies.

When this joining together occurs, the conditions for an effective working alliance described by Bordin (1979) are facilitated; that is, the patient and therapist experience a sound bond; they agree (implicitly or explicitly) on