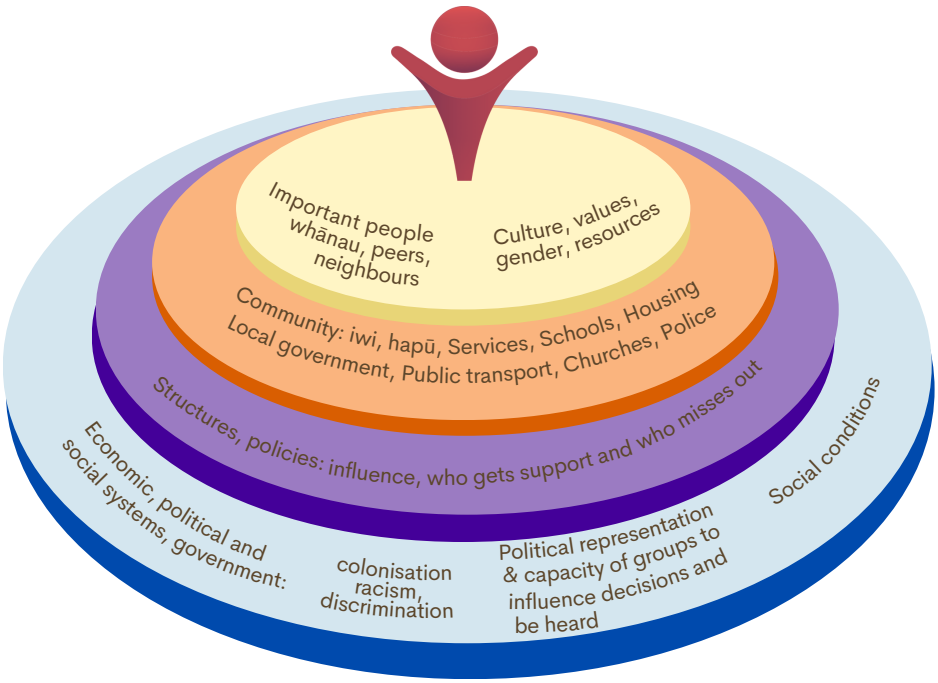
RELATIONAL RESOURCES FOR CHANGE

Context

Context is everything that surrounds rangatahi - their whānau, cultural and social meaning systems, their neighbourhoods, friends, schools, the structures, systems and policies that impact on them (such as the benefit system, the education system, the justice system) and the resources and risks in each of these (see Structural thinking). It includes our collective history, and so here in Aotearoa it includes, matters such as the traumatic impacts of colonisation as well as the state's treatment of Pacific peoples as seen in policies such as the Dawn Raids of the 1970s and other historical events are understood as having real impact on the present day lives of rangatahi and their whānau. All of these factors shape how rangatahi see themselves and their place in the world. We can think of them like this:



All of these things are important in relationship-based practice (RBP) because they impact on how rangatahi make choices and changes, what sorts of choices they get, and they also determine what resources and supports are available to them. When we support rangatahi, we have to understand the way all of these things influence what is possible. Rangatahi can feel overwhelmed, or even trapped by how complicated their lives feel. They are more likely to work with us when we show we have understood the way these thing impact upon them. Research with whānau shows how important it is for kaimahi to really understand how complicated their lives can be:

> "Service users valued the social worker's recognition not only of their own needs, but also the needs of the whole family or group of people linked. with them". (Beresford, Croft & Adshead, 2008, 1399)

Our mahi will also be more effective, when we understand this complexity and how it impacts on each rangatahi we support. We can adapt better and be flexible in the way we work with rangatahi when we understand how the parts of their lives fit together, including how their history impacts upon their lives in the present (de Boer & Coady, 2007).

Cultural knowledge is a very important part of context (Garfat & Fulcher, 2008). We need to know the right protocols and processes for engaging with rangatahi with different cultural backgrounds to ourselves. We also need to understand history, meanings, and value systems. If we do not know these things, we need to find people who can assist us to learn them, or who we can work alongside as we support rangatahi (see Māori centred approaches, RBP in Pasifika contexts). It is also important that we understand our own hidden cultural biases and assumptions:

> One's own personal experiences of acculturation and socialisation impose taken- for-granted assumptions and a …mindset that is not easily altered. (Garfat & Fulcher, 2008, 11)

These things are important because the meanings individuals attach to experiences and to other people shape our relationships. Kaimahi therefore need to learn about cultural norms, rituals, and values (Garfat & Fulcher, 2008, 13).

> Examining context requires one to be conscious of how everything that occurs does so in a context unique to the individual, the helper, the specific moment of interaction and the history of such interactions. (Krueger & Stuart, 1999).

Often context has a big impact on the behaviours that bring rangatahi to our services. Also, often the whānau (one key context) is seen as the cause of the problem (Garfat & Fulcher, 2008). Less often are they seen as an essential part of solutions. Similarly, other components of context are less often seen as part of the problem, for example the way vulnerable rangatahi are excluded from school when their more privileged peers may be treated with greater understanding and given more latitude (Sanders, Liebenberg, & Munford, 2018). Working with context means building relationships with and understanding whānau and rangatahi, as well as the broader context they are part of (Hubble, Duncan, & Miller, 1999).

Understanding context:

1. **Helps us respond well to social and cultural differences.**
2. **Shows we are interested in each rangatahi as a whole person.**
3. **Helps us adapt our mahi to the specific needs of each rangatahi.**
4. **Helps us use our power with compassion.**
5. **Means our plans, goals and actions will be more realistic, and more likely to be achieved.**
6. **Helps us understand what progress might look like for this rangatahi so that we can notice small steps on the way to change.**
7. **Helps us understand how we can work with others to advocate for rangatahi and challenge systems and policies to be more responsive.**
8. **Gives us very useful information we can use in our mahi.**

RELATIONAL RESOURCES FOR CHANGE

How to work with context

Being curious about what happens in the life of each rangatahi, particularly the things that are helpful, is a way to begin working with context. Some important early questions are highlighted below (adapted from Hubble, Duncan, & Miller, 1999). These questions help identify the positive things that have worked and the people who have helped from the context of each rangatahi. It shifts some of our attention from the problems that might have been identified to possible solutions or people to include in our mahi. It also helps us under- stand how social and cultural networks could be strengthened to build enduring support for rangatahi.

We can encourage rangatahi to bring helpful people to meetings and support them to tap into resources and people around them that may help. We can help them find these key people in their social and cultural networks who can expand opportunities for them and be there when we leave.

QUESTIONS TO ASK

- **According to this rangatahi, who is helpful in their day-to-day life?**
- **How or what do they do to get these people to help?**
- **What people, places, or things does this rangatahi seek out for even a little bit of support?**
- **What people, places, or things has this rangatahi found useful in the past?**
- **What helped this rangatahi to use those resources?**

Being curious about context keeps the rangatahi in the centre with us as partners in change (Ingram & Smith, 2018). This way we encourage rangatahi to take the lead. Using context in our mahi also helps us think about the way bigger issues impact on our support such as “power, professional roles, poverty, social exclusion and political ideology” (Ingram & Smith, 2018, 7) (see Rangatahi are the centre; The helping alliance; Agency and voice; Structural thinking).

> While... carefully (working on) the social context in which people's difficulties are located, practitioners are simultaneously drawing on internal, often unconscious, dynamics to make sense of professional encounters. (Ruch, 2018, 32).

Paying attention to context helps our mahi be anti-oppressive. When we understand how these bigger processes impact on rangatahi we stop seeing them as responsible for the things that are beyond their control, and we start to think about how we can work with these larger systems to create change that impact on the capacity of rangatahi and their whānau to thrive (see Critical theory). When we think about the impact of context, we shift the power balance in our relationship so that we work in partnership with rangatahi that respects their own unique knowledge (Ruch, 2018, 27).

Context and individual factors weave together, and we can't do our work without thinking about both:

> ...a much sharper awareness that all relationships take place in a context; broader social relations are not incidental to people's intra-psychic experiences and have profound effects on their emotional wellbeing (Turney, 2012, 151).

We also need to think about how our own contexts, and this includes the organisations we work for, impact on our mahi:

> there may be good reasons why parents are reluctant to trust a worker who they fear could remove their child. Equally, a pressured practitioner may not be inclined to take the risk of offering trust when they fear it will be unreciprocated or met with hostility (Turney, 2012, 155).

Here we can see the many ways that contexts (family suspicion and fear, pressure on the worker to just get the work done) work together in the background. As kaimahi we need to balance all of these tensions to create a space where real talking is possible. Positive youth development ideas help us to work through these tensions (see Positive youth development). They tell us to look in a wide range of places for options and to make sure that we keep the rangatahi in the centre of our focus – checking in with them, asking them where and who to talk to, and supporting them to work out their own solutions (see Rangatahi are the centre).

HOW DO I USE THESE IDEAS IN MY MAHI?

This example shows a kaimahi paying careful attention to context by listening to the rangatahi, hearing what whānau say about their experiences, and working with them all to create new opportunities for the rangatahi that build on their interests and strengths.

I started working with Sammy about three months ago. Sammy and her family have had a long relationship with our organisation, primarily for her older siblings. Sammy has been skipping school, regularly uses drugs and is known to the police. Mum and dad say they want the best for their family but lack the appropriate skills to support them. Mum openly discusses her dislike and challenges of the education system and shares her negative experiences. She says this is why she doesn't push her kids to go to school. Dad often works long days and doesn't engage much with Sammy when he gets home. During the day, Sammy meets up with other young people at the park and partakes in drug use because "its just there", and "everyone is doing it". Sammy first became known to the police after an incident at the park with two boys fighting.

While working with Sammy it was obvious that there was a lot going on around Sammy, her environment, her peers, her family, her education, the police, the drugs, peer pressure and the desire to fit in. I realised that Sammy was involved in some complex relationships. It was important for me to create space and build trust with Sammy to enable her to really talk about what was happening. Sammy revealed that she loved learning new things and enjoyed reading. No one in the family knew this about Sammy. Sammy wasn't keen on going back to school, but she wanted to try the alternative education (AE) programme. With her parents' support, Sammy and I went to look at an AE programme. Sammy said she was excited about the learning, activities and access to books. One day she hoped that mum would meet with her teachers, this is something we continue to work on. Because of Sammy's enrolment and attendance at AE her free time is minimised and her drug taking has decreased. New relationships have been established and Sammy has a new outlook on life.

RELATIONAL RESOURCES FOR CHANGE

Here are some places to look for more information

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