RELATIONAL RESOURCES FOR CHANGE

Some ideas from psychology that help us understand RBP

Around the world relationship-based practice (RBP) models have drawn on some key ideas from Western psychology. One of these is that for each of us there is a connection between our history, our 'back story', and our current experiences. Our past experiences influence our current behaviours and the way we build relationships. Attachment theory helps explain this process (see Attachment). This theory tells us that our earliest experiences of being cared for as a pēpi have a very strong impact on all our other relationships and how we learn to cope (Ruch, 2018, 38). Pēpi have powerful feelings and depend totally on adults to make sure their needs are met. They can experience intense anxiety and fear when these needs are not met.

While we may not remember these experiences, they continue to have an impact throughout life. They particularly have impacts on relationships. This means sometimes the way rangatahi respond to new situations, threats, and challenges may surprise us or seem like over-reactions. But when we understand the 'back story' we can see how these responses have developed.

Psychology tells us that all relationships have an unconscious element coming from the past that influences everyday interactions. Often, we are not aware of this. Psychology also reminds us that our actions are not always rational. Our feelings and the meaning we get out of situations shape our behaviour. Just like it is important to be aware of rangatahi 'back stories', when we are using RBP, we need to notice how things from our past impact on our behaviour now. Also, we need to think about how our emotions may be influencing the decisions we take.

The concept of transference is a way of explaining how previous experiences influence responses later in life. Transference happens when we unconsciously transfer feelings from the past into current interactions, or from other relationships to the current one. The most common source is the relationship we had with key caregiving figures as pēpi.

Transference applies to kaimahi and rangatahi. We all transfer feelings from early in life to current relationships. To be helpful to rangatahi who have experienced challenging situations from an early age, kaimahi need time and support to reflect upon their own interactions with rangatahi, and to plan for positive interactions that help rangatahi move forward. Strong relationship-based practice needs organisational support that allows time for building and reflecting on the relationship development process (Ruch, 2018, 34) (see Critical reflection; Relationship based practice in organisations).

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Psychology has been criticised for ignoring how social and political factors impact upon the choices rangatahi can make and the opportunities that are available to them (Ingram & Smith, 2018). Systems thinking, Structural thinking and Critical theory help us look for these impacts on rangatahi. These ideas help us think about the contexts around rangatahi including, issues such as power, professional roles, poverty, racism, ableism, social exclusion, and the impact of policies that do harm to rangatahi (Ingram & Smith, 2018).

Systems thinking, Structural thinking and Critical theory help us look for these impacts on rangatahi. These ideas help us think about the contexts around rangatahi including, issues such as power, professional roles, poverty, racism, ableism, social exclusion, and the impact of policies that do harm to rangatahi (Ingram & Smith, 2018). Organisations can help by assisting staff to learn about the impact of key legislation and also advocate on behalf of staff and rangatahi to ensure that meaningful resources and support are available for them (see Systems thinking; Structural thinking; Critical theory; Relationship based practice in organisations).

Ideas from psychology that help explain why RBP works

- Past experiences influence current understandings.
- People are not just rational, their actions are also shaped by feelings and how they understand their situations.
- Things outside the individual and their experiences also influence behaviour and relationships
- People are not always aware of the impact these things have on their behaviour and relationships.

What this means for our mahi

- Kaimahi involvement in client's lives can bring up feelings from previous experiences and people. Understanding this helps kaimahi respond effectively.
- Kaimahi need to carefully listen and learn about the past experiences of rangatahi so that they understand why rangatahi respond in the ways they do.
- Each client is a unique mix of these factors. There will be similarities between rangatahi, but there are also key differences. This mix is a resource for kaimahi.

How do these ideas help us in our mahi?

These ideas from psychology are helpful in RBP because they remind us that how rangatahi respond to us, may be because of their past experiences of adults who might have harmed them, let them down, or been unreliable (Hatala et al., 2017). When we tune into what it might be like to be in their position, and what past experiences they may have had, we can understand why they might not welcome us. We can see that we might have to prove ourselves, make clear our purpose and be a different, reliable, and safe sort of adult before they will accept us (Turney,2012).

Because vulnerable rangatahi have experienced trauma, grief, loss, confusion, fear, anxiety, and many other powerful feelings throughout their lives, kaimahi need to be able to persevere as rangatahi work through these feelings (see Working with challenging emotions; PARTH in practice reflection sheet - Perseverance).

Sometimes this will mean putting in a lot of effort to tracking them down when they miss appointments and demonstrating commitment to them. At other times it might mean stepping back and waiting for them to make contact and when they do, responding in a welcoming way. Sometimes it can mean thinking about other ways of using time between contacts (see The importance of time). For example, connecting with other important people in their life who can help understand where this rangatahi is at and what is pressing on them at the moment.

To build strong, positive relationships with rangatahi, we need to understand how early experiences impact on their behaviour as well as the things that cause stress and distress for them today. These experiences can make it hard for rangatahi to accept our offer of support (Ruch, 2018b). Referrals will not always contain this information and kaimahi will have to look for it elsewhere or go back to the referral source and ask for more information. When we understand that what might look like irrational or excessive reactions are attempts at positive coping, based on early experiences, we can respond more positively. Rather than defining rangatahi reactions as destructive or defiant, we can reframe it as a logical response given their experiences (Liebenberg, 2020). Then we can support them to make sense of how these past experiences impact on their current responses (see Understanding and working with resistance).

Knowing that past experiences influence current relationships and reactions also helps us to understand our own reactions to rangatahi when we work with them. Our own experiences can be ‘triggers’ for us in our work, just like we can trigger reactions in rangatahi. Supervision and opportunities for critical reflection on our mahi is therefore

very important in RBP so that we are careful not to put our own experiences and meanings on rangatahi behaviours. Strong RBP needs organisational support and regular opportunities for kaimahi to critically reflect on their mahi (see Relationship based practice in organisations; Critical reflection; Supervision resources).

HOW DO I USE THESE IDEAS IN MY MAHI?

This example identifies how learning about the 'back story' of rangatahi helps kaimahi build trusting partnerships

In our agency we support kaimahi to find creative ways to talk to rangatahi about their 'back story'. We know that their 'back story' is important as it influences their current behaviour and experiences. Two of our kaimahi support young males who are working on their issues with anger and fighting. All the rangatahi in this group left school before year 10; they had been expelled or just left because school was a difficult place for them to be. Some had gang affiliations and in sharing their stories they spoke about growing up in violent environments and seeing adults hurt one another. They said they sorted their issues by getting angry and fighting and that before coming to this group there had not really been anyone who helped them understand the behaviour. They had been punished by being expelled from school or doing youth justice sentences (such as community service) but had not had a chance to think about their behaviour and what they could do differently.

While it was a group setting it was important that individual solutions unique to the rangatahi were identified. The understanding of rangatahi 'back stories' enabled meaningful solutions. It was also useful to use creative and practical strategies for hearing their stories and for identifying solutions.For example, talking while playing basketball,talking while going on group outings,and using drawing and raps/rhyme where rangatahi could show their feelings in their own way. It was important to encourage the group members to listen to the 'back stories' of other rangatahi so they could be part of the support network helping each other to find solutions. The group also reflected on current/recent interactions that had turned violent and explored alternative ways that rangatahi could have responded. Rangatahi could then try and use these approaches in future interactions.

Young men in the group have said that many of the adults in the services they attended didn't take the time to find out about them and just wanted to sort out their behaviour. This didn't help because it didn't look at the causes of the behaviour. It was important that the group facilitators took the time to understand the behaviour of each rangatahi in the group and not make generalisations or judgements about this behaviour and its causes.

RELATIONAL RESOURCES FOR CHANGE

Here are some places to look for more information

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