

Relationships in Counseling and the Counselor's Life

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Relationships in Counseling and the Counselor's Life

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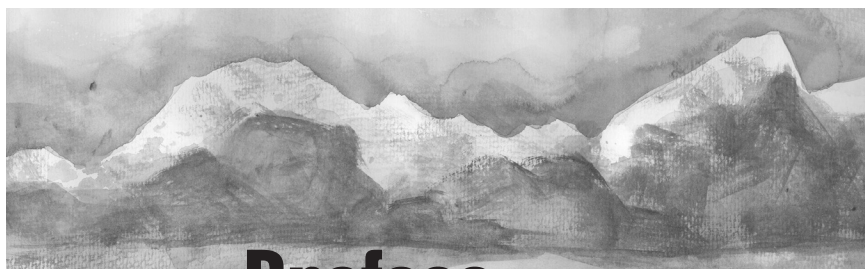
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Preface

What is truly special about human beings as a species? Is it that we have invented tools to increase our proficiency at gathering food and managing daily life? Is it our development of language? Perhaps it is our complex social behavior? Although we have developed these abilities to an extraordinary degree, at least compared to other inhabitants of the planet, they are hardly unique. After all, chimpanzees have been known to use tools to hunt for food or to defend themselves. Ants and termites are far better organized in their social networks, and dolphins and whales rely on their own verbal language system to communicate regularly.

What distinguishes us from other creatures is that we have developed the capacity for empathy: We are mind readers! Evolution has equipped us with the ability to reliably and accurately sense what others are feeling and to place ourselves in their shoes (or sandals). This has permitted us to decode others' body language, facial expressions, and verbal subtleties in such a way that we can usually assess whether someone is an ally and friend or a potential threat. This has made it possible for us to function more cooperatively within our social groups and to respond sensitively to members of our "tribe" who need support, reassurance, or assistance. The empathic mind is also what makes counseling work, in all its forms and permutations.

With respect to the practice of counseling relationships, we are talking about a subject so complex and challenging that it defies any simple explanation or easy answers. Dozens of models reflect their own particular emphasis or theoretical orientation, whether in the form of transference, working alliance, real relationship,

empathic resonance, collaborative stance, attuned responsiveness, attachment interactions, corrective emotional experience, or immediacy, to mention only a few. Each relational conception attempts to explain, or at least to describe, the mechanisms of change that take place during the time counselors and clients spend together.

In spite of the emphasis on empirically supported treatments (or ESTs), manualized strategies, and evidence-based practice (or EBP), relatively little attention is paid to the results of the studies upon which most models are based. A consensus in the field has emerged that many specific interventions and strategies have limited impact on counseling outcomes compared to the so-called common factors, which include client and counselor characteristics and, especially, the helping relationship. In addition, counselors feel undue pressure to incorporate particular strategies that may actually act as a barrier to more successful helping efforts. We all hunger for new techniques, novel interventions, and revolutionary advances in theory development, sometimes forgetting that the power of the relationship strengthens everything else we do to help people.

This book integrates the evidence supporting relational factors in counseling in a way that is both accessible and clinically useful. In addition, we focus on the reciprocal impact of the counseling alliance—how practitioners, as well as clients, are affected as a result of the intimate encounter, for better or worse.

An Unusual Collaboration and an Improbable Partnership

This is a book about relationships. It is also a story about our own relationship, which began 15 years ago when Rick was a doctoral student, taking an advanced group course that used one of Jeffrey's texts as a primary source. It was the first book in the field in which the author felt "real" to Rick, so much so that he was determined to meet Jeffrey at the next professional conference. Their first meeting was one of unequal power, with Rick as the deferential student and Jeffrey an established academic. There were other brief meetings at subsequent conferences, but mostly polite encounters. They would not have another conversation for more than 12 years.

Meanwhile, Rick worked hard to establish his own professional identity and reputation as a scholar and counselor educator. While Jeffrey continued writing two or three books each year about relationship issues, Rick mostly concentrated on his own research agenda and teaching, specializing in inferential statistics and assessment instruments (we warned you this was an unusual partnership).

In his wisdom (or audacity), the president of the American Counseling Association, who was a long-standing friend to both of us, as well as being Rick's mentor, invited us to team up to keynote the national conference. Jeffrey's first thought—and the first words out of his mouth during the keynote speech—was, "What the heck was he thinking?" It seemed ridiculous, first of all, to invite two people to deliver a speech together about relationships in counseling but particularly so considering that their styles were so completely different, their interests almost in opposite domains, and they hardly knew one another, much less ever collaborated on anything before.

Rick and Jeffrey tried to negotiate their differing opinions about the best format and structure for this speech, which represented one of the highlights of the careers of both men. Jeffrey was far more experienced in this area, having delivered similar keynotes at other international and national conferences in the past, but that didn't mean that Rick was any less opinionated about what they should do and how they should do it. In their dialogue with one another, they eventually settled on the idea of emphasizing process as well as content, which, after all, is what counseling is all about. What can one really do in 40 minutes that makes any kind of difference to an audience of several thousand people crowded in a hot room? They decided they would try to model the kind of relationship that they wished to profile in their talk, one that was collaborative, genuine, warm, engaging, and empowering. You know, the usual.

Jeffrey was quite comfortable with this format and was used to improvising and winging it, depending on his mood and the audience responses, but Rick much preferred a clear structure. As a quantitative researcher, he was far more familiar with presenting findings supported by numbers. He loved the idea that they could write out a script ahead of time and basically get to read it on the teleprompter on stage. However, Jeffrey was insistent that the experience would be more lively, entertaining, and interesting if they tried to *be* with one another in such a way that it reflected what they were actually talking about.

It was when they were about to walk out on stage that Jeffrey informed Rick that he made a few changes to the slides and not to be surprised if he "went off script a little bit." This doesn't sound exactly collaborative, but Jeffrey's intent was to help Rick loosen up a bit so they might capitalize on the strengths of their own relationship to support and empower one another. Rick was trying to calm his nerves and practicing deep breathing, so he barely registered what Jeffrey had just told him. It all became quite clear

when they landed on stage and Jeffrey proceeded to ignore their prepared slides altogether and walked to the edge to talk directly to the audience. He told them that Robert Smith must have been a little crazy to pair two such radically different professionals together and then give them a little more than half an hour to talk about the most complex, multifaceted, confusing, and significant feature of what we do—forming relational connections with clients.

Then, something magical happened. Jeffrey, the consummate storyteller, launched into a tale about his latest adventures working in Nepal with at-risk girls, highlighting how this was essentially a relational intervention. He finished with a flourish, leaving the audience practically in tears, and then turned to Rick and said, “Over to you, Partner.” Rick responded with a horrified look on his face as the next slide came on the screen profiling him with the words, “I love statistics!” The audience laughed uproariously at the awkward transition, wondering how Rick would recover.

What happened next sometimes occurs in rich, collaborative partnerships when the participants decide to just trust one another and go with the flow. Rick told his own story, also off script and spontaneously created, and they both knew at that exact moment that they were going to be okay, that this would indeed work. They weren’t certain what the association’s president imagined would ever happen in this shotgun marriage, but it turned out just fine.

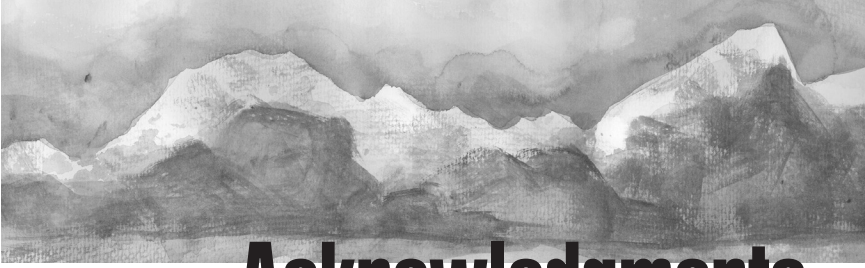
Jeffrey and Rick began their relationship in the customary and familiar configuration of unequal power that eventually was negotiated into one of mutual trust and optimal functioning, and this is what led them to coauthor this book together as a much more detailed and deep investigation of the most important subject in our profession—the most effective relationships that counselors develop and nurture with their clients, as well as with their loved ones.

Overview of What (Mostly) Follows

In this book, we address common misconceptions about what works in counseling and present strategies for further developing the counseling relationship and enhancing our own expertise and outcomes. Representing the strengths of the two coauthors—one, an empirical researcher and editor of the flagship journal in the field, and the other, a noted storyteller and writer—key facets of the counseling relationship are supported by engaging examples and stories that are integrated with existing research on counseling outcomes.

Part 1 introduces and reviews some of the basic assumptions that counselors, therapists, and researchers hold about the nature of helping relationships, including some of the discrepancies and debates in the field regarding how and why they empower change efforts. Part 2 describes some of the more practical ways relationships are used both as leverage and to facilitate trust and growth. We include chapters on some of the standard relationship interventions and also explain how relationships are embedded in a cultural and environmental context. We discuss how relationally based counseling is used to treat trauma, and how it uses storytelling structures, and we address some creative and innovative ways to enhance relational power. Part 3 moves to a discussion of how relationships operate in a counselor's personal life, such as how we are affected and influenced by our work, how we process disappointments and failures, how we deal with our own personal conflicts, and the ways we model in our lives what we teach to others.

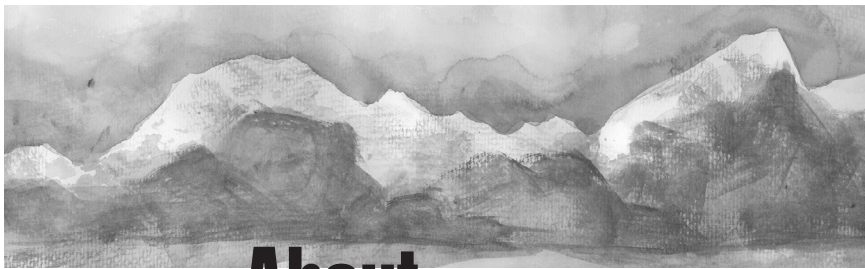
Because of the focus on core factors that lead to successful outcomes, this book is appropriate as a textbook for a variety of courses in the curriculum including Introduction to Counseling, Theories of Counseling, Counseling Skills and Strategies, and more advanced Practicum courses. Although we have infused research and examples related to diversity throughout the book, Chapter 5, "Customized Relationships," provides an opportunity for us to address issues of diversity with respect to the counseling relationship more directly. After all, it is the ways that we adapt and individually personalize our relationships that make them optimally potent and responsive.



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Many stories and case examples are included throughout the book, most of them offered without recognition. However, we do want to acknowledge a few counselors and therapists who graciously provided examples of their relational engagement with clients: Andrea Gustin, Jamie Littleton, Hannah Acquaye, Debbie Joffe Ellis, Leah Brew, Jeff Zeig, Hilda Davis, Marlene Klaborg Larsen, and Michelle Perepiczka.



About the Authors

Jeffrey A. Kottler, PhD, is one of the foremost authorities on relationships in counseling and on advocacy efforts. He is the author of more than 80 books in the field that have been translated into more than two dozen languages. Jeffrey's books are used in universities around the world and are considered classics among practicing teachers, counselors, psychologists, health professionals, and social justice advocates. Some of his most highly regarded works include *On Being a Therapist*, *Changing People's Lives While Transforming Your Own: Paths to Social Justice and Global Human Rights*, *Creative Breakthroughs in Therapy: Tales of Transformation and Astonishment*, *Change: What Leads to Personal Transformation*, *On Being a Master Therapist: Practicing What You Preach*, and *Stories We've Heard, Stories We've Told: Life-Changing Narratives in Therapy and Everyday Life*.

Jeffrey has worked as an educator and counselor in preschool, middle school, mental health center, crisis center, university, community college, corporation, and private practice settings. He has served as a Fulbright Scholar and Senior Lecturer in Peru, Thailand, and Iceland, as well as worked as a visiting professor in New Zealand, Australia, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Nepal. Jeffrey is professor emeritus of Counseling at California State University, Fullerton.

Richard S. Balkin, PhD, is a professor and doctoral program coordinator at the University of Louisville. He is the editor of the *Journal of Counseling & Development*, the flagship journal for

the American Counseling Association, and is past president of the Association for Assessment and Research in Counseling. His primary research interests include counseling outcomes, research methods, counseling adolescents, and cultural differences in counseling. He is a past recipient of the ACA Best Practices Research Award and the ACES Counseling Vision and Innovation Award.

Rick has published more than 60 peer-reviewed articles and book chapters, with the majority being quantitative in nature. He is the author of *The Theory and Practice of Assessment in Counseling* (Pearson) and has authored book chapters on research methods, as well as several articles related to research methods.