

Creating equilibrium: Four relational mechanisms that facilitate positive change

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Abstract

This paper uses critical realism to identify mechanisms that activate successful relationships. It draws data from a longitudinal, mixed-methods study of youth who used multiple services. It examines functionality of four relational mechanisms: power, recognition, responsiveness and mutuality that lead to positive change and explores the implications of these for practice with youth with complex needs.

KEYWORDS

change, critical realism, positive outcomes, relationship-based practice, youth

1 | INTRODUCTION

A substantial literature argues that the worker–client relationship is key to successful interventions. For example, up to 30% of positive outcomes are attributed to this relationship (Hubble et al., 1999). There is good reason, then, to focus on the characteristics of successful relationships. Critical realism (CR) provides an epistemological foundation for examining the multi-layered complexity of support relationships and reconciling multiple perspectives on this experience by illustrating how and under what circumstances relationships contribute to change (Peter & Park, 2018). This paper applies CR to data collected from multiple service-using (MSU) youth and their adult supporters. It briefly overviews relationship-based practice (RBP) literature and CR. Next, it outlines the study, considering two cases illustrating relational mechanisms identified in the qualitative dataset. It concludes with implications for practice.

2 | RBP

The idea that relationships social workers build with clients is critical to successful outcomes is not new and is found in many helping professions (Bastiaanssen et al., 2014; Duncan et al., 2007; Howe, 1998; Ruch et al., 2018; Tronto, 1993; Vollet et al., 2017). Relational aspects

of practice are referred to in different ways: RBP, relational practice, the helping/therapeutic alliance and therapeutic relationship. These approaches emphasize practitioners building and sustaining respectful, transparent and supportive relationships with clients, even under challenging circumstances (Ruch, 2018). The strength of the relationship is understood as the key to improved client outcomes (Ruch, 2018). For simplicity, the acronym RBP refers to these relationship-led ways of working.

Duncan et al. (2007, pp. 34–39) underline the importance of the relationship to client change:

Fifty years of outcome research shows that change doesn't result from focusing on the disorders, diseases or dysfunctions of youth ... Therapy works if clients experience the relationship positively, perceive therapy to be relevant to their concerns and goals, and are active participants.

While referring to the relationship as an alliance between worker and client, RBP also recognizes that each party holds different power. Specifically, youth clients often come from marginalized contexts where social and economic inequalities limit their power. Simultaneously, workers often hold statutory powers, augmenting their power within the relationship. Accordingly, professionals need

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to account for the impact of their power on this relationship. A strong, positive relationship creates opportunities to balance the power differential, increasing the chances that clients will remain engaged even when it's challenging. Accordingly, the relationship is prioritized as an ongoing and intentional foundation for practice (Beresford et al., 2008; de Boer & Coady, 2007). Although it is not a friendship, clients often describe the most impactful interventions as coming from workers who felt like friends, highlighting the significance of relationship quality in client change and drawing attention to the importance of not supplanting positive relationships already present in client lives (Ingram & Smith, 2018; Turney, 2018).

The RBP literature often refers to the capacity of the worker to build this changeable relationship as a 'way of being', suggesting an artful ability to come alongside a client and adapt professional expertise to their unique needs and characteristics (Cooper & Lousada, 2005; de Boer & Coady, 2007). Thus, the relationship drives the intervention. Howe (1998, p. 52), for example, argues that, 'The relationship does most of the therapeutic work. Different techniques ... merely provide a vehicle and framework for carrying out the helping alliance'. Whether recognized or not, social workers are always building relationships by building understandings of client lives. For Howe (1998), the issue becomes what they do with this knowledge. RBP focuses on ways of using this knowledge constructively so that workers respond in ways that increase the potential for positive change. RBP emphasizes flexibility, thoughtfulness, respect, tolerance and compassion and the capacity to retain a sense of calm when exposed to high stress and demands often characteristic of work with distressed clients (Smith, 2018).

RBP is not without critics, however. Some argue it ignores the impact of social or structural issues on client capacity to sustain change, suggesting the relationship cannot address these deep-seated issues. Concomitantly, workers need to provide an intervention within the confines of institutional power imbalances and limits. As a result, RBP has fallen in and out of favour in social work because of the need to understand the individual and their context (Turney, 2012). Contemporary RBP thinking addresses this issue, arguing that strong worker-client relationships can support empowerment and emancipatory practice (Turney, 2012).

In this regard, Morèn and Blom (2003) suggest that CR provides a way to understand the dialectics between human agency and social structure, which characterize the ethical and practical challenges inherent in social work. For example, capacity to care well for children is often compromised by poor housing, a structural issue over which parents often have no control. There is tension between care and control because social work involvement comes with both the intent to support positive change and the capacity to remove children when improvements are judged insufficient. Craig and Bigby (2015) argue that applying CR in social work helps expand understanding of how relational processes impact client outcomes, including impacts of structural factors on client distress. Accordingly, a necessarily brief overview of CR and its value for advancing understanding of the worker-client relationship follows.

3 | CR

Kazi (2003, p. 803) explains that social interventions 'take place at the interface of the individual and the social where multiple factors and influences are continuously at work'. It is consequently challenging to explain how the worker-client relationship itself creates change.

CR provides legitimacy to metaphysical discussions of unobservable mechanisms, the transient nature of knowledge as informed by experiences within intransitive aspects of contexts in which experiences occur (Bhaskar, 1975, 2002). It allows us to focus on subjective experiences of service users and service providers, the intersection of these experiences, embedding these interactions in larger explanations of causal mechanisms (processes, systems and structures) (Peter & Park, 2018). CR allows us to interrogate personal experiences within the larger systemic factors shaping those experiences. In the case of this article, it allows us to explore and understand the power dynamics at play within worker-client relationships, together with the systemic aspects of power impacting the processes surrounding those relationships, the use of RBP and its efficacy (Pilgrim, 2019).

CR divides reality into three separate levels: the *empirical*-events people experience, the *actual*-events whether or not they are experienced or observed and the *real*-unobserved mechanisms that generate events and experiences. Mechanisms explain how elements interact at the *real* level to create effects at the *actual*. Even though the *actual* is not directly accessible to us, it is real because it produces effects at the *empirical* level that can be observed. Explanations regarding why and how things happen in the social world—including within service provision relationships—are generated at the empirical level (Houston, 2010).

According to CR the social world comprises multiple interconnecting systems, each has its own generative mechanisms. Houston (2010), talking of social work, conceptualizes these systems as operating across five layers of social life each with their own mechanisms. The current study focuses on mechanisms at the *situated activity layer*, this is where social work relationships are formed and have their immediate impacts.

Mechanisms can interact, counteract and disable each other. They can operate synergistically, producing greater effects than each can alone. Because of this contextual contingency, CR is not predictive; it looks for tendencies. The concept of mechanisms helps explain how tendencies lead to observed effects at the empirical level.

In social work, mechanisms can be used to explain how relationships shape interventions and thus potentiate positive outcomes ... social mechanisms are thus about people's choices and the capacities they derive from group membership ... [it] is not programmes that work, but people cooperating and choosing to make them work. (Morèn & Blom, 2003, p. 43)

CR liberates us from narrowly focusing on immediately testable statements to explore the variability of effects, such as why a

relationship-building approach might work in one situation but not another, and unanticipated, transformative or surprising outcomes arising from these potentially powerful relationships (Morén & Blom, 2003). The CR focus on a stratified social reality also means it can explain effects in terms of human agency and social structure, addressing the key criticism of RBP noted above.

Mechanisms make things happen in social life, but they are not directly observable; they are located beneath the empirical level. This means that theory is needed to elaborate a conceptual model that explains how the relationship makes change possible (Morén & Blom, 2003).

Morén and Blom (2003 p. 55) have generated an overall theory of social work called CAIMeR. Key components of this theory are contexts, actors, interventions, mechanisms and results. In CAIMeR, interventions are a dialectical interplay characterized by 'oscillation between threats and offers'. Change emerges from this interplay. While a valuable overall theory, this explanation of intervention potential reduces the relationship to transactional interchanges. In the process, the complexity and potential of the relationship, as described in the RBP literature, is lost. Threats and offers do not seem sufficient, on their own, to increase the likelihood that youth will choose to engage in the support process and learn how to make and sustain positive change, especially if we consider the importance of subjective interpretations in the efficacy of RBP. Similarly, the mechanisms proposed by Morén and Blom (2003) do not account for how relationships may be able to make or break an effective intervention, again considering the role of both interpersonal and systemic power differentials. There is room, then, to explore the relationship further to uncover mechanisms that help explain how and why it has transformational potential. This is the focus of the current paper.

4 | METHOD

This paper draws on data from the Youth Transitions research which was approved by the University Ethical Review Board prior to commencement. Protocols ensured processes were respectful, protected identities, participants were well informed about the study and gave consent. The research is a national, mixed-methods, longitudinal study of patterns of resilience, risk and service use of 1366 youth, 506 of whom had experience of two or more (MSU) of the major systems: welfare, juvenile justice, mental health and non-mainstream education. MSU participants were recruited via their primary service providers. For further details of the research see <https://www.youthsay.co.nz>.

The research took place in New Zealand between 2009 and 2019. This paper is structured around two cases which reflect the experiences of a random qualitative subsample of 107 (100%) of the 506 MSU youth. This subsample reflected the age, gender, ethnicity, risk and resilience profiles of the 506 youth. The mean age for the subsample was 17.49 years. These youth were interviewed annually for 3 years. Youth were asked to nominate a trusted adult to be interviewed (person most knowledgeable [PMK]). Sixty-two per cent could nominate a PMK.

Analyses of survey data indicated the worker–youth relationship was a significant factor in positive change, accounting for a statistically significant 14% of positive youth outcomes 3 years post-service delivery (Sanders et al., 2017). That interventions had this sustained, positive impact raised the question: What is it about this relationship that makes the difference? The qualitative data was explored to understand how and why the relationship had these positive effects (Figure 1).

CR analysis was chosen because it focuses on human components of interventions, considers how different contexts impact outcomes and integrates multiple perspectives on the same issue. CR analysis involves two steps: abduction and retroduction. These steps are similar to how social workers make sense and create meaning in their practice (Craig & Bigby, 2015). Abduction involves two researcher-driven steps (Peter & Park, 2018) (Table 1).

Common patterns across the literature and interviews allowed consideration of how youth and PMK expressions of relational experiences added to or raised questions about extant RBP concepts. Coding included examples of confirmatory examples and counterfactual instances (see Collaboration row, Table 2). Retroduction generated explanations of how and under what circumstances these experiences linked to positive outcomes (Peter & Park, 2018). Table 2 illustrates analysis processes used to arrive at the four mechanisms discussed here.

5 | RESULTS

Statistical analysis identified a strong connection between better outcomes and the quality of the relationships workers built with youth. Qualitative data were analysed to understand what features of this relationship made the difference. Analysis suggested four mechanisms supported social workers in building these positive changeable relationships. The discussion below uses two cases that illustrate the key factors found across the 107 youth and 65 PMK interviewed. Case 1 is a social worker (PMK) explaining her work with one youth and also her overall approach to practise. Case 2 is a youth describing both positive and harmful professional relational practices.

As previously discussed, Morén and Blom (2003, p. 55) argue interventions are a dialectical interplay between worker and client characterized by 'oscillation between threats and offers', suggesting a transactional process of worker and client both giving and withholding. Data from the current study suggests successful interventions were more akin to a dynamic equilibrium achieved through negotiations based on workers demonstrating respect and understanding. This relational approach seems to disrupt the neoliberal sense of a social contract that frames contemporary social work encounters (Larufa, 2019). Young people's narratives challenge these notions of responsibility that shape relationships within the helping professions. Responding to what youth explain is helpful, youth ask that social workers give a lot more than they will receive in their relationships with youth, but to give in ways that subsequently enable young people to take greater responsibility (Munford & Sanders, 2017). These

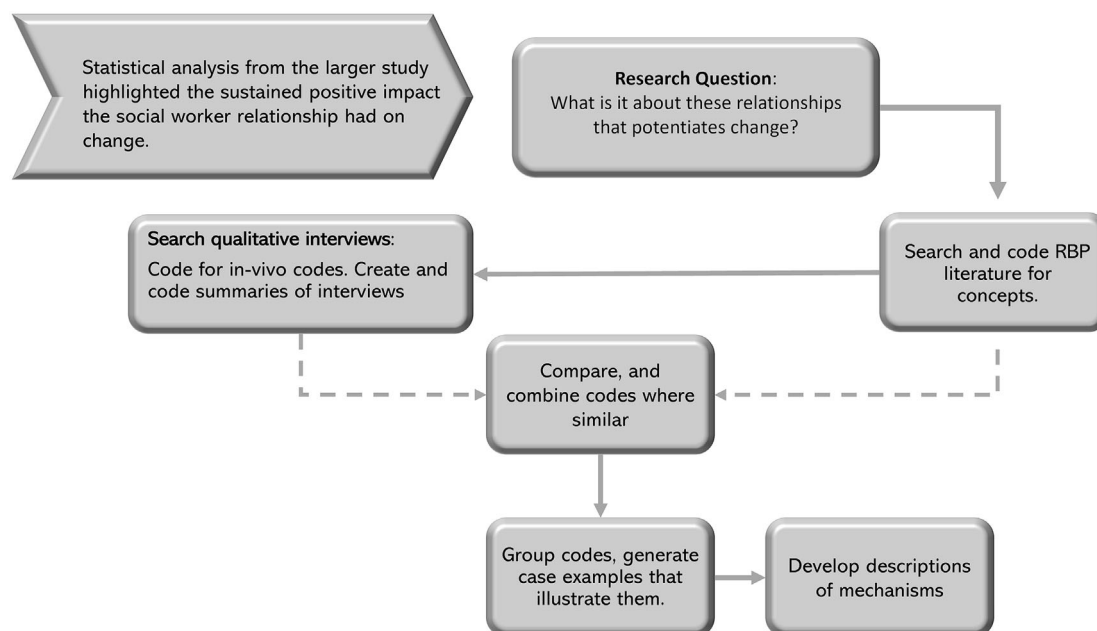


FIGURE 1 The qualitative research process.

TABLE 1 Abduction coding in the current study.

| Abduction coding item | Items coded |
|---|-------------------------------|
| Literature | |
| RBP literature to identify theoretical concepts | 35 key texts (see references) |
| Qualitative data | |
| Descriptions youth and their PMK gave of worker–youth relationships | 107 (youth) + 65 (PMK) |
| Summaries of youth experiences | 107 |

relationships establish a secure relational space for youth which enables them to draw on the resources workers have to offer.

The dynamic equilibrium balances the diverse pressures on the relationship for worker and client. It is achieved by subtle and not-so-subtle negotiations for common ground about what worker and client will do together. Importantly, this equilibrium is not created within and does not emerge from a place of equal power between worker and client. Rather, in a context where social workers hold significantly greater power than clients, they also make greater contributions and concessions to establish equilibrium. Within this context, clients are supportively scaffolded to move towards equality within their relationships with workers and related empowerment within their lives, bearing in mind the structural constraints of services and society.

The factors identified help support workers in establishing these relationships. As can be seen from the discussion of Marama, below, this applies in mandated and non-mandated interventions because, to be successful, client and worker need to establish some level of common cause regardless of the level of statutory direction. The equilibrium is dynamic because of the flux present in social work interventions. The equilibrium is fluid, changing over time as

circumstances change (Houston, 2010). Reflecting the dynamism and contingency within the intervention, there are also times of disequilibrium where the relationship is disrupted, risking poor outcomes. Opportunities for youth to make steps towards change are created through social worker management of this dynamic equilibrium.

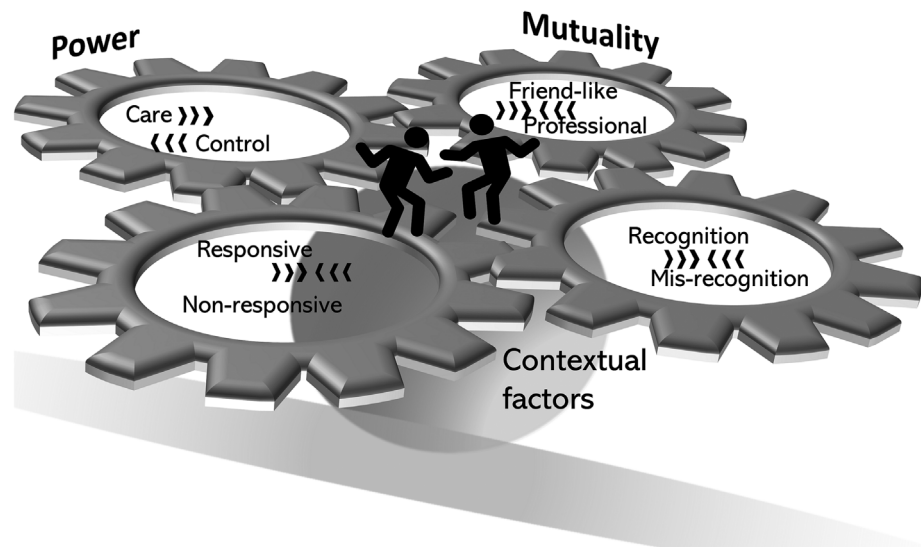
Four mechanisms activated this equilibrium; these were observed within most of the interventions recounted by participants. When interventions worked well, that is, when youth felt they were making progress, the mechanisms worked together, operating synergistically. But equally, as seen in Timoti's recounting of Probation and WINZ experiences, there were also notable situations where this did not happen. This highlights the contextual contingency of mechanisms—they activate or not and in particular ways depending on wider circumstances (Morèn & Blom, 2003). The negative impact of these relationships on Timoti and his capacity to achieve positive outcomes provides counterfactual evidence supporting the salience of these mechanisms. Figure 2 illustrates the four mechanisms.

5.1 | Power: Care and control

While a sense of being in the relationship together as equals is fundamental to RBP and critical to successful outcomes, there are nonetheless clear power differences between workers and clients (de Boer & Coady, 2007; Turney, 2012). While worker and youth need to be invested in the relationship, the nature of this investment differs. Importantly, workers have a specific responsibility to find ways to make the relationship work, responsibility that does not apply to youth (Turney, 2012). While creating a sense of common purpose is important, it is disingenuous to ignore the power practitioners have over youth; the critical issue is how they use this power (Turney, 2012).

TABLE 2 The analysis process.

| CR stage | Descriptions in the literature (citation examples) | Qualitative interview (I) and case summary data (C) |
|--------------|---|---|
| Abduction | Way of being, calm, friend but not a friend and authoritative (Cooper & Lousada, 2005; de Boer & Coady, 2007). | Timoti said Dan had a 'real heart' (I). Dan shared some aspects of himself but still retained his role as a prison officer (C). |
| | Recognition—asks questions, listens to answers, curious and identity (Houston, 2010; Ruch, 2018; Turney, 2018). | I guess with myself being Māori, I am very aware of how important identity, belonging and connection and all those things are. I might see that as important, whereas others might not think that way (I). I had just got used to being a number—a meal ticket for them [workers] but not important enough for them to help me (I). |
| | Collaboration, alliance, shares power, understands power over and reciprocal (Duncan et al., 2007; Houston, 2010; Howe, 1998). | I feel trapped, I will never be free, able to run my own life. They mixed it up and said 'no, you had your daughter that time, not this time'. Well, you know, I just said 'well whatever you are proposing, I will go with that'. They said, 'community detention'. I said 'you know how are you expecting me to get out and do my job searching if you are going to put me on a bracelet?' (I) |
| | Safe, reliable, trustworthy (Bell, 2002; Christiansen et al., 2015; Honneth, 1995; Kohli & Dutton, 2018). | Marama was clear with Daytona about why, when and how she would exercise control. While this might have been a risk to the relationship, it did not damage it. Rather, it created a secure base on which the relationship could grow. Knowing Marama would act to protect her gave Daytona a sense of safety (C). |
| Retroduction | Understands context (Blom & Morèn, 2010; Craig & Bigby, 2015; Turney, 2012). | Daytona's attempted suicide represented anguish and her own need to be able to control something in her life (C). Daytona has burnt her bridges with her immediate family. So, they are not there to help her through all this. That is a loss in terms of emotional support and attachment, which is a big part of her offending and her suicide attempt (I). |
| | Statements about how different aspects of the relationship facilitate change. Development of case examples to illustrate these. Development of mechanism statements | |

FIGURE 2 The four mechanisms.

Balancing care and control are key social work tasks (Craig & Bigby, 2015). Interventions are premised on the need for care and support. Simultaneously, professional involvement in the life of another person inevitably contains an element of control (Bell, 2002). Excessive use of control can undermine the value of care, limiting intervention efficacy. For their part, youth can exercise their power by

not attending appointments, an option that is not part of the professional delivery of social work, although youth did report that their workers missed appointments.

Interview data suggested that power as a mechanism often manifested itself in the equilibrium created on the care and control dimensions of the relationship. At any point in time, the relationship could

be high on care and control, low on both or high on one but not the other. The balance depended on context and its success relied upon workers carefully managing youth care and control needs given contextual factors. This is illustrated in both examples.

Marama, a juvenile justice social worker, began work with Daytona in a mental health ward following Daytona's suicide attempt. Early on Marama's control was high as she worked with other professionals to help keep Daytona safe. She also demonstrated a lot of care, in relation to the control aspects required of her, and in terms of her genuine care for Daytona. Marama understood Daytona's attempted suicide represented anguish and her need to be able to control something in her life:

Marama (juvenile justice social worker):

Daytona is pākehā [white] and I often see this with the pākehā youth. They have just such smaller family networks than Māori [indigenous] youth. This gives me fewer people to call on to support them. For instance, in going through the youth court, as with Daytona, where I am working around the offending that occurred prior to her suicide attempt. It also means the options of exploring whakapapa [genealogy] and connecting with the larger whānau and hapū [extended family] are not available. Whakapapa is a huge identity resource for Māori youth. We can get big changes not only because there are lots of people they can connect to, but because learning about all these connections around who you are and where you belong is just massive for youth, who are often quite lost. In Daytona's situation, these resources aren't available and so I have to look elsewhere to find people to connect her to, to help her find her feet, find who she might be. Daytona has burnt her bridges with her immediate family. So, they are not there to help her through all this. That is a loss in terms of emotional support and attachment, which is a big part of her offending and her suicide attempt. Thinking about culture and identity, their absence from her life also leaves a big gap she needs to fill around who she is and where she stands. There is this big hole for her, which of course is part of her getting pregnant, the offending and the suicide attempt. So, once we got through the initial crisis it was about working to try to find stable, reliable people who we can support to support her. Hopefully they will stay the course. That is going to be a big ask given she needs to work through the court processes and any consequences from that as well as the loss of custody of her baby, which of course was the thing that precipitated the suicide attempt.

This quote highlights that initially Marama was positioned high on control. This control, however, was informed by her understanding of Daytona's situation and driven by her care for Daytona. Over time, the balance shifted so Daytona exercised greater control concerning her own safety, and Marama's control diminished, while her care remained high. Over time, Daytona also became able to care for herself, further shifting the balance. Marama understood that, ultimately, she could not stop Daytona from trying to take her own life (her control was limited) equally, she knew that demonstrating care and deploying soft control, responding to Daytona's experiences, could create circumstances for Daytona to grow (de Boer & Coady, 2007; Morèn & Blom, 2003). By shifting the point of care-control equilibrium on the power mechanism, Marama gradually created an environment where Daytona could positively

exercise her own control, imagine and start creating positive options herself.

Importantly, Marama was clear with Daytona about why, when and how she would exercise control. While this might have been a risk to the relationship, Marama's transparency did not damage it. Rather, it created a secure base for the relationship. Knowing Marama would protect her, and the limits of that protection, gave Daytona a sense of safety. Marama's honesty provided an opportunity for careful discussion about what was happening for Daytona and how Marama could be of use. The dynamic equilibrium between care and control facilitated the development of Marama's relationship with Daytona, focusing their work.

Timoti talked of Dan, a prison officer who worked with him during a 2-year prison sentence. Timoti said Dan had a 'real heart'. Dan shared some aspects of himself but retained his role as a prison officer, demonstrating care and control. Together, they developed practical post-release plans to help Timoti get 'the system' out of his life. Timoti said Dan saw past the labels applied to him (drug dealer and fighter) and believed in his capacity to create this new future.

Before Dan, the system's involvement in Timoti's life had been high on control and very low on care. All major arms of state control had been involved: welfare, police, justice and income support (WINZ). A major worry for Timoti on release was being able to sustain himself without crime. He explains these tensions and contextual challenges:

Timoti (youth):

I've got fines I have to pay back, debts to WINZ from overpayments they made but didn't tell me about until it was huge: \$2500. I will never pay all that back. I feel trapped, I will never be free, able to run my own life. I get breached because WINZ schedule appointments at the same time as probation, and WINZ don't clear their texts, but I can't call them because I have no minutes on my phone, so who do I let down? Probation and go back to prison, or WINZ and get my benefit cut? It never ends...I missed a third probation appointment, but I'd rung and said, "I can't afford to pay my rent if I don't go to work today", but the message didn't go through soon enough and I already got breached, and then I was back up in court for breach... it counts as another conviction. It just piles on. I haven't offended since I got out of jail... the only thing I've been in the system for since then, is breaching. There was no leeway. One time I said, "I have my daughter this time". They mixed it up and said, "no, you had your daughter that time not this time". Well, you know, I just said "well whatever you are proposing, I will go with that". They said, "community detention". I said, "you know, how are you expecting me to get out and do my job searching if you are just going to put me on a bracelet".... It's not easy, it's like once you're in the system, it's really, really hard to get out, even though you're trying really hard. The odds are stacked up against me.

As explored below (mutuality), Dan's relationship with Timoti retained high levels of control required by his position, but in ways Timoti recognized as genuine care. Key for Timoti was Dan's continuous encouragement to create practical, achievable plans to get free of the system. Possible pitfalls were discussed, and strategies identified. So, Dan showed care in a highly controlled environment by activating practical and realistic energy in Timoti about how to create this post-prison life.

Of course, the operation of the power mechanism hints at the presence of other mechanisms, such as recognition and mutuality. Mechanisms do not operate in isolation; the intervention is nested in an open social system where multiple mechanisms are continuously operating (Craig & Bigby, 2015).

5.2 | Recognition

Recognition theory (Honneth, 1995) has a growing importance in social work. Turney (2012, p. 151) highlights the importance of recognition to healthy human development: 'It is through the relational experience of recognition-recognizing and being recognized by the other-that the infant learns to understand him or herself'. Applied to the social worker-youth relationship, recognition involves seeing each youth as a whole person rather than a collection of problems needing solutions. Conversely, misrecognition creates uncertainty and insecurity, which undermines effective relationships (Houston, 2010). As a mechanism, recognition helps youth trust their worker.

In their interviews, youth often described recognition as their worker understanding their 'back life', the larger life lived around the intervention. A key way workers achieved dynamic equilibrium was by calibrating their interactions around cultural and contextual dimensions of youth lives, as Marama explained. Many Māori (indigenous) youth talked about getting that 'whānau feeling' from their worker, a diffuse

sense that their worker knew how relationships worked in the Māori world; this made their worker feel trustworthy. But this is not just relevant to working with indigenous youth. Houston (2010) draws attention to the fundamental significance of culture in social work. Young people's prior knowledge, understandings, ways of making sense, language and meaning systems all need to be understood and drawn on by the worker to establish and sustain an impactful relationship. The RBP literature provides some guidance regarding culturally anchored mechanisms that activate effective relationships. For instance, when workers invest effort in understanding their cultural and social worlds and their life histories, clients report greater engagement and better outcomes because workers adapt to the realities clients face. Clients then feel understood and accepted (de Boer & Coady, 2007; Duncan et al., 2007).

Marama worked to achieve a dynamic cultural equilibrium with youth, whether or not they were Māori. Rather than a contextual factor located outside the relationship, recognition was integral to her practice, as seen in her understanding of whakapapa-based (genealogy) resources that were not available to Daytona. While these familial resources were absent, Marama used the principles of connection, identity, belonging and meaning-making to support Daytona to start filling the 'big holes' that fractured her attempts to create a meaningful life.

Similarly, a chance supermarket encounter between Dan and Timoti highlighted the way contextual contingencies (Blom & Morèn, 2010) can set off cascades of effects. In this case, recognition created space for change. Timoti was surprised that Dan remembered him and the plans they had made together:

I had just got used to being a number—a meal ticket for them [workers] but not important enough for them to help me. When Dan spoke to me at the supermarket, I was surprised, wanted to run, but he put his hand on my arm and asked me how I was.

Dan was genuinely interested in Timoti; they went to a café to talk about Timoti's plans to reconnect with his father and through him to his culture. This had gone badly, his father seemed only interested in Timoti's capacity to sell drugs. However, while staying with his father, he met two kaumatua [elders] who wanted to support Timoti reconnect with his whakapapa. The troubles with WINZ and probation had distracted Timoti from this. Dan encouraged Timoti to return to the kaumatua, seek their support with WINZ and probation and pursue his plans to learn more about his culture. Timoti had felt ashamed about the problems with the state agencies and stopped meeting his kaumatua, but in talking with Dan found the confidence to go back.

At our last interview, things were still difficult with WINZ and probation. However, the support from the kaumatua had made a difference in other facets of Timoti's life, including staying away from crime. Highlighting the power of recognition to enable change, the connections with his whakapapa and cultural knowledge from the kaumatua transformed how he saw himself and his future. He was still struggling to pay off fines, and the relationships with probation and WINZ remained challenging, but he had access to supportive, culturally anchored resources that enabled him to better manage these, so they were less damaging than they had been.

Dan's response to Timoti in this chance encounter highlights how workers can activate the recognition mechanism when they are attentive to what youth tell them and carefully respond. Dan did not do anything specific to help, rather he encouraged Timoti to seek support from the kaumatua; to be open to the potential and power of recognition from within his own culture. This created the possibility for Timoti to access ongoing cultural support—the resource most likely to assist him achieve his goals. Dan could have used his social capital to try and influence probation and WINZ officers to give Timoti a chance to move from misrecognition to recognition. While possibly being effective in the short term, this did not hold the potential for longer term gains that using his own agency to reconnect with his cultural roots held.

5.3 | Responsiveness: Time

Responsiveness is critical to the development of an effective helping relationship (de Boer & Coady, 2007). Responsiveness creates a sense of safety and gives confidence that when youth really need support they know their worker will be there. Being available when youth need support demonstrates that their lives and their realities are important and understood (Duncan et al., 2007). Bell's (2002) work also highlights the central importance of workers keeping appointments and keeping their word.

In the interview data, responsiveness was reflected in youth comments that workers had the time for them; as Timoti intimated, they were more than just a number. Timoti also described what lack of responsiveness looked like in the interactions with WINZ and probation, who had let him down. Being able to respond at the time youth need it rather than only on scheduled time was important.

Youth explained that this type of responsiveness built trust in their worker (Sanders & Munford, 2019).

Negotiating a dynamic equilibrium in relation to responsiveness brings others into the intervention, in addition to youth and their worker. For instance, it introduces managers and funders who may place constraints on worker availability; it may also involve other professionals in youth lives, such as school personnel, as well as people from young people's own worlds (Blom & Morèn, 2010).

Taking up Daytona's story, her life had been shaped by the unpredictable appearances of statutory social workers and abrupt moves to new caregivers. Marama's involvement followed a series of violent substance-fuelled episodes culminating in Daytona's attempted suicide following the removal of her baby. Marama was a youth justice social worker, thus her mandated role was the offending, but she could see the long shadows cast by this larger history of statutory disruption and grief in Daytona's life.

Daytona had no choice about Marama's involvement (power), whether she benefitted from this depended on Marama's management of the early encounters (responsiveness). Here, Daytona would make the decision about whether or not she would accept Marama's offers of help (de Boer & Coady, 2007; Duncan et al., 2007). Rather than quickly completing the legislatively defined assessments, Marama completed them across several visits. She understood institutional time was not the same as youth time. She used her power and deployed the responsiveness mechanism to create opportunities to build their relationship through the demonstration of care and recognition. Marama asked questions, listened carefully and explored Daytona's story, as Daytona saw it, giving her time to explain and describe her experiences. While organizationally important, the information was of secondary significance. Marama knew it would be partial, likely needing modification as time passed:

A pressure for quick solutions deprives both service users and workers the opportunity to question themselves, reflect on these questions and find new possibilities. Such pressure also encourages competition for the 'best' description or interpretation of a situation. (Kohli & Dutton, 2018, p. 86)

5.4 | Mutuality: Friend-like and professional dispositions

Nowhere was the subtle nature of the equilibrium workers need to achieve more clearly apparent than on the final mechanism, mutuality. In the current study, youth repeatedly made comments about their worker being friend-like. Indeed, these qualities are the most referenced worker characteristic in the literature discussing client reports of successful interventions (Bell, 2002; Beresford et al., 2008; de Boer & Coady, 2007; Ingram & Smith, 2018). Practice holds healing power when done within a context of mutual liking and respect (de Boer & Coady, 2007). Demonstrating that they see the inherent value in each youth, social workers establish an emotional connection

that helps youth to build coping capacity and self-esteem (Bell, 2002; Turney, 2012). Also referenced in the literature as reciprocity (Turney, 2012), this sense of give and take in social work relationships fosters a sense of ordinariness, making a potentially intrusive relationship feel familiar, less threatening and more comfortable. As a result, youth are more likely to be open and honestly share their experiences, in turn increasing the chances the intervention will be more relevant (Beresford et al., 2008). Youth in the current study identified the interventions that made the most difference were delivered by professionals who 'felt like a friend'. But equally, they recognized their workers were not their friends.

Timoti's experiences illustrate the dynamic equilibrium between being friend-like and professional. When asked what it was about Dan that stood out as different Timoti said, he 'just felt a bit like a mate who had my back'. Timoti could show his vulnerability and uncertainty to Dan and be confident that Dan would not use that knowledge against him. Being safe marked the relationship as different. This helped Timoti honestly engage with Dan over his plans. Timoti knew that Dan was still a prison officer, but he also understood Dan would not use this against him. Timoti felt Dan understood the real challenges inmates faced, but also the ways that these might be addressed, and he approached Timoti on a human level.

It is critical that workers do not supplant naturally occurring relationships in youth worlds or create relational bonds that cannot continue. When explaining how she approached her work with Daytona, Marama described building a strong relationship, but at the same time exploring all the people in Daytona's own world who might provide a safe enduring presence when the intervention ended. She knew Daytona needed ongoing support from within her own networks and that friend-like was not the same as being a friend. Important ingredients that attach to this friend-like character are

- genuine concern, warmth and trustworthiness (links to the power mechanism) (Bell, 2002; Beresford et al., 2008);
- respect, valuing the youth as a person and listening to them and understanding them (links to the recognition mechanism) (Beresford et al., 2008; de Boer & Coady, 2007); and
- reliability, availability and clear explanations so youth understand (links to the responsiveness mechanism) (Bell, 2002; Beresford et al., 2008; de Boer & Coady, 2007).

There are clearly tensions and challenges in ensuring organizational processes enable practitioners to effectively activate this mechanism while keeping clients, workers and organizations safe. Organizations and workers can create opportunities for this mechanism to shape practice by identifying which aspects of their organizational cultures facilitate or inhibit these types of practices and developing policies defining how these practices are supported and managed. Consequently, the mutuality mechanism has significant implications for organizations wanting to adopt RBP (Fairtlough, 2018).

6 | DISCUSSION

Across the data, youth talked about being 'lucky' when they were allocated a worker who made the efforts Marama and Dan did to build an effective relationship (Sanders & Munford, 2019). The idea of luck suggests that such workers are unusual, something that was reflected in many interviews. Given the volume of service interventions involved, youth interviewed were able to knowledgeably talk about the luck involved in getting good workers. They have both good and bad experiences. In this respect, then, Timoti and Daytona were fortunate to be supported by Dan and Marama.

Timoti's challenge was finding people in the system who took seriously and supported him in his desire to start afresh. His experience of Dan can be contrasted with those of the WINZ and probation officers. The impossibility of attending two different appointments at the same time is clear and reflects disequilibrium in the power mechanism. Officials could have listened, put themselves in Timoti's position and positively responded to his desire to start afresh. They could have co-ordinated their meetings. They could have accepted he had advised them he could not make a meeting and their systems had failed. They could have believed that he had to take care of his daughter. In any of these situations, they could have moved the balance from high control and low care towards an enabling equilibrium balancing mandated responsibilities with care thereby creating opportunities for Timoti. However, their responses left Timoti feeling captured by 'the system'; there was no escape. His best option was to continue offending.

When workers sequester control, fail to engage in recognition and responsiveness and do not demonstrate care, they create system-driven traps. These constrain the potential for a positive, helpful relationship, limiting youth access to resources that support change. In this way mechanisms located within social systems create harm. Their operation is transmitted through actions and choices of individual workers in their engagements (situated activities; Houston, 2010) with citizens (Blom & Morèn, 2010). Ultimately, the power mechanism caused harm for Timoti by undermining his faith that 'the system', as mediated through these critical relationships, would provide meaningful help.

Of course, these were not the only mechanisms in play. The chance encounter with Dan opened different possibilities. From a CR perspective, Dan's use of the four mechanisms highlighted here, activated additional mechanisms within social systems and situated activities (Houston, 2010). Dan demonstrated the potential of carefully managed professional relationships to achieve dynamic equilibrium by activating power, recognition, responsiveness and mutuality. He did not have to identify himself to Timoti, he did not have to remember their plans and to care. But in doing so, he engaged recognition and responsiveness, and this created the opportunity for Timoti to imagine different options. Dan's balancing on the mutuality and power mechanisms is particularly interesting. While in prison, the balance was high on friend-like, low on professional aspects, and it was high on both control and care. This created a relational space where Timoti could

seriously start to consider a life free of 'the system'. Their chance meeting presented Dan with the option of adopting a normative-friend stance and become more involved. We do not know Dan's motivations, but Timoti's recounting suggests a professional rather than friend-like stance. This propelled Timoti towards the kaumatua and the cultural enrichment this offered, a potentially more valuable resource for Timoti than having Dan as a friend.

Knowing the resources available to Timoti, Dan encouraged him to use his own agency and activate his own relational resources to address the challenges. Dan's use of these mechanisms placed Timoti in control of his circumstances. By re-activating the recognition mechanism, this interaction ensured that all the positive resources the kaumatua represented could become a force for Timoti's growth. Dan's involvement demonstrated the power of a positive relationship to help create change further down the track (Seal, 2016).

This can be contrasted with the corrosive impact of relationships with probation and WINZ. Thus, different systems and different professionals, through the mechanisms they activate, can cancel out each other's effects, enhance or compensate for them. By the final interview, Timoti still confronted many challenges, but his life had changed dramatically. For the first time, he talked of hope, a future with debts paid and the opportunity to imagine a life free from crime.

As often occurs for vulnerable youth, state child welfare services had a long history of involvement in Daytona's life, featuring unannounced disruptions to her living circumstances, intrusions into her school life and the recent removal of her baby. These intrusions represented imbalances in the power mechanism and a lack of recognition and responsiveness. Each generated its own response by Daytona, creating further ripples and ruptures. The accumulating impact of these mechanisms directly led to her offending and suicide attempt. Marama did not necessarily know all of this. However, she understood that Daytona's current situation was immersed in a painful history of disruption in her family and intrusion of state agencies. Her relationship-building approach was premised on the understanding that the immediate 'problem' might be less important than the history it implicated and the impact mechanisms in the institutional domains had upon Daytona's life (Kohli & Dutton, 2018).

Belonging, meaning and identity are critical factors that shape youth lives. The particular ways in which these factors manifest themselves in particular situations is shaped by personal history and by group membership. Marama utilized her cultural knowledge differently depending on the youth, their needs and characteristics. So, her general approach always involved activation of the recognition mechanism. However, the ways in which she did this differed depending on each youth.

Marama illustrated the way that workers can deploy numerous mechanisms to strengthen the relationship. She used her mandated tasks to create youth-oriented time, enabling the relationship to develop in a more 'natural' way. The mutuality equilibrium was weighted at the professional end; the ostensible purpose was form filling, and she used this to relationship-build. Because Daytona had few relational resources around her, it was important that Marama did not supplant any of these by accentuating the friend-like dimension.

Her activation of the recognition mechanism informed her professional-friend-like stance with Daytona, translating into a search of Daytona's own naturally occurring relationships.

The youth-practitioner relationship does not exist in isolation and each party brings past experiences with them. Using these mechanisms intentionally within the relationship, impacts previous relational experiences and makes their presence felt in the here-and-now of the support relationship. Dan and Marama worked with nuanced understandings of meanings, belonging and identity, activating the recognition mechanism in different ways. Dan was not interviewed for our research, so we do not know for sure, but it appears he grasped the fundamental importance of cultural connections to Timoti's wellbeing. While working with him in prison and in the chance meeting, Dan's actions indicate his understanding of the potential of these powerful resources. He did not do anything directly to make these connections but rather encouraged Timoti to make his way towards people who could help him to grow these important aspects of himself. This enhanced Timoti's chances of getting 'the system' out of his life. Dan deployed the friend-like-professional mechanism differently in the prison and the café. In each, his response appears to have been carefully calibrated with the goal of Timoti gaining the confidence to find his own solutions.

7 | CONCLUSION

Practitioners sit at a critical juncture between social systems and youth worlds (Kazi, 2003). They are responsible for continuously creating and recreating a state of dynamic equilibrium, flexing their practice around changing circumstances, always maintaining a central focus on the youth and what they say they need to make good progress. Naturally, this also calls on systems to recognize and facilitate interactions with these characteristics. A CR-inspired approach enables us to think about where, when, for whom and under what circumstances mechanisms in the practitioner-youth relationship can contribute to positive change. The mechanisms outlined above provide some insights into how workers can deploy the relationship to achieve positive effects. In searching for generative mechanisms, an overarching observation from the RBP literature is that each intervention is embedded in a unique set of drivers that shape the way the relationship operates. The four mechanisms point to key ways workers can respond to this particularity through the relationships they build.

Alongside this particularity are general forces that also shape how the support relationship contributes to change (de Boer & Coady, 2007; Houston, 2010; Ruch et al., 2018). For instance, when thinking about the power mechanism, institutional contexts, such as hospitals and prisons, are high on control. This impacts the meanings youth attach to relationships formed there and the ways they experience these settings. Practitioners, then, need to pay attention to how they balance control and care. Through their relational practices, Marama and Dan accentuated the care dimension, diluting the impact of institutional control. They did this in ways that meant the

relationships they created did not supplant relationships for Timoti and Daytona. This created a positive equilibrium for both. It unlocked the relational resources Marama and Dan offered within the confines of the professional relationship so these youth could start imagining different futures.

Mechanisms are abstractions; they are best-fit theoretical formulations of generative processes that lead to effects observed at the empirical level (Morèn & Blom, 2003). Their value here is that they aid understanding of how and why positive relational practices assist youth in making change. Of course, in the domain of the empirical, mechanisms generally occur simultaneously, some may only partially activate, further, they may operate synergistically or in conflict with each other. Additionally, mechanisms in play at earlier times may continue to exert impacts beyond their operation. There were doubtless other mechanisms in play in the work Marama and Dan undertook to those observed here. This fits well with the RBP explanation that relational practices are not simple formulae that can be applied in a routinized or bureaucratic way. Rather, it requires responsive, careful and critically reflective practices that adapt and flex around youth, always maintaining a sensitive, respectful and optimistic orientation, recognizing that youth behaviours tell a larger story that needs to be taken account of when seeking to add value to their lives.

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There are no conflicts of interest to report.

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Research data are not shared.

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