

Creating relationship-based practice in youth employment services—Converting policy intentions to practical program design

Ariella Meltzer¹  | Ioana Ramia² | Jennifer Moffatt³ | Abigail Powell⁴

¹Centre for Social Impact, UNSW Sydney, Sydney, Australia

²Australian Education Research Organisation, Sydney, Australia

³yourtown, Brisbane, Australia

⁴Eleanor Glanville Institute, School of Social and Political Sciences, University of Lincoln, Lincoln, UK

Correspondence

Ariella Meltzer, Centre for Social Impact,
UNSW Sydney 704, Level 7, Science
Engineering Building (E8), Sydney, NSW 2052,
Australia.

Email: a.meltzer@unsw.edu.au

Funding information

yourtown

Abstract

Relationship-based practice refers to approaches within human services which centralise inter-personal relationships—either those between clients and workers or between clients and their own network—as a way to achieve positive service outcomes. Relationship-based practice is increasingly recognised as a critical component in many areas of human services, particularly youth services. Despite increasing policy intentions for programs to adopt a relationship-based approach, it is not always clear how services can implement this in practice. While relationship-based skill training can be offered to individual workers, a question remains as to what can be done at an organisational and policy level to cultivate relationship-based practice. Within this context, this paper explores how programs can be designed to foster relationship-based practice. The paper draws on the evaluation of an intensive and tailored service for addressing long-term youth unemployment in Australia: the *your job your way* pilot program run by *yourtown*. A key success of the program was strong

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/) License, which permits use and distribution in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, the use is non-commercial and no modifications or adaptations are made.

© 2022 The Authors. Social Policy & Administration published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

relationship-based practice, and this paper explores five features of the program's design that enabled this: (1) small case-loads, (2) intensive support, (3) staff with complementary skills and a professional and 'youth friendly' demeanour, (4) staff discretion about some aspects of program implementation, and (5) support delivered through social and group activities. The paper draws implications for how service provider organisations and governments can cultivate relationship-based practice in human services.

KEYWORDS

program design, relationship-based practice, social work, youth unemployment

1 | INTRODUCTION

Relationship-based practice is increasingly recognised as a critical component in the success of many areas of human services, including disability (Fisher et al., 2020; Robinson et al., 2020), social housing (Flanagan et al., 2019), and youth services (Rodd & Stewart, 2009; Smith et al., 2016). There is recognition that where relationships and the benefits they cultivate (e.g., trust, respect, genuine concern, and practice competence) are at the forefront of program implementation, there are very often better outcomes from services (Trevithick, 2003). Importantly, this includes better outcomes in both service engagement and the health, wellbeing, and social/economic engagement of vulnerable population groups (McCay et al., 2011; Stewart, 2008). In this respect, relationship-based practice can be considered critical within human service delivery.

Nevertheless, while the benefits of relationship-based practice are clear, it is not always evident how to ensure that it takes place. Historically, much has depended on the relational skills of individual frontline workers in human services, with less consideration of how service provider organisations and governments might foster relationship-based practice or of how broader aspects of program design might enable or constrain it. Using the evaluation of a successful service for addressing long-term youth unemployment in Australia, this paper considers the components of the program's design that enabled relationship-based practice. It also draws out implications for how responsibility for enabling this type of approach might be shifted to service provider organisations and government, rather than individual frontline workers.

1.1 | What is relationship-based practice, and why is it important?

Relationship-based practice has a long history within psychology, psychoanalysis, social work, and human services. It has a variety of meanings, each stemming from different theoretical traditions and branches of practice. It is however not always easy to find clear definitions of it in existing literature (Bryan et al., 2016; Ruch, 2005) and, as a concept, it has gone in and out favour within the philosophies of human service delivery (Howe, 1998; Trevithick, 2003). Nevertheless, it has recently been the subject of a resurgence of interest (Bryan et al., 2016).

Broadly, two of the most dominant concepts of relationship-based practice refer to:

- a. *Cultivating and building on the strength of the relationship between a client and worker, such that the client-worker relationship is used as a vehicle in itself to achieve positive outcomes for the client.* This type of relationship-based practice is ‘founded on empathy, warmth and genuineness on the part of the worker’ (Hudson & Sheldon, 2000, p. 65 in Trevithick, 2003, p. 164). It is achieved where the client-worker relationship results in open interaction and communication between the client and worker, which enables personalised support to the client to take place and, as a result, better outcomes to be achieved for them. As Trevithick explains (2003, p. 169):

The greater the trust, respect, concern and practice competence that is generated [through the client-worker relationship], the greater the likelihood of an open and honest exchange where individuals can reveal what they see to be happening, and why, and how the situation can be improved.

The client-worker relationship then becomes the medium through which the worker engages with the complexity of the client's experience and situation, and is able to offer support (Ruch, 2005). This type of relationship-based practice has grown out of social work, specifically casework and psychoanalysis, and is rooted in a psycho-social and psycho-dynamically informed casework tradition (Ruch, 2005; Trevithick, 2003). It strongly centres the client-worker relationship including the worker's views on the nature and capacity of the client.

- b. *Building the relational skills of a client, such that they are better able to manage within their own personal network of relationships in the community and become less reliant on service/worker support.* This type of relationship-based practice centres the broader social relationships and community of a client, as well as the relational skills of the client (e.g., trust, communication, and system-navigation skills) (Furlong, 2013). Workers in social work and human services may still play a significant role in cultivating the client's relational network and skills—however, the intended outcome is for the client to be able to manage without (or with less) service support and relational input from paid workers. This type of relationship-based practice aims to shift away from centring the importance of service relationships, such as client-worker relationships, in vulnerable people's lives (Furlong, 2013), towards an approach that focuses on building the capacity of an individual. Ultimately, it seeks to foster and support more natural relationships that are less service-bound (Furlong, 2013). In this sense, it is essentially about capacity building of relational skills and networks for a client.

While coming from different theoretical and practice traditions, these two versions of relationship-based practice are not always entirely separate. A strong client-worker relationship may, for example, very often become a helpful basis on which to foster broader relational skills and networks. Together, these two types of relationship-based practice highlight the importance of relationships to many aspects of successful social work and human services—and this also plays out in practice. Some sectors, for example, youth work, have described relationships as ‘central’ to effective work in their area and as ‘the glue that holds our work together’ (Bourke & Evans, 2000; Hart, 2017; Rodd & Stewart, 2009, p. 4).

There are nevertheless acknowledged risks and tensions of relationship-based practice. These include its relative incompatibility with other dominant concepts in human services, such as ‘person-centred practice’ (which centralises the needs of individuals rather than relational groups; Murphy et al., 2013). Relationship-based practice can also sometimes be relatively incompatible with areas of work that require directive input from workers to clients (which have less capacity to be driven by relational needs and are instead more commonly governed by established standards, rules or regulations; Stewart, 2008). Further, there is a danger of seeing the client-worker relationship as an end in itself, rather than as a mechanism to achieve outcomes for individuals (Murphy et al., 2013). There can also be difficulties in enacting relationship-based practice while maintaining what traditional service management considers to be sufficient professional boundaries (Hart, 2017; Murphy & Ord, 2013). Nevertheless, when these risks and tensions are well-managed, relationship-based practice holds an important place, both in achieving positive outcomes

for the people who are receiving human services and also as the method through which those working in human services do their work.

1.2 | Who cultivates relationship-based practice, and how?

Given the importance of relationship-based practice, there is a critical question about how and by whom this type of practice is cultivated and supported.

Following the seminal work of Biestek (1957) on the attitudes, knowledge, and abilities required by social workers for casework relationships, a significant portion of the literature has implied that much in the delivery of relationship-based practice relies on the relational skills of individual frontline workers. A broad ranging review by Trevithick (2003) shows that relationship-based practice has commonly been linked to individual workers' casework skills, communication and interpersonal skills, and to particular client-centred and psycho-social models of practice (Trevithick, 2003). As a specific example, there are, for instance, discussions among practitioner-researchers about how relationship-based practice involves youth workers applying counselling skills within unstructured everyday interactions (Rodd & Stewart, 2009). Following Biestek (1957), much of the literature implies that it is the aptitudes, attitudes, and knowledge of individual frontline workers that are seen to be critical to the implementation of relationship-based practice, as they are the ones who are tasked with creating and maintaining a relationship with a client. Training and supervision of individual workers are then presumably some of the key ways that relationship-based practice is cultivated.

Importantly however, the literature also shows that relationship-based practice does not always eventuate when responsibility for it is shifted entirely onto frontline workers, without the right support and conditions being in place (Murphy et al., 2013). Cultivating relationships involves significant time for informal, unstructured contact between frontline workers and clients, and scope for personalised, emotively attuned communication (Rodd & Stewart, 2009)—much of which is often considered 'unquantifiable' in policy and funding criteria (Hart, 2017, p. 249). The current environment within human services does not, therefore, necessarily always support the conditions needed for relationship-based practice (Hingley-Jones & Ruch, 2016). As far back as the 1990s, authors were writing about the difficulty of maintaining relationship-based practice within environments where time and resources were scarce (Schofield, 1998). The result was that, rather than foregrounding relationship-based practice, briefer interventions with more clearly quantifiable (and hence more easily measurable) outcomes became the focus, so that the available time and resources could be clearly accounted for. Arguably these conditions have only intensified since the 1990s, particularly as a result of changes in the economic environment and neoliberal policy context, which have recently seen the implementation of austerity policies (Hingley-Jones & Ruch, 2016). Such policies are very often a barrier to funding bodies wanting to provide the time, scope, and resources needed for the 'unquantifiable' work involved in relationship-based practice (Hart, 2017, p. 249; Rodd & Stewart, 2009). Another related barrier to relationship-based practice is pressure on those working in human services to maintain professional boundaries (Hart, 2017; Murphy & Ord, 2013). Where frontline workers are expected to maintain a demeanour of professionalism, asking them to foreground relationships and relationship-based practice may sometimes be seen—by either workers themselves or by those supervising or managing them—as a conflict.

Given this context, to better support the cultivation of relationship-based practice, emphasis needs to shift from frontline workers to the responsibilities of service provider organisations and government. Service providers and government have an important role as they are respectively the most common program deliverers/designers and funders/procurers of human services—and they can therefore modify the contextual factors that may otherwise make relationship-based practice difficult. In particular, there appears to be no existing literature on how broader aspects of program design and the funding/procurement processes related to it might enable or constrain relationship-based practice. Considering how program design (and its associated funding and procurement processes) might be used to enable relationship-based practice is, however, a way of ensuring that responsibility for this type of

work is not individualised to specific frontline workers, but rather built into the structure of human services programs and into the line of responsibility of service providers and government. In this respect, it moves away from the idea of relational skills being the critical ingredient that frontline workers either have or do not have, towards the structural conditions for relationships being equally as important in making or breaking the conditions that enable relationship-based practice. Further, considering relationship-based practice as a program design issue also provides a practical way of addressing the otherwise 'unquantifiable' nature of relationships (Hart, 2017, p. 249), by showing that even if relational outcomes are difficult to quantify and measure, there can still be another clear and useful place for relationships to be addressed within the policy process, that is, within the design of human services. Nevertheless, so far, the role of program design in cultivating relationship-based practice remains a gap in the literature, with no studies of this subject able to be located.

To address this gap, this paper uses the evaluation of a successful wraparound program for addressing long-term youth unemployment. The paper highlights the components of the program's design that enabled relationship-based practice. This program is used as a case study of relationship-based practice within program design, with the two dominant concepts of relationship-based practice discussed earlier, guiding the analysis. Implications for other human services programs are then considered.

2 | METHOD

This section outlines the method of the research/evaluation drawn on in this paper, including the nature of the program that was evaluated—named *your job your way*. The research had ethics approval from the University of New South Wales Human Research Ethics Committee.

2.1 | About the your job your way pilot program

The *your job your way* pilot program was developed and implemented by a not-for-profit service provider, *yourtown*, to support long-term unemployed young people to achieve and maintain employment. The program was piloted in three sites around Australia between June 2018 and June 2020. The program targeted young people aged 15–21 years (up to 24 years in one site) who had been unemployed for 52 weeks or more and were at risk of social exclusion and permanent detachment from the labour market. The *your job your way* program was designed to provide these young people with intensive, comprehensive, and ongoing support to achieve and maintain work. During the 2 years of the pilot, the program engaged with 210 young people.

The intensive model of *your job your way* was implemented by a 'dual support team', encompassing a qualified Pathways Coach (for non-vocational support) and an Employment Mentor (for vocational support), with a combined caseload of only 25 young people. The small caseload allowed for the 'dual support team' to offer young people intensive one-on-one support (such as mentoring and counselling); individual and group coaching for employability skills; job search, job application, and interview preparation; practical assistance to address barriers to employment (such as gaining a drivers' licence or buying interview clothes); literacy and numeracy coaching; job matching/place-ment; and referral to specialist services. When a young person gained employment, the focus moved to 'in work' mentoring and personal support, for up to the first 26 weeks of employment. In addition, upon gaining employment, the 'dual support team' acted as a liaison between the young person and employer to anticipate and resolve any barriers to employment retention.

The *your job your way* program was designed to be an intensive addition to jobactive services, the standard unemployment program available in Australia for people of all age groups. While the young people in *your job your way* were formally counted as part of the jobactive cohort, they received more intensive supports through the *your job your way* pilot, which they were beneficiaries of in addition to the standard jobactive approach.

For context, jobactive is the main initiative by the Australian Government to connect unemployed people who are looking for work with employers. The objectives of jobactive are to help jobseekers find and keep a job, move from welfare to work, and meet their mutual obligation requirements (e.g., actively looking for suitable paid work; attending job interviews; attending approved education/training programs) (Australian National Audit Office, 2017). Importantly, an Australian Senate Inquiry recently concluded that jobactive is not fit-for-purpose and not delivering on its stated objectives (Marshall, 2019). Key findings were that many necessary services and support arrangements are missing from jobactive; the ‘compliance framework is punitive and in some cases grossly unfair’ (Marshall, 2019, p. xx); and the current funding model incentivises providers to churn people through a series of short-term and sometimes unsuitable jobs (Marshall, 2019). The Inquiry also noted that young people in particular are not well-served by jobactive. Even parts of the system that are specifically for young people, such as the Youth Jobs PaTH internships program—which was designed to help young people gain skills and work experience to find and maintain a job—do not give sufficient support to those who experience additional barriers to employment (Marshall, 2019). It is within this context that the intensive approach of *your job your way* was developed by *yourtown* and trialled as an addition to jobactive services, specifically to provide an additional layer of support to young people who had been long-term unemployed under the current system and were likely significantly disadvantaged.

2.2 | About the evaluation

The evaluation of *your job your way* investigated the extent to which the pilot program achieved its intended outcomes, that is, that young people received vocational and non-vocational support to find and keep satisfying and ongoing employment (Ramia et al., 2020). Both formative and summative evaluations were conducted, including a process evaluation (how the program was established and implemented), outcomes evaluation (the changes to which the program contributed), and cost–benefit analysis.

This paper focuses on the findings of the process evaluation, which was primarily comprised of qualitative data, as this allowed insight into perceptions of the implementation of the program. The qualitative data was collected through a mixture of longitudinal and one-time interviews. A total of 210 interviews with 107 individuals were conducted. Of these, 147 interviews were with young people participating in *your job your way*, each interviewed up to three times (66 of the 210 were interviewed once, 53 were interviewed twice, and 28 participated in a third interview). The young people were a partial sample of the full cohort who participated in the *your job your way* program, randomly selected from the full cohort, with some controls to ensure representation from all three program sites and from young people who had spent different lengths of time in the program. Longitudinal interviews were also conducted with *your job your way* staff, each interviewed up to four times, ~6 months apart, giving a total of 32 interviews. During the second year of the pilot, 19 one-time interviews were also conducted with employers and nine with the young people’s parents, partners, or friends. At the end of the pilot three interviews were also conducted with senior managers at *yourtown*. The transcripts from this range of interviews form the dataset for this paper. The broader evaluation also included quantitative program and secondary data to examine the outcomes and cost–benefit of the program, but this is not the focus of this paper (details can however be found in the original evaluation report; Ramia et al., 2020).

Data analysis was both thematic and guided by the terms of reference of the evaluation. The interview data was transcribed verbatim. It was then initially deductively coded (using NVivo 12), using a framework of pre-set codes to capture the key focus areas of the evaluation: that is, pre-set codes outlining each of the outcome areas that the program hoped to achieve for young people; pre-set codes to demarcate program implementation successes and challenges; and pre-set codes to examine change over time, as the longitudinal nature of the evaluation progressed. The data that resulted within each of these codes was then re-coded openly/inductively to generate emergent sub-themes based on the participants’ responses. The data covered in this paper was allocated to one of two inductive sub-themes, which commonly arose in participants’ responses: (1) the relationship-based nature of the program (data

evidencing that relationship-based practice happened), and (2) program design features that enabled the relationship-based approach (with further sub-themes outlining the different design features). These sub-themes mostly resulted from data originally coded under the deductive theme of 'program implementation successes', although participants' reservations about the program design features contributing to relationship-based practice are also included, where available.

Given the context of the *your job your way* program being designed as an intensive addition to jobactive, the findings below are framed partly in comparison to jobactive, but also partly in comparison to other unemployment services more generally. This is because young people themselves were not always aware of when they had previously accessed jobactive or other similar services. Verbatim quotes are marked with the following descriptors: YP— young person; PT—parent; PR—partner; and ST—staff. The senior managers are grouped together with other *your job your way* staff in the reporting in order to maintain the managers' confidentiality, due to the small sample of this group.

3 | FINDINGS

The findings of the research/evaluation are outlined below, first showing the relationship-based practice that was cultivated within *your job your way* and then profiling the features of the program's design that enabled this approach. These features include small case-loads, intensive support, the staffing model, staff discretion in some spending and site decisions, and the inclusion of social and group activities, all of which are outlined in more detail below.

While not the focus of this paper, to best appreciate the significance of the findings below about relationship-based practice, it is important to also understand that the *your job your way* program was successful in achieving its intended outcomes for young people, and, notably, in several instances was more effective at doing so than jobactive (Ramia et al., 2020).¹ Firstly, the proportion of *your job your way* clients who found jobs (82%) was much higher than that of jobactive clients (49%). A higher proportion of *your job your way* clients also maintained their jobs for 4-, 12-, and then 26 weeks than jobactive clients. Further, as measured by the Workstar™² tool, young people in *your job your way* showed improvement in job skills and experience (73%), job search skills (63%), aspiration and motivation (63%), basic skills (52%), workplace and social skills (51%), and health and wellbeing (50%) (Ramia et al., 2020). Notably, the effectiveness of *your job your way* continued through the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite not being able to engage with the program face-to-face, young people continued their progress throughout 2020, did not report significant mental health problems and were mostly able to maintain their motivation for engagement with the program and to apply for work (Ramia et al., 2020). Importantly, in achieving these outcomes, the *your job your way* program also generated a 1:6 cost-saving to government when all relevant costs and savings were considered (Ramia et al., 2020), suggesting not only the social but also financial value of the program's design. This context regarding the successful outcomes and cost-benefit of the program is important background to the information about relationship-based practice that follows, showing that not only was the relational approach of the program appreciated by young people, but it was also connected with program success, increased outcomes attainment and financial efficiency.

3.1 | Relationship-based practice in your job your way

The evaluation of *your job your way* found that relationship-based practice emerged as a central element of the success of the program. Both types of relationship-based practice profiled in the introduction in this paper were evident: (1) strong client-worker relationships that became a vehicle for service delivery and outcomes, and (2) a focus on fostering the relational networks and skills of the client.

Young people and their family members described the strength of their relationships with *your job your way* workers and, in particular, described being treated with personalised support—that is, support that is consistent with the first of the definitions of relationship-based practice discussed earlier in this paper. For example, they said:

[It's] just the way you get spoken to. It's like you get treated like an actual human being, not some computer (YP_17).

So, [the **your job your way** staff member] will actually have a conversation with me and he'll ask how my family's going and stuff, and it seems to be more personal, which is a lot better than instead you're just a number sort of thing (YP_16).

He's listened to, he's treated on a personal level... his individual needs and qualifications and experience and hopes are actually listened to. [They] try and guide and help him in the areas that he wants to work or further educate himself in. He's treated as an individual and not a number, and I really like the support – that it is recognised on a personal basis (PT_03).

Importantly, young people also explained how the strength of the client-worker relationship translated to a better service and better outcomes for them—primarily that the trust and personalisation encapsulated in the client-worker relationship prompted young people to put in the work required for better outcomes:

I actually really like the structure of it [the **your job your way** program]. That it is so personal... I can just text them, I can email them, I can just pop in one day and they'll make time for me. That sort of personal side is awesome. I really love that. Because it's so personal, they know they can push certain things. They know me, so they can go 'You need to focus on this, so go and do it' – you know, with someone who doesn't really know you, it's a bit like, 'But I don't want to do it', [but] with them it's alright, [because] you know they're doing it for you (YP_27).

Staff in *your job your way* also confirmed the presence and importance of the relationship-based approach. Multiple staff commented that a key benefit of the *your job your way* model was that they were able to establish a well-rounded and personalised relationship with young people, which became a basis for them to provide authentic and holistic support in both vocational and non-vocational areas. One commented on how strong client-worker relationships enabled 'frank conversations', which was a critical ingredient in prompting young people to strive towards better outcomes:

... we get to develop those relationships with the young person... We get to know them on a level that we can have open frank discussions with them about employment opportunities and things like that. So, we're more real, I guess – we get to be real with our clients, so that works (ST_S06).

Throughout the evaluation, staff also noted instances where the relationship between them and clients became a basis for developing relational skills and networks that would help young people in employment—that is, support consistent with the second of the definitions of relationship-based practice discussed earlier in this paper. For example, staff spoke about enabling young people to practice communication skills through their own ongoing discussions with them, including telephone skills and how to manage tone within conversations; working through trust and mental health issues; and promoting self-confidence to talk with strangers, both through their own interactions with young people and through specific training. As discussed later, the structure of the program also enabled opportunities for staff to introduce young people to each other, within a trusted social setting, which built young people's relational network for finding potential employment.

As such, relationship-based practice was a central success of the *your job your way* program, acting as a vehicle for program implementation and enabling improved relational skills and networks for young people. Exactly how the relationship-based practice was enabled within the program's model is the subject of the next set of findings.

3.2 | Program design features contributing to relationship-based practice

The evaluation identified five program design features which were critical in creating the conditions for relationship-based practice within *your job your way*. Each of these features are elements on which an explicit decision was made when designing the program. Further, each represents an unequivocal departure in design from the standard jobactive approach and from the approach in many other unemployment services. The five features are outlined below.

3.2.1 | Small caseload

The *your job your way* program was purposefully designed to have much smaller caseloads than the standard jobactive approach. The two staff at each *your job your way* site mostly serviced a maximum of 25 young people between them, whereas it is common for staff in jobactive to typically service 148 people each (Marshall, 2019, p. 94). This meant that staff in *your job your way* simply had more time for focusing on each young person and for developing a relationship with them.

The program's staff were mostly very positive about the relational impact of smaller caseloads as a design feature of *your job your way*. They described how 'the whole nature of [our work] is very different, just by the case numbers alone' (ST_09) and commented on the benefits of 'having that time to spend with the client – not just having a half hour time slot to try and cover everything' (ST_08). One person noted:

... if you have that time to spend with [young people] and listen to them and focus on what's going to benefit them and not [on] what you think's going to benefit them, you're going to achieve huge things (ST_08).

While young people themselves were not necessarily aware of smaller caseloads as a specific design feature of the program, they did make comments suggesting they appreciated and benefited from this feature. For example, young people noted that they saw the *your job your way* staff for more frequent and longer appointments than they had previously seen staff in other unemployment services and that they felt the staffing in *your job your way* was more consistent. Young people also commented that staff appeared to have more time to listen to them and provide detailed instructional support:

They actually sit down and listen, and they show you what to do... they actually sit there and actually help you with the situation (YP_67).

As such, both staff and young people confirmed that the conditions were set for staff and clients to have more time with each other within *your job your way* than in many other similar services. Notably, while there was widespread agreement on the benefits of the smaller caseload, there was some debate about what the exact size of the small caseload should be. A small number of staff felt that the same results could be achieved for young people with a small to moderate increase in case numbers (i.e., between another 5–25 people per load).

3.2.2 | Intensive support

The intended purpose of the smaller caseloads was that *your job your way* was explicitly designed to provide more intensive support than jobactive. The relational impact of this was that *your job your way* could be a much more personalised and tailored form of support and that staff had the opportunity to invest in young people as individuals and in their relationship with them.

Staff confirmed the more intensive nature of the support was enabled by the lower case numbers. They said it allowed their work to be ‘more productive and more individualized’ (ST_10). Using the metaphor of an onion, one staff member noted that the smaller caseloads also enabled a more in-depth focus on the complexity of each young person’s experiences:

[It means our focus can be on] pulling away layers of the onion, finding where the actual barrier or barriers are [for young people] (ST_09).

Young people confirmed their experiences of more intensive support and noted that this was different to what they had experienced in other similar services. They described how being able to receive intensive support, including across a range of non-vocational areas of their lives, had tangible benefits for them and for their work-readiness:

Ever since I joined **your job your way**... it's like they understood that I need help in certain areas and my resume wasn't correct for employers to read properly, and they helped me with that. And I don't drive, so they understood that if I need to get [to] interviews or go to my course or anything like that and it's too far away, they can drive me. Compared to my old case manager [who] was just like ‘Here you go, here's the address, off you go’... So it's helped me a lot with getting like job-ready and getting to places and being organised... I feel more prepared going for jobs now, compared to like two years ago before I started with them (YP_53).

This data from staff and young people demonstrates that the design of *your job your way* with intensive support as an explicit feature was critical in enabling relationship-based practice, as it allowed a deeper personalised focus on each young person than what they commonly experienced in other similar services. One staff member noted a risk of the intensive approach being the possibility of becoming too involved in young people’s lives and therefore emphasised the importance of having appropriate client-worker boundaries—however, with such boundaries in place, even this staff member recognised the importance of the intensive approach to relationship-based practice and positive outcomes in *your job your way*.

3.2.3 | Staffing model

The staffing model was a further program design feature which contributed to the relationship-based practice in *your job your way*. There were two relevant elements of the staffing model, described below.

Firstly, a distinctive feature of the *your job your way* program compared to jobactive was that the staffing was designed to operate as a ‘dual support team’—which essentially meant that the program was structured to have two staff working alongside each other with complementary skillsets. In each *your job your way* site, one staff member was a university-qualified social worker or psychologist, called a ‘Pathways Coach’, tasked with focusing on non-vocational support, while the other was an ‘Employment Mentor’, tasked with mentoring young people through the vocational elements of the program. The combination of their skillsets and presence of both meant that there were complementary service elements available to young people and also that young people had more than one option of staff with whom to establish a relationship.

Secondly, *your job your way* staff remained professional, but also engaged in ‘youth friendly’ practice,³ where they were approachable and relaxed with young people. Staff explained that this demeanour allowed them to build trust with young people, which in turn gave them social licence to hold young people accountable for their actions:

... we're approachable and relaxed and have the young people chill, but then maintain that professionalism. And what that does is it gives us the capacity to build a real relationship with them, and to then be able to say ‘You've got to pull your neck in, you're being ridiculous right now’ and for them to listen (ST_03).

Young people confirmed the ‘youth friendly’ nature of the staff. For example, one described a particular staff member as the ‘one person that I can just talk to and open up to no matter what’ (YP_10), while another commented on the *your job your way* staff in general, saying ‘I'm very comfortable when I'm around them’ (YP_62).

The combination of these elements was that the staffing of the *your job your way* program contributed to relationship-based practice—the complementary skillsets and demeanour of the staff not only enabled relationships to develop, but also fostered accountability in the young people participating in the program.

3.2.4 | Staff discretion on some spending and site decisions

A further feature of how *your job your way* was designed was that staff had a greater degree of discretion and flexibility over local program implementation than is commonly the case in jobactive and other similar unemployment services.

Staff had, for example, some discretionary funds that they could spend as they saw was needed for personalised engagement with and support for young people. These funds had a direct role in fostering trust and relationships with young people and, notably, were in addition to other dedicated funds for more directly vocational aspects, such as funds for buying appropriate work clothes or for transport and fuel costs (to enable young people to get to job interviews, education, or work). One staff member explained the benefit of the discretionary funds:

It gives us the capacity to do little things for people, celebrate little wins, facilitate them moving towards goals – those kinds of things that you don't have [in jobactive]; there's less staff discretion in regular jobactive (ST_03).

This staff member gave examples of buying a water bottle to help with one *your job your way* client's health goals and of buying a small Christmas present for the young child of another client, which gained his trust and meant that ‘he's been much more willing to talk to us and [get] on board with our suggestions since then’ (ST_03).

Similarly, staff in *your job your way* were able to choose to conduct some of their service activities in locations other than the *your job your way* office—and so they commonly met young people in cafés and other locations in the community. Staff noted the benefits of this, for example, describing how conducting educational sessions in a café meant young people looked forward to the sessions more and ‘it makes the young people in the program feel valued and feel part of something’ (ST_06). Young people also confirmed the benefits of meeting in community settings, noting that often cafés were quieter and less overwhelming than a busy office.

Overall, the ability of staff to exercise discretion and flexibility within the *your job your way* model had the effect of making young people feel valued—and feeling valued by the program and its staff reinforced the relationship-based nature of the program.

3.2.5 | Vocational and non-vocational development through social and group activities

The final program design feature of *your job your way* that enabled relationship-based practice was that the program delivered some vocational and non-vocational development through social and group activities, which brought young people from the program together in an informal context.

At a basic level, staff noted the importance of the social and group activities as time in which to build young people's trust in them, in a less formal activity setting. However, staff also commented that because these activities brought multiple clients together at once, the activities were also opportunities to foster relationships, communication skills, and a sense of community between the different young people in the program. This built their relational networks and confidence, which, in turn, could have a potential impact on their employment as well:

The social interaction; so when we do JobClubs and things like that, so the young people meeting and hanging out with people that they wouldn't usually... when we do group activities, they think that we're just hanging out and having a coffee, but it is really building those communication skills and listening skills and things like that (ST_07).

Young people also confirmed the benefits of this approach. One talked about how meeting other young people looking for similar work could be a good opportunity to find out about additional potential employers. Another described the benefits of meeting others as a form of peer support:

We have a JobClub, so we get to meet other people in that and talk about our own experiences and stuff, which is good... it's good to talk to people that understand as well and, like, you [can] talk about your [job] interview[s], like, good ones, bad ones and share your stories and stuff (YP_31).

As such, delivering vocational and non-vocational development through social and group activities meant that the design of the *your job your way* program enabled the second type of relationship-based practice profiled earlier in this paper, that is, the type focused on building young people's relational skills and network. Overall, this meant that the social and group activities held the potential to contribute to young people having the skills and connections to cope better on their own with future vocational goals.

4 | DISCUSSION

While relationship-based practice has long been recognised as a key approach enabling positive outcomes in human services, responsibility for implementing it has usually rested with individual frontline workers who commonly lack control over whether they have the time, scope, and resources required for this type of work. This paper therefore sought to understand how, instead, responsibility for relationship-based practice might be shifted towards service provider organisations and government, who can modify structural and contextual factors. This was examined through a focus on how program design can enable a relationship-based approach. The paper used the example of an intensive and tailored service for addressing long-term youth unemployment—*your job your way* developed and piloted by *yournown*—to show how a program's design can enable relationship-based practice.

Through the example of *your job your way*, the paper found that a relational focus can be built into a program's design by considering aspects such as caseload size; the intensity of work with clients; staffing model; how spending and site decisions are managed; and how social and group activities are delivered. As noted in the introduction to Section 3 of this paper, the relational approach of the *your job your way* program that resulted from consideration of these areas was associated with good social, health/wellbeing, and employment outcomes, and with a 1:6 cost-saving to government (Ramia et al., 2020). This demonstrates that in the example of *your job your way*, building a

relational focus into the program design was associated with good program outcomes, suggesting the social and financial value of the chosen relational approach. While this example is drawn from a single case study of the *your job your way* pilot program and therefore applies most closely to youth unemployment initiatives, the principle of designing a human services program to meet conditions that can enable relationship-based practice can nevertheless be applied more broadly, even if the exact design features differ in different human services contexts.

The implications that can be drawn from these findings are several-fold. Firstly, while individual workers will always need professional skills and knowledge to deliver relationship-based practice, this paper highlights that the conditions and context they work within also need to enable this type of practice to occur. Seeing relationship-based practice as a program design issue shifts responsibility for it towards service provider organisations and government. In doing so, it recognises that government (as the most common funders and procurers of human services) and service providers (as common program deliverers and, sometimes, program designers in human services) both deeply influence context—and therefore need to be held accountable for creating the conditions for successful relationship-based practice.

Importantly, when service provider organisations and government are held accountable in this way, it also helps to get past some of the challenges in the implementation of relationship-based practice. For example, where located only within the responsibility of frontline workers, relationship-based practice may be seen as a potentially unprofessional approach enacted by individuals, which does not centralise professional boundaries (Hart, 2017; Murphy & Ord, 2013). Yet if government and service provider organisations are accountable for enabling the conditions for relationship-based practice and for cultivating it based on a policy goal, it repositions this type of work as one which is informed, desired, and professional, and should inherently lead to good outcomes.

Further, understanding relationship-based practice as a program design issue provides a very practical and tangible way of getting past the ‘unquantifiable’ elements of relationships which have so far hampered their inclusion in policy prescriptions and funding criteria (Hart, 2017, p. 249). This paper provides an example of how considering relationship-based practice as a matter of program design enables a set of very practical decisions to be made in the sourcing, designing, funding, and procuring process of human services, which can in turn create the conditions for relationship-based practice and, potentially, lead to better program outcomes. This removes the ‘unquantifiable’ nature of relationships (Hart, 2017, p. 249) as a rationale for relationship-based practice not being fostered through policy and provides a clear pathway for a practical and tangible approach to relationships being at the forefront when planning human services.

Finally, drawing on the case study of *your job your way*, the paper provides five examples of program design features which have supported relationship-based practice in that particular program: (1) small caseloads, (2) intensive support, (3) staff with complementary skillsets and a professional and ‘youth friendly’ demeanour, (4) staff discretion about some spending and site decisions, and (5) some vocational and non-vocational development being delivered through social and group activities. While these features might not be suitable in every human services domain or program, they may suit some others, especially in youth unemployment, youth work in general, and potentially in other programs supporting better employment outcomes for other age groups. The example of these program design features also provides a springboard for thinking about how other different but related design features might be relevant in other programs to enable relationship-based practice.

4.1 | Limitations of this paper and avenues for future research

While this paper provides a novel approach for considering how responsibility for relationship-based practice might usefully be shifted towards service provider organisations and government, it is not without limitations.

The paper only examines how program design enabled relationship-based practice in one program. It would be beneficial to continue to explore how well the program design features in this paper work for creating relationship-based practice across different service types and for different demographics. It would also be worthwhile to explore

what other program design features might be relevant for promoting relationship-based practice, especially in different service contexts.

Further, the paper only draws on the perspectives of people connected directly to the program while they continued to participate (i.e., *your job your way* participants and their families, as well as staff and employers connected to the program). Future research drawing on perspectives from those who may have left the program and from government and other external human services planning agencies would be useful to understand what kinds of challenges, barriers, or risks might exist to this approach (either in practicality or in the motivation to implement it and/or participate in it), and what can mitigate those challenges, barriers, and risks. In particular, some of the program design features which this paper shows support relationship-based practice—such as small caseloads and intensive support—are very labour-intensive and appear expensive on the surface. Yet, as shown by the broader research/evaluation on which this paper is based, these same features ultimately generate a 1:6 cost-saving to government, when all relevant costs and savings are considered (Ramia et al., 2020). Understanding more about the implications of this cost versus savings context, particularly within a climate where governments are increasingly focused on and value cost-effective services, would be important for better appreciating the extent to which there may be appetite to implement a program design approach to relationship-based practice on a wider scale.

5 | CONCLUSION

Overall, there is importance to thinking about how relationship-based practice can be better supported on a structural level by government and service provider organisations. It is an issue that these groups cannot afford to ignore. This is because relationship-based practice is commonly linked to better outcomes from a range of human service areas (McCay et al., 2011; Stewart, 2008) and, as shown by the research profiled in this paper, also linked to other benefits, such as wellbeing improvements for vulnerable population groups and cost-savings to government (Ramia et al., 2020).

This paper has demonstrated how considering relationship-based practice as a program design issue shifts it into the line of responsibility of service provider organisations and government, which supports its implementation. Further, the paper has shown how considering relationship-based practice a program design issue means that acting on it implies a set of very practical and tangible sourcing, designing, funding, and procuring decisions within human services. This is important as it redresses the way in which the ‘unquantifiable’ nature of relationships has so often been used as a rationale for not addressing a relational approach within policy prescriptions and funding criteria (Hart, 2017, p. 249). These insights are important for ensuring that the policy process and its actors deeply consider relationship-based practice in the future, including how more of it can be implemented to achieve positive program outcomes.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Open access publishing facilitated by University of New South Wales, as part of the Wiley - University of New South Wales agreement via the Council of Australian University Librarians.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

One of the authors is a previous employee of yourtown.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The authors sought all relevant ethical approvals. Ethical approval was provided by the UNSW Human Research Ethics Committee (approval number HC180775).

INFORMED CONSENT

All participants gave informed consent to publish the information in the research.

ORCID

Ariella Meltzer  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8738-0469>

ENDNOTES

- ¹ More information on the outcomes of the *your job your way* program is available in Ramia et al. (2020).
- ² <https://www.outcomesstar.org.uk/using-the-star/see-the-stars/work-star/>
- ³ The World Health Organisation defines youth friendly practice as ways of working which are accessible, acceptable, and appropriate to young people (WHO, 2002).

REFERENCES

- Australian National Audit Office. (2017). *Jobactive: Design and monitoring*. Department of Employment.
- Biestek, F. P. (1957). *The casework relationship*. Allen and Unwin.
- Bourke, L., & Evans, P. (2000). Youth workers in Sydney: Doing a lot with a little. *Youth Studies Australia*, 19(1), 38–43.
- Bryan, A., Hingley-Jones, H., & Ruch, G. (2016). Relationship-based practice revisited. *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 30(3), 229–233.
- Fisher, K. R., Robinson, S., Neale, K., Graham, A., Johnson, K., Davy, L., & Hall, E. C. (2020). Impact of organisational practices on the relationships between young people with disabilities and paid social support workers. *Journal of Social Work*, 21, 146801732095435.
- Flanagan, K., Levin, I., Tually, S., Varadharajan, M., Verdouw, J., Faulkner, D., Meltzer, A., & Vreugdenhil, A. (2019). Understanding the experience of social housing pathways. *AHURI Final Report* (324).
- Furlong, M. (2013). *Building the client's relational base: A multidisciplinary handbook*. Policy Press.
- Hart, P. (2017). The reality of relationships with young people in caring professions: A qualitative approach to professional boundaries rooted in virtue ethics. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 83, 248–254.
- Hingley-Jones, H., & Ruch, G. (2016). 'Stumbling through'? Relationship-based social work practice in austere times. *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 30(3), 235–248.
- Howe, D. (1998). Relationship based thinking and practice in social work. *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 12(1), 45–56.
- Hudson, B. L., & Sheldon, B. (2000). The cognitive-behavioural approach. In M. Davies (Ed.), *Encyclopaedia of social work*. Oxford University Press.
- Marshall, G. (2019). *Jobactive: Failing those it is intended to serve*. Australian Parliament, Education and Employment References Committee.
- McCay, E., Quesnel, S., Langley, J., Beanlands, H., Cooper, L., Blidner, R., Aiello, A., Mudachi, N., Howes, C., & Bach, K. (2011). A relationship-based intervention to improve social connectedness in street-involved youth: A pilot study. *Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Nursing*, 24(4), 208–215.
- Murphy, C., & Ord, J. (2013). Youth work, self-disclosure and professionalism. *Ethics and Social Welfare*, 7(4), 326–341.
- Murphy, D., Duggan, M., & Joseph, S. (2013). Relationship-based social work and its compatibility with the person-centred approach: Principled versus instrumental perspectives. *British Journal of Social Work*, 43(4), 703–719.
- Ramia, I., Meltzer, A., Moffatt, J., Powell, A., & Barnes, E. (2020). *Your job your way final evaluation report*. Centre for Social Impact and yourtown.
- Robinson, S., Blaxland, M., Fisher, K. R., Johnson, K., Kuang, C., Graham, A., & Neale, K. (2020). Recognition in relationships between young people with cognitive disabilities and support workers. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 116, 105177.
- Rodd, H., & Stewart, H. (2009). The glue that holds our work together: The role and nature of relationships in youth work. *Youth Studies Australia*, 28(4), 4–10.
- Ruch, G. (2005). Relationship-based practice and reflective practice: Holistic approaches to contemporary child care social work. *Child and Family Social Work*, 10(2), 111–123.
- Schofield, G. (1998). Inner and outer worlds: A psychosocial framework for child and family social work. *Child & Family Social Work*, 3(1), 57–67.

- Smith, F. M., Blazek, M., Brown, D. M., & van Blerk, L. (2016). 'It's good but it's not enough': The relational geographies of social policy and youth mentoring interventions. *Social & Cultural Geography*, 17(7), 959–979.
- Stewart, K. (2008). Outcomes of relationship-based early intervention. *Journal of Occupational Therapy, Schools, & Early Intervention*, 1(3), 199–205.
- Trevithick, P. (2003). Effective relationship-based practice: A theoretical exploration. *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 17(2), 163–176.
- WHO. (2002). *Adolescent friendly health services*. World Health Organization Press.

How to cite this article: Meltzer, A., Ramia, I., Moffatt, J., & Powell, A. (2022). Creating relationship-based practice in youth employment services—Converting policy intentions to practical program design. *Social Policy & Administration*, 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1111/spol.12840>