Interrogating assumptions about the relationship between service providers and recipients: learning from a new service for survivors of In Care Abuse

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Highlights

- Relationships between service providers and recipients are key to service effectiveness and should be included in theories of change
- Making explicit and interrogating assumptions about how relationships shape change is a helpful way to do this
- Emotions such as trust can influence the realisation of desired outcomes in complex and interdependent ways
- Centring relationships within the evaluation process surfaces the diverse ways people experience a service and how context impacts on this

Abstract

Understanding the dynamic relationship between service providers and the people who use their services is key to effective evaluation. This paper presents a practical approach to embedded evaluation that can be used by services to interrogate assumptions about relationships. The approach includes a simple framework for developing theories of change that centres relational aspects of the change process. This framework is complemented by a structured approach to surfacing risks and assumptions. Using the example of the evaluation of Future Pathways, a new and ground breaking service provided to people who experienced abuse or neglect as children In Care in Scotland, the paper describes how this approach was used in practice. Focusing in on assumptions identified by the service around trust, the paper describes the process undertaken to interrogate these assumptions through data collection with people using the service and staff. This process led to rich learning to support the development of the service as well as the identification of new elliptical assumptions. The paper concludes by sharing reflections on the learning from this work for the wider evaluation community highlighting the need for evaluators to take a relational approach to interrogating assumptions about relationships.

Keywords

Assumptions, relationships, theory of change, trauma informed, In Care Abuse, embedded evaluation, contribution analysis, outcomes

Introduction

The importance of the relationships that people form with the services they use is widely accepted. There is growing recognition that effective public services are relational, rather than transactional, and that individual or community experiences of a service and feelings about their experience are critical to realising benefits. As Osborne et al (2016) argue, for public services to be effective they need to be both delivered *and* received. That is, such services are inherently co-produced. Whilst there has been a tendency to focus on delivery of interventions and services, it is the interaction between services and people where the work and scope for improvement happens.

This co-production of service is most obvious within explicitly relational services such as those designed to support peoples' recovery (e.g. Borg and Kristiansen, 2004); make positive changes in their life (e.g. Shennan, 2014) and manage difficult emotions through trauma informed approaches (e.g. Sweeney et al., 2016). The emotional labour, skill and adaptability required to build effective relationships in these contexts is widely recognised (e.g. Guy et al 2015; Miller and Barrie, 2020). However, relational dimensions are also critical in many public service interventions that may seem on the surface to be transactional. A topical example of this is vaccination. For vaccination programmes to work they need people ready to receive the vaccine as well as people able to administer it. This requires building effective relationships with prospective vaccine recipients that foster trust and motivate people to come forward for the vaccine. Whilst done on a larger scale, this relational work also takes great skill.

Evaluating relational dimensions of services

Understanding how services attend to and work with relationships, and how this contributes to the success of the work, requires a relational sensibility to be embedded in evaluation. Participatory and qualitative approaches enable evaluators to understand the interactions within an intervention from the perspective of everyone involved. Approaches such as realist, developmental and democratic evaluation help evaluators unpack the relationship between process, outcomes and

context and create space for evaluators to attend to the relational dimensions of change (e.g Brand et al., 2018; Hanberger, 2006) as well as the relational and emotional consequences of the act of evaluation itself (Abma et al., 2020). In contrast, evaluation approaches that demand fidelity to an intervention or that rely on standardised outcome measures obscure the nature of the relational work performed and the diverse ways this contributes to realised outcomes.

Theory of change approaches are well suited to highlighting the relational changes sought through an intervention as well as the risks and assumptions in place. Whilst there are many examples of evaluation practitioners focusing on relationships between providers and recipients of service, theory of change models have tended to give primacy to cognitive rather than relational components of a change process. Mayne's (2015) synthesis of common theory of change models recommends explicitly including steps in a theory of change calling out changes to knowledge and skills and behaviour, but not relationships (also see Mayne, 2023, this issue). One notable exception is Steve Montague's work. Building on contribution analysis and realist evaluation, Montague (2011) explicitly considers how people relate to an intervention, adding a step capturing reactions, awareness and aspiration in his version of a results chain.

In this paper we take Montague's work a step further and share an approach to building and working practically with a theory of change for improvement and evaluation that centres the relational and emotional aspects of the change process. Central to this process is the approach taken to surfacing and interrogating assumptions about the relational dimensions of the service. Interrogating assumptions underpinning the theory behind a programme or service brings two main benefits. First, it adds rigour to the evaluation process, linking different levels of outcomes and enabling data to be collected to make stronger claims about the relationship between the programme activities and outcomes (Bicket et al., 2020). Second, and just as importantly, working with assumptions can be an important source of learning for those delivering the programme, giving

deeper insight into how different aspects of the service interact, the impact of context, and critically what can be improved (Archibald et al., 2016).

Over the following sections we present our approach and share a case example of how the approach was put into practice in the developmental evaluation of a new service for survivors of childhood abuse or neglect In Care.

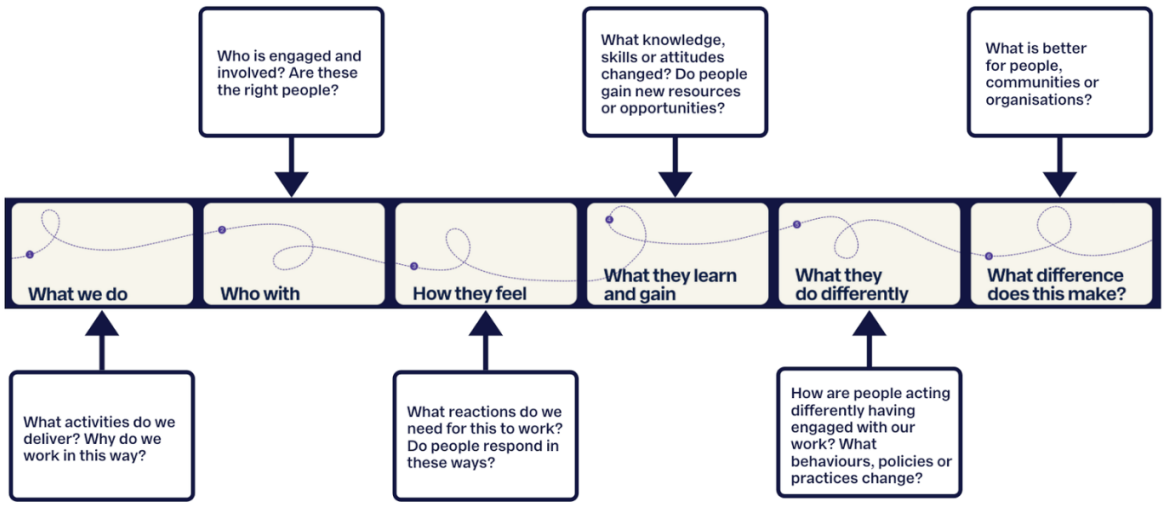
Matter of Focus approach

The Matter of Focus approach has been developed over the past six years by the authors AC and SM and at the time of publication was in use by over 150 organisations. The approach is designed to help organisations whose work is complex and relational to engage in the very practical sense making required to continually learn and improve. The approach is underpinned by software, OutNav[1], that enables organisations to bring together different forms of data in real time and continually reflect on their progress towards intended outcomes. The theory-based approach emphases evaluative thinking and builds on contribution analysis, participatory approaches, complex systems thinking and evidence to action (Morton and Cook 2022).

At the centre of the approach is a simple framework that underpins the development of a theory of change (Figure 1.). The framework is expressed in plain language so that everyone in an organisation, including service recipients, can understand it.

[1] More information on OutNav is available from www.matter-of-focus.com/OutNav

Figure 1. Matter of Focus outcome mapping framework



Organisations use this framework to surface success stories that show how their work can make the difference they hope. Organisations then build on these success stories to create an 'outcome map'[2]: a simple diagram that shows how different elements of the programme work together to contribute to change.

The framework allows organisations to make explicit the relational work that they do and the contribution that makes to improved outcomes at several different levels:

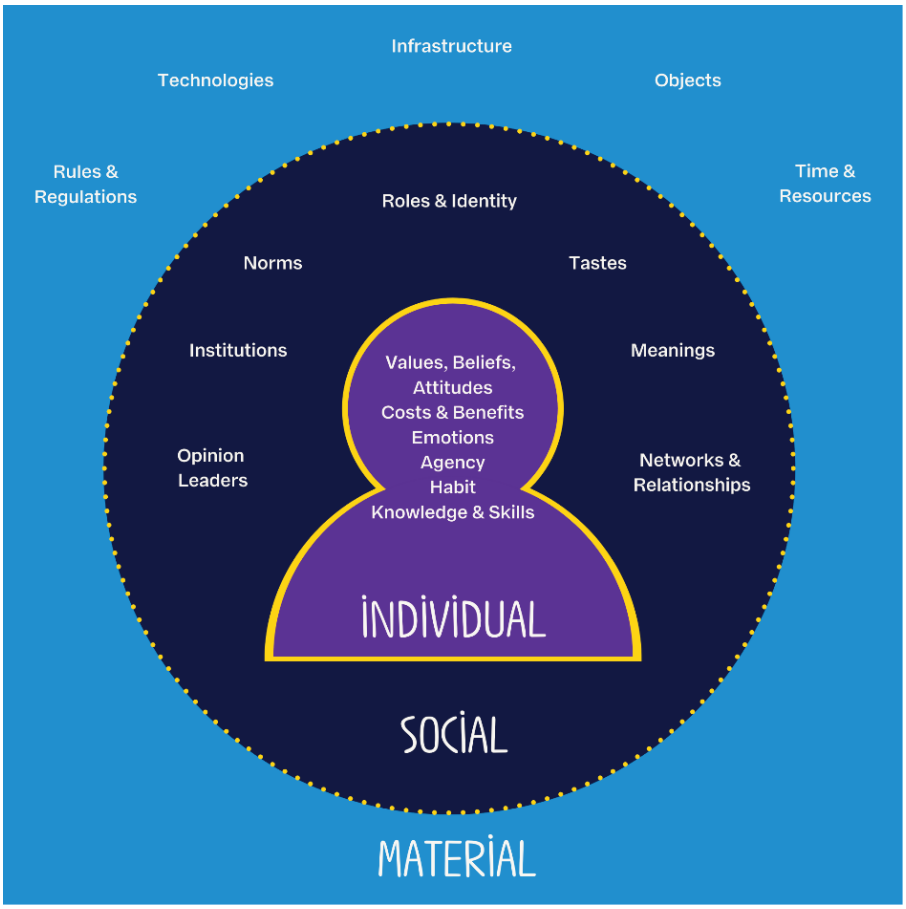
- 'What we do' - the relational work carried out by the service, e.g., the approach taken to build trust
- 'How they feel' - how people need to respond to the service for it to be effective e.g., trust a vaccine programme is safe
- 'What they learn and gain' – can be practical, e.g., protection from a virus; emotional e.g., new confidence; or relational e.g., stronger relationships.

[2] More information on outcome maps as used in the Matter of Focus approach can be accessed: https://www.matter-of-focus.com/what-is-outcome-mapping/

- ‘What they do differently’ - makes explicit how these changes are manifest in practice and behaviour, for example acting with more confidence, socialising more.

The development of this outcome map is underpinned by analysis of the context in which the intervention is operating, taking a systematic approach to surfacing risks and assumptions. This process uses the ‘ISM framework’ (Darnton and Horne, 2013) shown in Figure 2. to prompt discussion and structure the analysis. The ISM framework is built on an extensive review of the behaviour change literature (Darnton, 2008) and identifies the factors operating in Individual, Social and Material contexts that influence change. Working with the ISM at the start of an intervention enables teams to surface risks and assumptions, identifying factors that will help them in their work, as well as those that might stop them being successful. This thinking contributes to what Mark (2023), in this issue, refers to as a ‘premortem’, and helps to both identify and work with the wider factors that enable change to occur (e.g., Wimbush et al. 2012).

Figure 2. The ISM model. The evidence based model used in the approach to analyse the context for the work



A key strength of this framework is that it both explicitly prompts teams to think about the relationships they have with the people they support and helps them identify the diverse factors in the individual, social and material spheres that they need to work with to build and sustain these relationships. Over the following sections we will show how this worked in practice.

Context for the evaluation

Future Pathways [https://future-pathways.co.uk/] was established in 2016 to provide person-centred support to anyone who had experienced abuse or neglect whilst living in care as a child in Scotland. The organisation is funded by the Scottish Government and is a key part of the Government's strategic response to providing support to survivors of In Care childhood abuse.

As one of the first services of its kind internationally, there was limited evidence to inform the programme design. The existing evidence indicated that survivors of childhood abuse experienced dramatically reduced outcomes across all areas of life, from education, health, and income to relationships (Conway, 2012). This was substantiated by testimony from survivors of In Care abuse who had been campaigning for recognition, justice and support for many years (Future Pathways, 2020). In line with current health and social care policy in Scotland, the service was commissioned to work with Survivors in a person-centred way -- to understand what matters to them and help them access the services and supports they need to improve wellbeing.

Whilst the service was not underpinned by an explicit theory of change, the service model was based on some very clear assumptions. These included:

- Childhood trauma can have a life-long effect on a person's wellbeing and the service needs to take a trauma informed approach.
- Improved wellbeing is possible with the right emotional and practical support.

However, what was not known when the service launched was whether survivors would engage with this service (when they had been failed by services in the past) and what would be required to put in place the emotional and practical support needed for improved wellbeing.

Within 18 months of launching the service, it became clear that there was a strong demand for the service and that the service needed to continually innovate to respond effectively within the complex and contested environment in which it was operating. In early 2018, Future Pathways commissioned Matter of Focus to work with them to initiate a process of developmental evaluation of the service to support learning and to underpin ongoing service developments. This involved three phases of work and is described below.

Approach to the evaluation

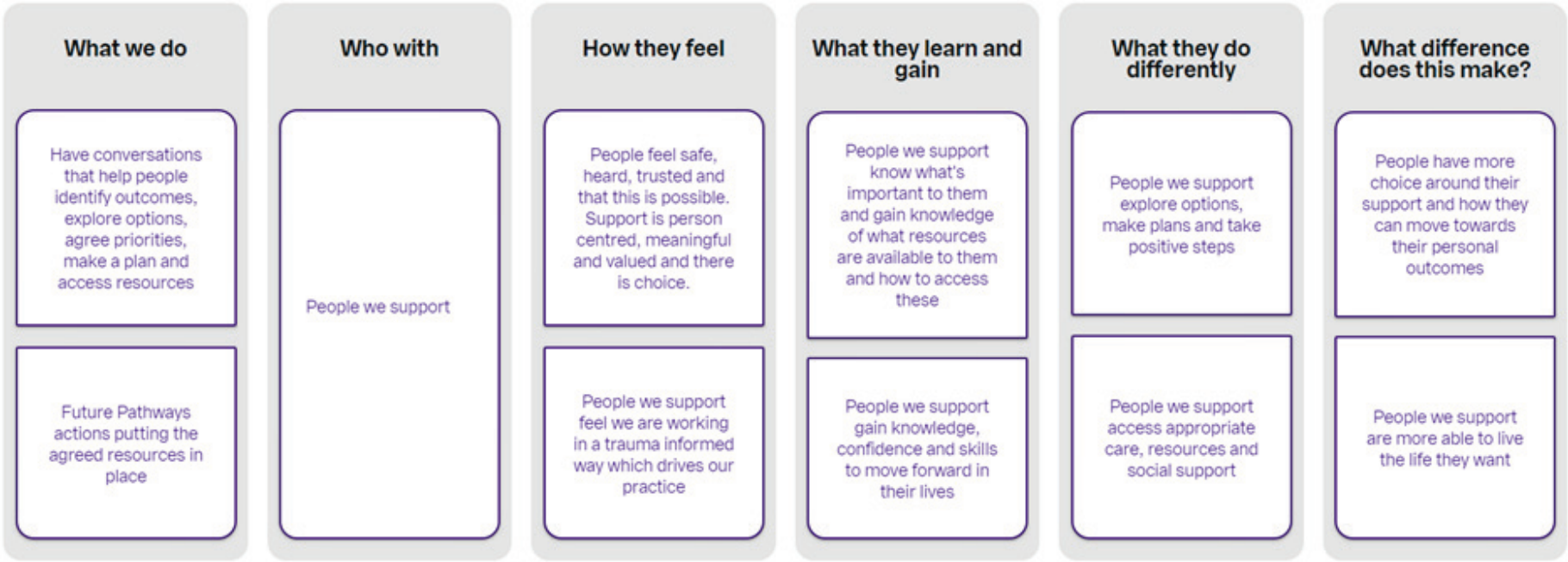
The Future Pathways team recognise that their work is of international significance and they are committed to evaluation to capture and share learning from the work and to support service development. The evaluation process is ongoing, starting with an intensive period of developing and initial testing of a theory of change, led by Matter of Focus, followed by ongoing evaluation led by Future Pathways[3]. In this paper we reflect on findings from both phases of evaluation work.

The theory development and testing was carried out between January and August 2018 through a series of workshops involving 27 staff members, managers, and key stakeholders. The Matter of Focus team worked with Future Pathways to:

- Develop a shared understanding of the context for their work, using the ISM framework shown in Figure 2.
- Elicit success stories from Future Pathways staff using the Matter of Focus headings shown in Figure 1.
- Formalise and refine a theory of change for the service expressed in an outcome map (except shown in Figure 3) with associated risks and assumptions.

[3] This process has been underpinned by OutNav software developed by Matter of Focus to scaffold self-evaluation around a theory of change.

Figure 3. Excerpt from the Outcome Map showing how Future Pathways supports people registered with the service



The theory development process highlighted how central the relationships between staff and people registered with the service were to effectiveness. The sharing of success stories and context analysis led to identification of a range of assumptions that the service needed to explore, notably: that survivors could trust the service; that staff had the appropriate skills and resources to deliver the service; that there were appropriate care resources and social support that survivors could access to support recovery.

Having agreed to a 'good enough' theory of change, the Matter of Focus team carried out a round of data collection and analysis to test the theory of change and underpinning assumptions. This involved engaging with 24 people who had used Future Pathways in interviews and focus groups. The findings from this work were written up in a scoping report (Cook and Grant, 2018) which was then discussed in a series of workshops with the wider staff team, leading to a range of actions for improvement.

Once this phase was complete, Future Pathways developed a small team to refresh the theory of change and continue the evaluation work themselves. This work is ongoing and includes reflective practice sessions with staff, use of administrative data and in-depth interviews with a small number of survivors every quarter. All this data and evidence is uploaded to the software OutNav and the team work collectively to reflect, analyse and report on progress.

Bringing relational evaluation practice to life

In this paper, we focus in on the assumptions identified by the service on the issue of trust to illustrate how the evaluation approach enabled the surfacing and interrogation of assumptions about the relationship between survivors and Future Pathways and how the service adapted in response. The insights gained through this process are presented sequentially, starting with the learning from the workshops, then the data collection phase and finally how the service adapted in response to the findings.

The primacy given by the staff to the importance of trust to the effective delivery of the service quickly became obvious through the workshops. Through success stories and the context analysis process staff identified the following assumptions relating to trust:

- Survivors can trust that they will be safe in their interactions with staff
- Survivors can trust that the service will be effective and help them towards a better life
- Survivors feel trusted and believed by the service and therefore prepared to engage in the emotional journey the service is designed to facilitate.

Working with staff to analyse the context for their work enabled them to identify a range of barriers to the service's efforts to build trust with people. The most significant of these were related to the childhood experience of abuse and lifelong stigma and discrimination so many survivors experienced. As one staff member reflected:

> *"People often need to build a strong trusting relationship in order to feel safe enough to open up and free themselves in their thinking - to focus on what they truly feel is important to them and how they want their life to be like. Often people are not used to thinking about 'support' and 'wellbeing' in the way that we are meaning …this can take time.*

(Excerpt from reflective impact log completed by a staff member as part of the theory development process).

A further assumption surfaced was that staff have the capacity, skills and time required to build a trusting relationship. Many staff members reflected on how much time it took to build trust with people and reflected on the difficult trade-offs that needed to be made between sustaining trusting relationships with survivors currently registered with the service and meeting the needs of the growing number of registrants.

Interviews with survivors, carried out by the evaluators and an embedded researcher, reinforced the assumptions about trust and deepened understanding of how these assumptions played out from the perspective of survivors.

For survivors, trusting the service and feeling heard and safe was critical to engagement, but as many people reflected, this was hard to do because of the seriousness of the breach of trust with services as children and in other parts of their lives. When trust was established, it needed to be nurtured. The importance of accessibility and length of relationship were often referenced. As one survivor reflected:

> *"Having someone constant in your life helps you build trust when that's been broken from an early age. Consistent support staff is important as change diminishes trust."*
>
> (Interview with person being supported by Future Pathways)

The service was described as feeling different than previous experiences by survivors. Trust was prioritised and was built through non-judgemental listening and by not asking people to share their story of abuse. These factors also helped survivors build confidence in the service and themselves.

> *"When I started speaking to my support co-ordinator I trusted her as I believed she knew what she was talking about. I trust my support worker and Future Pathways with my life."*
>
> (Interview with person being supported by Future Pathways)

A key finding from the interviews and focus groups was that this relational approach and the time taken to build trust was worth it. Building trust and an effective relationship with Future Pathways did contribute directly to recovery. Taking the time to build trust gave the survivors

confidence to accept help, to work with staff to identify their needs, get better supports in place. As a result, many people were living better lives. As one survivor reflected:

> *"My Support Co-ordinator asked the right questions, I trust them. She saved my life. I was for jumping out of the window. I put my hand up for help and this has given me confidence to put that out there – to ask."*
>
> (Interview with a person supported by Future Pathways)

A challenge was observed within the service model regarding its efforts to support people engaging with wider services. For survivors, this meant that the process of building trust needed to start again with each new service they accessed. As one survivor reflected, *"I'm horrified at the thought that I might be passed on to someone else."*

A few people who participated in the interviews and focus groups felt much less positive about the service. They shared a range of factors that stopped them from feeling safe in the service, for example changing staff, not seeing staff enough to build trust, and knowing friends or family members who were waiting for a service.

Many survivors expressed concerns about the broader context in which the service was operating. It was clear that their lack of trust in the system as a whole coloured their relationship with Future Pathways. One overwhelming factor was uncertainty about where Future Pathways sat in relation to their search for justice for the abuse they had received. There was concern that early promises made to the survivor community by the government were not being kept, and some survivors were uncertain about the role of Future Pathways in this, making them doubt the support provided. One person expressed their worry that Future Pathways' funding was coming out of funds that might be available for reparation from the Government.

> *"We were told this is support for life, no longer for life, a one off. It feels like you are thrown a bone and then off you go. Just like social services. They are just throwing stuff at us…will that be taken from our compensation?"*
>
> (Interview with person supported by Future Pathways)

For the service, the findings from the evaluation were not surprising, but it did confirm their initial assumptions about the role of trust in the service and challenges in building that trust. This gave the service confidence to argue for the additional resources required to sustain the relational approach whilst opening the service up to a larger number of survivors. The findings also identified opportunities for the service to improve the way it worked, including:

- ensuring staff are supported to work with the emotions of survivors
- putting in place new processes with survivors at the point of registration to help them build a trusting relationship with Future Pathways as well as individual staff members
- working with providers of support to help them embed trauma-informed practices and more quickly build trusting relationships with survivors referred to them

The evaluation also highlighted a new elliptical assumption (Mark, 2023, in this issue), which is that for survivors, trust in Future Pathways is influenced by their trust in the Government to make reparations for their abuse. This is an external influence that is out of the control of the service. However, knowing that it exists has enabled the service to address the issue in their interactions with survivors, managing expectations.

Learning for the evaluation community

For many evaluators and programme leaders, these kinds of insights will be familiar. So many human services are about connection and helping people to overcome adversity and we recognise the emotional labour that is core to these relationships. At one level the findings about

relationships are obvious and will echo with what people instinctively know about their own programmes and services.

However, relatively few programmes formalise an understanding of how these relational processes work in the form of assumptions alongside a theory of change. The case of Future Pathways shows how valuable it is for staff, managers and people who use services to talk about and understand the relational aspect of their work. This example clearly shows that it is not enough to just ask people what they feel about the service. Instead, a systematic and relational approach is needed to unpack the layers of assumptions about the relationship between the service providers and recipients and the influence of external factors. This cannot be done in a simple mechanistic way using standardised measures.

Relational processes were important at several levels within this example:

- **Relationships between service recipients and staff**: a focus on what positive engagement looks like
- **Relational aspects within the context**: previous betrayals within abusive relationships and the role of the state in support and reparation
- **Assumptions about relationships**: that the service can build good relationships, that people will learn to trust a new service
- **Relationships between the service and the funder**: the role of the service in delivering a government initiative in a contested environment
- **Relationships between evaluation and service**: the embedded nature of the evaluation made it easier for learning to be quickly integrated into practice

By paying attention to, and supporting the team to successfully navigate, these relational processes at different levels, the embedded evaluation process has made a vital contribution to this initiative. Being able to call out, test, and evaluate what is happening has helped the project learn as

it delivers and progress the work with more confidence. This has helped clarify how the service makes a difference, including that the real work of supporting survivors towards recovery doesn't start until trusting relationships are established and maintained. Being able to demonstrate evidence of outcomes has helped the service build trust with the funders and ensure continuity for survivors.

Recommendations

It is important that evaluations of people-based services go beyond simple outcome evaluation to understand the relationship between service providers and recipients. Otherwise, insights into how services work are missed and some of the essential work that is done can be overlooked. This observation is consistent with complexity informed approaches to evaluation that recognise it is not just what you do, but how you do it that gets results.

There is a risk that the importance of interpersonal relationships is taken for granted or that trusting relationships are assumed. Including relationships explicitly within a theory of change is an important way to avoid this risk. This is critical for therapeutic services such as Future Pathways, but also important for any change process that relies on an emotional engagement with the intervention to be effective, such as vaccination programmes. As the findings from this evaluation show, centring relationships within an evaluation process creates space to understand the diverse ways people experience an intervention and how the context impacts on this. It also brings an additional explanatory lens to understand success and failure.

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