



Building Relationships Across Power Dynamics

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RELATIONSHIPS
PROJECT

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|--|-----------|
| EXECUTIVE SUMMARY | 2 |
| ABBREVIATIONS AND DEFINITIONS | 4 |
| 1. INTRODUCTION | 5 |
| 1.1 Key Researchers/ Stakeholders in the Space | 6 |
| 1.2 RCP Background and History | 6 |
| 1.3 Research Project and Pattern Library | 8 |
| 1.4 Background Research and UK Contextual Factors | 9 |
| 2. RESEARCH FOCUS | 11 |
| 2.1 Purpose and Objectives | 11 |
| 3. LITERATURE REVIEW | 12 |
| 3.1 Overview and Key Findings | 12 |
| 3.1.1 Defining “ Good” Relationships | 12 |
| 3.1.2 Power Dynamics and Effects on Relationships | 13 |
| 3.2 Research Goals | 15 |
| 4. METHODOLOGY | 16 |
| 4.1 Community Engagement | 19 |
| 4.2 Limitations | 19 |
| 4.3 Reflexivity | 21 |
| 5. EVIDENCE & KEY FINDINGS | 22 |
| 5.1 Defining “good relationships” | 22 |
| 5.2 How to build good relationships across a power dynamic? (Skills and Behaviours) | 23 |
| Table 1: Summary of Behaviours and Skills that Support Relationship Building Across Power | 29 |
| 5.3 How can organizations support relationship building between people across power dynamics? | 30 |
| Table 2: Organizational Changes towards Building Relationships Across Power | 32 |
| 6. DISCUSSION | 33 |
| 6.1 Empowerment and Perceived Sense of Power | 33 |
| 6.2 Repair and Bridging a Gap | 34 |
| 6.3 Changes for Organizations to Support Relationships Across Power | 35 |
| 7. RECOMMENDATIONS | 37 |
| ACKNOWLEDGMENTS | 42 |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY | 43 |

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2024, the Relationships Project conducted a survey for UK professionals inquiring about struggles that they face with relationships. Many people struggled in relationships across power and power dynamics and this research was conducted to provide guidance.

Key questions that our research paper seeks to answer are;

- How do we define good relationships?
- What behaviors, skills and techniques can senior leaders in the public sector apply when building relationships across a power dynamic?
- Lastly, how can organizations provide better conditions to support relationship building between people across power dynamics?

We conducted six semi-structured elite interviews with service providers within the UK (healthcare, education and local government). Our research is limited to a small sample and hasn't focused on other power dynamics beyond power held by roles in organizations.

Key findings from our study include 8 groupings of skill sets and behaviors that are critical to building strong relationships across power; **role clarity and boundary setting, creating shared understandings, conscious awareness of power and its' use, collaboration where possible, a personal connection, client autonomy/empowerment, relationship repair, and being expansive about your role.**

Organizational conditions that strengthen relationship building include; community and external collaborations, internal collaborations, recruitment and training for relationship centered people, and collective leadership.

We recommend mandatory research-based training specifically on power, awareness of power dynamics and conscientious use of power, for medical clinicians, educational professionals, employees in county and district within the UK. We also recommend an increase in research funding towards service accessibility and service provision through the lens of power dynamics and understanding what power dynamics exist across services.



Easy Read Summary: Building Relationships Across Power Dynamics



What did we do?



A team at The Relationships Project and Samuel Centre for Social Connectedness completed and funded this research.

We asked 6 people, who hold power in their titles at work, how they build relationships with people. The people we asked are experts in their field, based in the UK and work in healthcare, education and government, for example teachers, health administrative workers etc.

What did we find?



People shared that good relationships are reciprocal, reliable, mutual, trusting, and unique. To build good relationships across power (through job roles), people recommended that professionals are::

1. Clear about their role, what they can and can't do for someone
2. Using clear language and explaining things for people
3. Are aware of the power they hold and how they use it
4. Work as a team with people and create shared goals
5. Empower people and give them choices
6. Apologize for mistakes and build trust slowly
7. Think creatively outside of organizations' norms



What next? Final thoughts



Power exists everywhere and professionals need to know the power that they hold so they can empower people they work with, rather than harm them.

We recommend more funding in research towards power dynamics in public services like healthcare and education to help professionals understand the power they hold and training for professionals in public services about power, specific power dynamics and careful use of power.



ABBREVIATIONS AND DEFINITIONS

| | |
|---------------------------|---|
| Elite Interviews | Interviews with people from senior roles or who have privileged access to the knowledge of specific groups of people or decision-making processes. |
| Purposive sampling | Selective, or subjective sampling, is a form of non-probability sampling in which researchers use their own judgment in choosing the sample to participate in their research. |
| RCP | Relationship Centred Practice |
| RP | The Relationships Project |
| SCSC | Samuel Centre for Social Connectedness |
| “We” | Is in reference to the research team behind this work: Immy Robinson and Neil Denton from the Relationships Project, and myself. |

1. INTRODUCTION

This research is a partnership product between two aligned organizations; the Samuel Centre for Social Connectedness (SCSC) and The Relationships Project (RP). SCSC is a research, advocacy, and action group that partners with academics and changemakers to combat social isolation and support building belonging around the world. The Relationships Project (RP) is a UK-based organization committed to bringing about a paradigm shift towards a world where building and maintaining good relationships is the first priority; Relationship Centered Practice (RCP).¹ Since 2021, the Relationships Project has been acting as a field builder, helping to catalyze, support and grow a field of practice around putting relationships first.² RP prioritizes spaces and shared learning through connection, understanding of Relationship Centered Practice, and embedding this learning in ways to support practitioners wanting to practice Relationship Centered Practice consistently.

1.1 Key Researchers/ Stakeholders in the Space

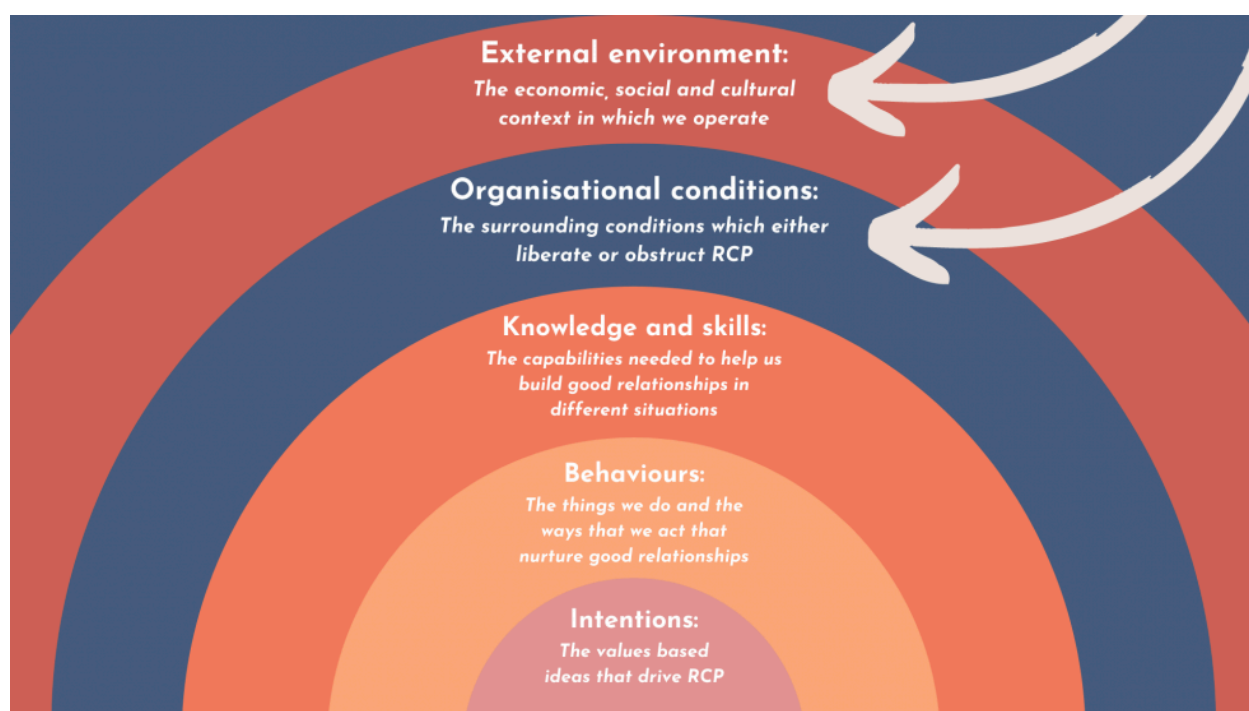
The key stakeholders involved in our research project are the Samuel Centre for Social Connectedness, Relationships Project internal team, the Relationships Collective leaders and the network of relationship centered practitioners developed by the Relationships Collective. This research project is centred around relationship centered practitioners based in the UK and working in the public sector, however we want this knowledge to support all service providers working in the UK and globally.

¹ Robinson, Immy. 2024. "What We Mean by Relationship-Centred Practice." *Relationships Project* (blog). February 27, 2024. <https://relationshipsproject.org/what-we-mean-by-relationship-centred-practice/>.

² Robinson, Immy. 2024. "Two Years of Bringing People Together." *Relationships Project* (blog). September 11, 2024. <https://relationshipsproject.org/two-years-of-bringing-people-together/>.

1.2 RCP Background and History

Our research is based around a framework, Relationship-Centered Practice, previously developed by the Relationships Project. Relationship-centered practice (RCP) is the guiding principle where meaningful and effective relationships are positioned as the first order goal, both an end in itself, and the means by which other goals will be achieved.³ RP has developed a framework to understand factors that can hinder or support relationship-centered practice (pictured below).



As this framework details, underpinning RCP is a set of principles, intentions or commitments; examples include reciprocity, trust, and safety. We next see behaviours that would characterize RCP, including active collaboration and goal setting, active listening, setting boundaries, conflict transformation etc. Above this, we have organization conditions, which includes permissions given or withheld in organizations

³ Robinson, Immy. 2024. "What We Mean by Relationship-Centred Practice." *Relationships Project* (blog). February 27, 2024. <https://relationshipsproject.org/what-we-mean-by-relationship-centred-practice/>.

that allow for people to center relationships.⁴ Lastly, we have external conditions, e.g. economic and social, that might affect how people can build relationships in their roles.

Our research questions and interviews were informed by this framework and specifically narrowed in on specific behaviours and organizational conditions needed for building relationships.

1.3 Research Project and Pattern Library

The Relationships Project has been learning alongside hundreds of Relationship-Centred Practitioners about how they put relationships first in their community, organization or system. We've learned that whilst relational work is necessarily shaped by context, there are common 'patterns' that we witness across sectors and specialisms; behaviours, competencies and conditions which underpin and enable Relationship-Centred Practice.

This knowledge is being used to create a 'Pattern Library': a digital, community-built wayfinder which will provide support and guidance to those looking to embed relational ways of working into their community, organization or system.⁵ Patterns in the library will share information, guidance and support around a specific behaviour, competency or condition which helps underpin and embed relational work in accessible ways to the practitioner community in the UK, and later globally.

In 2024, RP put out a survey to hundreds of UK practitioners across different sectors that asked people about their struggles within relationship building.⁶ One

⁴ The use of the pronoun 'we' throughout this paper is in reference to the research team behind this work: Immy Robinson and Neil Denton from the Relationships Project, and myself.

⁵ Robinson, Immy. n.d. "Pattern Library." *Relationships Project* (blog). Accessed September 19, 2024. <https://relationshipsproject.org/pattern-library/>.

⁶ Rice, Gayle, and Immy Robinson. 2024. "Pattern Library Update." *Relationships Project* (blog). February 29, 2024. <https://relationshipsproject.org/help-populate-the-pattern-library/>.

repeated struggle that practitioners were interested in was building relationships across power and where power dynamics are present. This will be the focus of this research paper, and we want to study how practitioners can build relationships across power.

The Relationships Project aims to serve a practitioner network, situated in the UK.⁷ We narrowed our focus to UK-based service providers within the public sector (provides all public services in the UK) and their positional power dynamics within the public sector, specifically branches of healthcare, education and local government. These branches were chosen as we'd like to explore power within the public sector to support provision of these services. Examples of role power dynamics we will be examining include medical professionals and patients, teachers and students, local authorities and citizens etc.

1.4 Background Research and UK Contextual Factors

To understand the focus of building relationships across power, one needs to understand power, power dynamics, and where they can exist. Power has been defined by many sources but to simplify, our paper refers to power as “the ability to affect or prevent change.”⁸ There are also various frameworks of power found in literature, but they have some core overlapping facets. According to Dr. Cedar Barstow and the Right Use of Power framework, there is **Personal Power** (often seen as character traits and belief that making change can happen in your life), **Role Power** (based on the roles (or positions we occupy in the world), **Status Power** (“membership” in a group that holds power, typically a majority or people with “privilege”), **Collective Power** (joining a trade

⁷ Robinson, David. 2023. “Our Dreams for a Centre in Community Participation and Connectedness.” *Relationships Project* (blog). February 21, 2023. <https://relationshipsproject.org/our-dreams-for-a-centre-in-community-participation-and-connectedness/>.

⁸ “The Five Types of Power – The Ally Co.” n.d. Accessed September 2, 2024. <https://insights.theallyco.world/posts/the-five-types-of-power/>.

union or political party are examples of collective power), and **Systemic Power** (structures, stories and symbols that become status quo for societies).⁹

We will be focusing our research on role/positional power with service providers who have role power over their clients and service users. All of these power dynamics are interconnected and related, especially status power with identity differences between providers and service users, however role-based power will be the primary focus of our research.

Within the RCP framework, we can also look at external economic, social and financial factors that affect peoples' abilities to center relationships. Our research centers interview insights from professionals in healthcare, education and local government. Structural and societal factors that are currently affecting the UK public sector branches; healthcare, education and local government within the United Kingdom are worth noting.

To begin within healthcare, the NHS (National Health Service) has been struggling with longer waiting lists and real term budget cuts to the Department of Health and social care between 2021 and 2024.¹⁰

According to a 2023 report by the House of Commons Library, a few core issues facing the education sector are teaching staff recruitment and retention.¹¹ In 2022,

⁹ "The Five Types of Power – The Ally Co." n.d. Accessed September 2, 2024.

<https://insights.theallyco.world/posts/the-five-types-of-power/>.

¹⁰ "Health Funding Data Analysis." n.d. The British Medical Association Is the Trade Union and Professional Body for Doctors in the UK. Accessed September 2, 2024.

<https://www.bma.org.uk/advice-and-support/nhs-delivery-and-workforce/funding/health-funding-data-analysis>.

¹¹ "Looking to 2024: The Challenges Facing the Education Sector in the Year Ahead | Reed." n.d. Accessed September 2, 2024.

<https://www.reed.com/articles/looking-to-2024-the-challenges-facing-the-education-sector-in-the-year-ahead>.

40,000 teachers quit the profession amid a competitive wider labour market. The education sector has also faced school spending budget cuts since 2010.

Lastly, UK local government authorities (made up of thousands of local councils) are also working with strained budgets (statutory and discretionary), making it challenging to fund essential services and infrastructure projects.¹²

2. RESEARCH FOCUS

2.1 Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this research project is to support service providers in the RP network by researching and understanding key behaviours that are relevant to building relationships across power dynamics. We bring two interconnected layers of the RCP framework (pictured above).

The first perspective is individual service provider perspectives and reflections about the principles and behaviours that help to build good relationships (across power dynamics) with their "service users/clients". The second, interconnected perspective includes the organizational qualities, structures and systems that provide "permissions" for service providers to act in a relational way (that is cognisant of, and responsive to, power differentials).

Research Questions

The following are the research questions that frame this research project:

1. How do we define good relationships?

¹² "Local Government in England, Scotland and Wales." n.d. UK in a Changing Europe. Accessed September 3, 2024. <https://ukandeu.ac.uk/explainers/local-government-in-england-scotland-and-wales/>.

2. What behaviours, skills, methods, approaches and techniques can service providers apply that would be helpful in building relational trust across a power dynamic?
3. How can organizations (healthcare, education and local government) provide better conditions to support relationship building between people across power dynamics?

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Overview and Key Findings

3.1.1 Defining “ Good” Relationships

Overall, there are a variety of definitions for good relationships across literature. Research on quality of relationships is often seen in research on couples or organizational psychology. To begin, the Relationships Project characterizes good relationships as having particular factors that differentiate them from transactional or poor relationships. These key factors include: mutual, personal, organic, warm, trusting and enabling.¹³ This is in line with findings of organizational research that define relationship quality (RQ) as having key dimensions; trust, affect, respect, support, flexibility, loyalty.¹⁴ Systematic reviews on relationship quality describe the definitions as a “mud puddle” and recommend that the best proxy for relationship quality is affect-based trust. Research by McAllister (1995) states that interpersonal trust has

¹³ Robinson, Immy. 2024. “What We Mean by Good Relationships.” *Relationships Project* (blog). February 15, 2024. <https://relationshipsproject.org/what-we-mean-by-good-relationships/>.

¹⁴ Ferris, Gerald R., Robert C. Liden, Timothy P. Munyon, James K. Summers, Kevin J. Basik, and M. Ronald Buckley. 2009. “Relationships at Work: Toward a Multidimensional Conceptualization of Dyadic Work Relationships.” *Journal of Management* 35 (6): 1379–1403. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206309344741>.

cognitive and affective foundations.¹⁵ The cognitive foundation is based on strong knowledge and reasons, e.g. reliability and skillset of the professional. Affect-based trust is based more upon the emotional bond that's developed between individuals. It's trust built through believing that the individual holds genuine care and concern for someone's well being and sees intrinsic value in the relationship.

3.1.2 Power Dynamics and Effects on Relationships

There are many overlapping frameworks for types of power e.g. Dr. Cedar Barstow's and the Right Use of Power framework's definition, which include: personal, role, status, collective, systemic.¹⁶

This research will focus on role (positional) power, and investigate power dynamics between public service providers and service users. There are intersections between the spheres of power that, while important, were beyond the scope of this paper.

Previous literature and research about how power dynamics affect relationships, is particularly found in studies on couples and romance. One particular study by Robert Körner in which 181 heterosexual couples were interviewed, found that the key factor to relationship satisfaction wasn't positional or status power, rather it was the perceived personal level of power.¹⁷

¹⁵ McAllister, Daniel. 1995. "Affect- and Cognition-Based Trust as Foundations for Interpersonal Cooperation in Organizations." *Academy of Management Journal* 38 (February):24–59. <https://doi.org/10.5465/256727>.

¹⁶ "The Five Types of Power – The Ally Co." n.d. Accessed September 3, 2024. <https://insights.theallyco.world/posts/the-five-types-of-power/>.

¹⁷ Körner, Robert, and Astrid Schütz. 2021. "Power in Romantic Relationships: How Positional and Experienced Power Are Associated with Relationship Quality." *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 38 (9): 2653–77. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02654075211017670>.

Overall, research covers some power dynamics and relationships within the public sectors; particular doctor and patient relationships, along with teacher and student relationships. Within education research, teachers' viewpoints of their roles influenced how they choose to exercise power and empower their students in class. Many teachers viewed their roles as 'a benevolent dictator', 'a concerned authority', 'a facilitator', 'a mentor', or 'an adviser'. These roles are associated with different forms of exercising power, and are guided by different teaching perspectives.¹⁸

There are clinical and educational guides for teachers and doctors in building relationships with students and patients. For teachers, it is positive to listen to and respect students' opinions, have faith in students, and not be afraid of allowing their negotiations and active involvement in learning goals as long as they are genuine.

The guides for teachers touch on the need for connection through sharing stories, listening and paying attention, being collaborative, and having consistent connection with students.¹⁹

Research within healthcare states the need to make communication more collaborative, and build trust with patients so they feel like they're a team. It is critical for this trust to be built as, without it, people don't seek healthcare or will go elsewhere.²⁰ These guides provide relevant insight and advice that professionals can look to, however very few address these relationships through the lens of power and power dynamics.

¹⁸ Sidky, Gihan. 2017. "The Power Game: Power Dynamics between the Teacher and the Students in a Graduate Seminar." *English Language Teaching* 10 (5): 179. <https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v10n5p179>.

¹⁹ Knightsmith, Dr Pooky. 2022. "Relational Practice: Improving Behaviour and School Culture." SecEd. January 24, 2022.

<https://www.sec-ed.co.uk/content/best-practice/relational-practice-improving-behaviour-and-school-culture>

²⁰ TEDx Talks, dir. 2022. *Making Room for Trust in the Doctor/Patient Relationship* | Miri Lader, MD | TEDxDayton. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6W55slJJ0ig>.

Lastly, in terms of organizational tips for supporting relationship building across power, there is research that focuses on organizational psychology and what makes for stronger relationships in organizations. For example, Jody Gittel researched the differences between two airlines; American and Southwest, and found differences in how the organizations were structured, and how this impacted worker relationships.²¹ Jody found that a few supportive organizational factors were:

- Cross-functional accountability (responsibility for performance held across units, shared goals and problem solving with other units);
- Supervisors with smaller spans of control, (employees having more supervisor support);
- Recruiting for people based on team working ability.

These factors can lead to stronger relationships across employees within organizations.

Research has been conducted on categorizing power dynamics, but not naming power dynamics in work contexts, and learning their effects on relationships. From a practitioner lens, there are many scattered sources with great tips and examples for people working to build relationships across specific power dynamics. This information isn't consolidated, accessible, or systematically reviewed across sectors and professionals.

3.2 Research Goals

The goal of this research and the Relationship Project's "Pattern Library" is to gather and consolidate tips, skills and behaviours that service providers and other

²¹ Gittel, Jody Hoffer. "Paradox of Coordination and Control." California Management Review 42, no. 3 (April 2000): 101–17. <https://doi.org/10.2307/41166044>.

relationship practitioners can use to build relationships across power dynamics. The goal was to cover a wider range of work contexts and types of power dynamics in the interviews, with a focus on the public sector of healthcare, education, and government. We hope these skills are also applicable across other sectors.

This research involved people working within healthcare, education and government. We hope to address a variety of power dynamics beyond teachers and students and patients and doctors. Lastly, we are taking a practitioner-centered approach on an analysis of organizational factors that impact relationship building across power dynamics, and taking cross-sector suggestions on what service providers recommend to organizations to provide a better environment for relationship building.

4. METHODOLOGY

To begin, this project is in response to a pre-survey, conducted in February 2024 by the Relationships Project, with hundreds of practitioners within their network, asking practitioners about key struggles they face in building relationships at work. One key finding was that people struggled with how to build relationships across power dynamics.²²

Wanting to be open to a variety of sources, perspectives and answers to support practitioners, we took a primarily inductive, qualitative research approach, with mixed methods of desk research through a scoping literature review and 6 online, semi-structured, and elite interviews.²³

²² Robinson, David. 2023. "Our Dreams for a Centre in Community Participation and Connectedness." Relationships Project (blog). February 21, 2023.

<https://relationshipsproject.org/our-dreams-for-a-centre-in-community-participation-and-connectedness/>.

²³ Elite Interviews; interviews of people from senior roles or who are responsible for and have privileged access to the knowledge of specific groups of people or decision-making processes.

We conducted a literature review on a variety of secondary sources; academic, clinical and community resources, that scope out major definitions, trends and tips on good relationships, power, and forming relationships across various power dynamics that currently exist.

Next, we conducted six online 60 minute semi-structured elite interviews with service providers within the public sector in the UK. These service providers are experts in higher, more senior leadership roles and have been in practice for 15+ years within the public sector. We intentionally wanted to conduct elite/expert interviews, as the goal of this research project is primarily to support practitioners engaging in relationships across power dynamics, and all of our participants provided incredible nuanced, specific and applied insight and wisdom, awareness of current barriers, and suggestions for practitioners and organizations.

They are also practitioners that intentionally prioritize relationship-centered practice, as they were recruited directly from or through referrals from the Relationships Project's network of practitioners. The sampling method was purposive sampling.²⁴ Relationship practitioners were chosen and selected by RP based on participants' expertise in relationship building and high positional power in their respective roles within the public sector within the UK.²⁵ We chose to directly recruit from the RP network to engage the community of practitioners within the Relationships Project network that we are aiming to support.

We chose to use interviews here because power dynamics are often a sensitive and thought-provoking topic within relationships; as such, this often requires trust

²⁴ Ben-Joseph, Kerry. 2021. "Purposive Sampling 101." Alchemer (blog). May 20, 2021. <https://www.alchemer.com/resources/blog/purposive-sampling-101/>.

²⁵ RP refers to "Relationships Project" going forward within this report

building, follow-up probing and time with an interviewee to gather wisdom and intel about power and relationships. A semi-structured method was used where we had a standard set of 6 questions, but often asked probing follow-up questions and allowed participants to speak freely. This structure supported our inductive approach, as it allowed interviewees space to guide the interviews into topics and examples they felt were relevant, along with slowly building trust and gathering specific knowledge.

It is pertinent to the research to mention the power dynamics involved in conducting these interviews. Although these are experts, being an interviewer and asking potentially confidential and sensitive questions inherently creates a power dynamic. As the person conducting interviews and guiding conversation, I had more power than the interviewees. To minimize potential harm and empower the participants, the initial outreach emails make space for asking if anyone needed accommodations. In the interviews, participants were informed that they had the right to informed consent, to not answer questions, take breaks, and remove any information shared after the interviews. Recording transcripts were also anonymized after recording. Once the first draft of the paper was completed, the participants were sent a copy to indicate if there was any discomfort with its contents.

Lastly, we conducted an inductive and grounded theory data analysis approach, where the data from our interviews shaped our theory and findings. This project is in response to the survey that shone light on what practitioners needed, so we want to keep this research in the practitioner-first framework and allow practitioner insight to guide our findings.

We transcribed the interviews, removed any identifiers to keep anonymity for our interviewees, and coded for the key findings and themes of our research. Thematic analysis was conducted where seven larger themes of the key skills and behaviours emerged, and four themes of organizational conditions that support relationship building where power dynamics are present. The findings are categorized into the framework previously researched by RP called relationships-centered practice (individual behaviors and skills, organizational conditions and external conditions).²⁶

4.1 Community Engagement

The Relationships Project has built an engaged network of practitioners in the UK who are passionate about centering relationship building in their practice. This research allowed us to delve deeply into wisdom and knowledge of how these specific practitioners navigate building relationships across power dynamics.

We are currently using the data from this research paper to create a short community guided resource for RP's Pattern Library. This toolkit aims to serve the Relationships Project community of practitioners in building relationships within their respective roles and fields.

4.2 Limitations

As previously mentioned in the background research, this project, through desk research and key research questions, focuses on the power dynamics found in positions or roles. There are many other intersecting power dynamics (eg. differences in lived experiences and identities) that our research didn't cover as it wasn't within the

²⁶ Robinson, Immy. 2024. "What We Mean by Relationship-Centred Practice." *Relationships Project* (blog). February 27, 2024. <https://relationshipsproject.org/what-we-mean-by-relationship-centred-practice/>.

scope of our research, however impacts all of the power dynamics discussed within our research. Another key limit of this research was the lack of interview perspectives from service users and clients with marginalized identities; this would have provided insight to practitioners on how service providers could improve when building relationships with marginalized communities. The interview scope of this project could not cover this important context of power dynamics, however some secondary sources in our desk research include different forms of power dynamics, along with many practitioners touching on intersecting power dynamics in their interviews.

The process for selection of interviewees was within a limited time frame and biased in that we primarily focused on internal outreach from within the Relationships Project team to senior professionals in their 'Relationships Collective'.²⁷ We only selected people who had prior relationships with the Relationship Project and work within the public sector of healthcare, education or government. They carried roles from local government officials, former teachers, or directors of training within healthcare etc. These senior expert roles were incredibly valuable and hopefully included a positive bias of having people who are passionate about centering relationships, in partnership with the Relationships Project.

It's also important to note, as we've learned from our research, that our interviews reflected a power dynamic between myself, the researcher and the participants. We intended to minimize this power dynamic by applying processes of informed consent and informing participants about this consent throughout the process

²⁷ The Relationships Collective: a group of 9 individuals who together represent just some of the brilliant, enthusiastic, creative and diverse people who are pioneering a relationship-centred future.

Robinson, Immy. n.d. "The Relationships Collective." *Relationships Project* (blog). Accessed September 23, 2024. <https://relationshipsproject.org/the-relationships-collective/>.

of their participation in the research project. We also leaned heavily into their legitimate power source and wisdom from their seniority and experience in their roles by allowing their expertise to guide the interview, and actively listening to their experiences with positive feedback. We primarily hoped to provide a positive and fun interview experience for participants, and viewed specific answers and data as the secondary goal.

4.3 Reflexivity

A key note on positionality would be pertinent here from myself, the writer. We conducted this research from unceded Indigenous lands; (Tiohtiá:ke/Montreal) which is situated on the traditional territory of the Kanien'kehà:ka, a place which has long served as a site of meeting and exchange amongst many First Nations.

I write from the position as a child of refugees and as a settler to unceded Indigenous lands, and I strive to engage in ongoing processes of unlearning and questioning settler colonial ways of living on this land and approaching thoughts, resources and other marginalized groups.

I feel this is pertinent to share as I was guided to this research surrounding power by my own positionality. I am someone who is both a queer, person of colour and have personal lived experiences with harmful intersecting systems of oppression. I am negatively marginalized by these systems, but am also given power over other people and this stolen land by these same systems. I have first-hand experience of being harmed by doctors, teachers and practitioners who have abused their power over me, which deeply harmed me and called me to this research. As such, I am very aware of how power can be used negatively to harm people.

This research has been incredibly eye-opening to me in viewing power and power dynamics in relationships as a blind spot for myself and many people who are passionate about making systemic changes. Power and power dynamics play into how and why people are treated in specific ways every day across so many systems. Learning how everyone needs to be more mindful and actively think about the power they hold in almost every space and interaction is what I hope readers will take away from this paper.

I am compelled to delve into further research on power dynamics in relationships, as more people need to be aware of specific, tangible power dynamics present in their relationships, and use this knowledge to build relationships in a more power-conscious manner.

5. EVIDENCE & KEY FINDINGS

5.1 Defining “good relationships”

The prior literature review discussed the definition of good relationships to be ones of built “affect-based trust”; trust that is based more upon the emotional bond that’s developed between individuals.²⁸ It’s trust built through believing that the individual holds genuine care and concern for your wellbeing and sees intrinsic value in the relationship. Some factors that define good relationships according to the Relationships Project and prior research are; mutual, personal, organic, warm, trusting.²⁹

The above definition was validated throughout codes through the six interviews, with people often describing their strong relationships as “reciprocal, reliable, mutual,

²⁸ McAllister, Daniel. 1995. “Affect- and Cognition-Based Trust as Foundations for Interpersonal Cooperation in Organizations.” *Academy of Management Journal* 38 (February):24–59. <https://doi.org/10.5465/256727>.

²⁹ Robinson, Immy. 2024. “What We Mean by Good Relationships.”

trusting, and unique”. One practitioner, talking about a client they’ve supported for years, who exemplified what McAllister defined as affect-based trust: “it was my birthday on Saturday and she sent me a message on Facebook.³⁰ She didn’t have to say that, I’ll try not to get too worked up now, but it’s being recognized that she likes me being a part of her life. I love being in her life. She makes my life better”. Variations of personal excerpts revealed how clients and service users are important relationships for many service providers, highlighting the need to build these strong relationships while being mindful of the present power dynamics.

5.2 How to build good relationships across a power dynamic? (Skills and Behaviours)

The root of the data analysis conducted was to seek specific skills and behaviours that lead to stronger relationships across power dynamics. Below is a summary of these findings in Table 1 as a resource for service providers and relational practitioners who are working with clients within a power dynamic. After the thematic analysis was completed, 7 groups of key behaviours and skill sets emerged:

- **Clarifying your role,**
- **creating shared understandings,**
- **constant and conscious awareness of power,**
- **collaboration wherever possible,**
- **client autonomy and empowerment,**
- **relationship repair,**
- **and being expansive about your role.**

³⁰ McAllister, Daniel. 1995. “Affect- and Cognition-Based Trust as Foundations for Interpersonal Cooperation in Organizations.” *Academy of Management Journal* 38 (February):24–59. <https://doi.org/10.5465/256727>.

Clarifying your role is the process of practitioners detailing a clear agreement of expectations and boundaries (what a practitioner can and can't do) in their work with clients and service users. This process ideally is done collaboratively with the person the practitioner is supporting, and is often ongoing and needs to be revisited. For example, one participant, who was a former teacher, described that teachers and education trusts would set up initial home visits at the beginning of school terms with families of students to go over "commitments" and plan (with families) how they would support students. Teachers and trusts would later need to keep this "commitments" document on file to refer back to throughout the year and support boundary setting (setting clear guidelines and limits for how a practitioner will engage in the relationship).

Creating shared understandings refers to the process of practitioners making sure they are bridging any communication gaps between themselves and their service user/client. This can include clarifying miscommunications through **feedback loop communication**, a communication technique involving both people in the conversation having a chance to provide feedback, ask questions, and clarify misunderstandings.³¹ The goal is to have both parties understand what is being conveyed. One participant shared an example of taking time to have a short call to clarify a misunderstanding with a client, giving more information than a provider might typically supply, to help the client understand why an action was taken, and then later re-clarifying in an email what action had been taken.

³¹ "(27) Feedback Loops: The Art of Listening in Effective Communication | LinkedIn." n.d. Accessed September 13, 2024.
<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/feedback-loops-art-listening-effective-communication-jay-dhahan-jmake/>.

Another specific behaviour that fell under this category was taking time to *explain the why* when an action is taken and there's a power dynamic present. One participant, a teacher, expressed that she had an experience where she needed to get 20 boys in a school to line up to get to their classrooms. She explained that while one teacher resorted to shouting at his students, she took time to explain why it's important for the boys to line up and how it would help their class.

Lastly, a recurring behaviour mentioned in the interviews is **co-creating accessible language**. This can refer to the use of "plain language" (clear, simple and straightforward communication that can be understood easily) in healthcare, and the importance of a doctor using language that a patient understands. To co-create language can look like a doctor asking a patient what they would like their condition to be referred to as or explaining a condition in simpler terms for a patient.

Constant and conscious awareness of power is having a practitioner be very aware of the power dynamic present with their service provider and person they're supporting, so that they are consistently conscious of how their actions and behaviours impact a client or service user in ways they may not be aware of. Many interviewees spoke of how this is often a blindspot for many professionals, and many interviewees regretted that they hadn't been as aware of existing power dynamics earlier in their careers. They spoke about education on power dynamics needing to be implemented. An interviewee, who conducts training with local law enforcement on power and works with domestic violence survivors, facilitated an activity where they would ask all participants in the workshop to think of their most embarrassing moment privately and would later ask one person to share this with the group. They would then stop the

person from sharing but explained that this is often the experience of domestic violence survivors interacting with law enforcement and not being treated with kindness and understanding. This exercise was aiming to get professionals to understand and empathize with the power dynamic that is present when working with domestic violence survivors.

Collaboration wherever possible encompasses many intentional behaviors that service providers can take to include their clients and service users in the decision-making process. It includes co-creating goals and agreements allowing a client or service user to share what they need. This allows clients to have agency in their journey and support that they will receive. For example, in the above example of teachers setting up home visits with their students' and families, both the "agreements" between teachers and families and classroom goals are created together.

Client autonomy and empowerment involves behaviours such as active listening and understanding what the client wants and needs. It also includes providing as much autonomy and choice for the service user as possible. For example, an interviewee working in local government was supporting a citizen in rehabilitation and reintroduction to the community after massive health issues. He mentioned that one of the first things they needed to be attentive to is asking the person what they needed and really listening to them express their specific needs before making any assumptions about how he could help her, as well as allowing her to guide her own process of reintroduction into community.

Relationship repair refers to the process of rebuilding trust and faith in a relationship whenever there is a mistake made by a practitioner, or simply building trust

prior to meeting with the client or service user. For example, an interviewee working with a health trust spoke about understanding that patients and health providers had previous poor experiences with the health trust and she therefore needed to build trust slowly. This interviewee made sure to listen to clients and ensure they felt comfortable with the actions and ways in which the health trust would support the provider or client. Another interviewee, a former teacher, spoke about the essential behaviour of apologizing if a mistake was made or yelled at students in a moment of stress.

Lastly, being **expansive about your role and questioning imaginary rules** refers to a finding where the longer some of the participants were in their role, the more confident and flexible in their role within the organization they became. For example, one participant working within the health administration mentioned, “The good thing about my job is if I see something that needs doing for a patient, I can then go and say I'm giving you permission to do it. With the administration, I usually find it better to ask for forgiveness than permission.” It's the little extra step of flexibility and creativity that providers can take on with their clients that isn't necessary to their role, but can meaningfully build stronger relationships with their clients.

One participant mentions developing a mindset of asking “**why not**” when clients are needing support, and trying to find creative ways to support the client, rather than always following role guidelines. David Robinson from the Relationships Project also speaks about challenging “**imaginary rules**”; the conventional norms that we often follow within organizations or life unquestioningly, but aren't explicitly required to follow.³² Actively challenging norms that make it harder to build relationships can be

³² Robinson, David. 2024. “Changing Our Permissions.” *Relationships Project* (blog). April 16, 2024. <https://relationshipsproject.org/changing-our-permissions/>.

extremely powerful in relationship building and putting the person you're supporting first.

A clear example, David refers to a conversation with a nurse:

"I was telling her about the comfort my father had derived from the consultant who sat on his bed. I had been with him at the time and seen how the conversation changed when she sat down and took his hand in hers.

"I am afraid that we can't sit on beds" said my friend, "it's a rule".

"Whose rule?" I asked.

"The hospital trust, the ward manager, the RCN, the NHS?"

Neither of us knew."³³

This skillset is developed over time and needs to be carried out while keeping in mind one's workload capacity. We don't hope to encourage practitioners to take on too many new responsibilities, however we see that thinking outside of the box and learning when you can expand your role improves practitioner-service user relationships over the longer term.

³³ Ibid.

Table 1: Summary of Behaviours and Skills that Support Relationship Building Across Power

| Themes | Behaviours and Skills | Examples |
|--|--|---|
| Clarifying your Role | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Detailing a clear agreement of expectations and boundaries of your role. - Revisiting and clarifying your role. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Teachers setting up initial home visits with families of students going over "commitments" agreement. - Going back to commitments and agreements kept on file/ email when setting boundaries. |
| Creating Shared Understandings | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Using feedback loop communication. - Explaining the "why" in the knowledge gap. - Co-creating language to be accessible. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Teacher needs to get 20 boys to get into a straight lineup to go get to their classrooms and explains to the students why they're setting up the lines and why it's important, rather than yelling. |
| Conscious Use of Power and Awareness of Power | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Self-reflective education and trainings about power dynamics that are present. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - E.g. participant working in local government creates mandatory training workshops for officers and law enforcement working with domestic violence survivors around power. |
| Client Autonomy and Empowerment | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Active listening and understanding. - Providing clients autonomy and choice as much as possible. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - E.g. local authority asking questions about what a citizen needs and not making assumptions on how best to support them. |
| Relationship Repair | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Awareness of history trust issues with previous providers and build trust slowly. - Repair and apologize when making a mistake. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Probation officers understanding the history of experiences a domestic violence survivor may have had with officers in the past. - Apologizing if you made a mistake/ yelled, lost temper etc. |
| Collaboration where Possible | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Co-creating goals of working together. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - E.g. workshop facilitators asking participants about their visions and goals for the session, shared goal curation" |
| Be Expansive Beyond your role | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Asking "why not" or using creative thinking when supporting a client/ patient. - Challenging the imaginary and historical rules. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - E.g. health professional talking about growing in confidence over years in the role, felt more comfortable taking risks to prioritize patients and their wellbeing. |

5.3 How can organizations support relationship building between people across power dynamics?

In further application of the RCP (Relationship Centered Practice) framework by the Relationships Project, there are many factors and layers that affect relationship building and the power to build relationships.³⁴ One of these layers are organizational conditions that can make it easier or harder to build relationships within organizations. The core organizational changes that were mentioned across interviews included community and external collaborations, internal collaboration, specific recruitment and training and collective leadership.

Community and external collaborations refers to practitioners and departments in organizations meeting and collaborating with other external organizations. One participant mentioned as a teacher that she found it important to meet and network with community organizations such as housing services or food services. She felt that as some students have larger issues at home that affect their personal lives, having the external resources to fill in gaps in their needs could help their education and her relationship with students.

Internal Collaboration refers to collaborating across sectors and departments found internally within an organization. One healthcare worker, working as of a Health Trust mentioned that there often there is a lack of meetings that happen between social workers, nurses, doctors, working with a patient case. She mentioned that often there are power dynamics within the Health Trust where certain doctors and professionals won't meet with other professionals based on their titles. She recommends that

³⁴ Robinson, David. 2022. "What Is Relationship-Centred Practice?" *Relationships Project* (blog). November 7, 2022. <https://relationshipsproject.org/what-is-relationship-centred-practice/>.

healthcare organizations encourage cross-sector collaboration and more in-person meetings between professionals with different titles to promote more internal collaboration.

Specific Recruitment and Training refers to having organizations hire people based on their people skills and values that prioritize relationship building, rather than just prioritizing job specific skills. One participant also believed that having specific training for teachers who might be new to their roles, or aren't great at relationship building, be given specific training on relationship building within their roles.

Lastly, **Collective Leadership** refers to a structure of leadership within organizations that includes less hierarchy between the roles and levels of management. One participant explained that within their Health trust they had been working from more of a top-down leadership structure since the 2020 Covid pandemic. She mentioned that the senior leadership didn't support middle management well but required constant top down approvals for most decisions made within the Health trust. This blocked a lot of support efforts for patients as when doctors needed support from middle management, they would need to wait for approvals from senior management, who wasn't aware of complex patient cases and issues. She mentioned that the leadership structure used to be more collective where middle management, who worked directly with healthcare workers could have more autonomy and make more decisions, without executive approval. A collective leadership structure would need to trust and support managers in supporting healthcare workers, rather than have stronger top down authority.

Table 2: Organizational Changes towards Building Relationships Across Power

| Themes | Organizational Properties | Examples of How |
|---------------------------------------|--|---|
| Community and external collaborations | Collaborating with external orgs to fill in support service gaps. | -E.g. resource sharing with students when other external factors are involved like housing services. |
| Collaboration internally | Cross-sector collaboration. | - E.g. social workers, mental health, housing committee having more in person meetings and working together. |
| Specific Recruitment and Training | Recruiting people that are relationship building focused, and have these principles or provide training. | - Having strong, flexible managers. - Training/ mentoring support to people in relationship focused roles that may not be strong in building relationships. |
| Collective Leadership | Less top down leadership and more autonomy and power for middle management and on ground employees. | - Allowing middle management more flexibility and decision making power and having top management support middle management. - Less performance oriented and prioritizes managers supporting employees |

The above themes that emerged were similar across most of the interviews. All of our participants have incredible expertise in their fields; a few have worked in middle and upper management roles in local government, and health and education trusts in the UK (who manage many hospitals and schools across the UK).

Another issue that most professionals mentioned struggling with was budget cuts that led to lower resources for public service providers, and not having some public services mandated as statutory services (funded by the government and taxpayers). Many providers want to implement these above organizational changes, however find it difficult with this restriction.

6. DISCUSSION

The results of this study gathered specific themes of behaviours that support relationship building across various power dynamics. They also expand and support previous research conducted in a variety of settings.

6.1 Empowerment and Perceived Sense of Power

Robert Körner and Astrid Schütz's 2021 study with 181 heterosexual couples found that perceived personal level of power matters most in relationship satisfaction.³⁵

If we extrapolate the importance of perceived sense of power in romantic relationships to all relationships with power dynamics, our findings support the importance of a service users' perceived sense of power; particularly the themes of **building client autonomy and empowerment, and collaboration wherever possible**. By setting goals collaboratively with clients and allowing them as much choice and opportunity to decide their path, a provider is increasing their perceived sense of power, which is the key to relationship satisfaction.

Another empowering skill set that supports a service users' perceived sense of power includes **collaboration wherever possible**. It is empowering for people to have a say in their. Primarily within education, researchers have shown that teachers find empowering students has a lot to do with listening to what they have to say and not being afraid of allowing their input and negotiations. A study found that when students are actively involved in constructing the curriculum, this helps their learning and gives

³⁵ Körner, Robert, and Astrid Schütz. 2021. "Power in Romantic Relationships: How Positional and Experienced Power Are Associated with Relationship Quality." *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 38 (9): 2653–77. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02654075211017670>.

students a feeling of ownership of what they are doing, which proves to be supportive in their learning.³⁶

6.2 Repair and Bridging a Gap

On the flip side of empowering the client, our research shows that many of our skill sets and behaviours touch on repair work that service providers need to do to bridge. Practitioners working with service users and with a positional power dynamic need to put intentional work in repair and education on the power dynamics at play and building trust with their clients/ service users.

For example, one participant shared a quote from a domestic violence victim in her workshop stating “The last professional I trusted took my children away”. This exemplifies the power that a service providers’ role can have on a person the why trust may be broken with a client consciously before a service provider even begins working with them. This person carries this prior trust breach with them and there needs to be space for healing in a new relationship with a new social services provider.

We can look at community methods found in research such as United for Brownsville (UB), an organization aimed to improve the early childhood system in Brownsville, New York and they hold mediated “healing circles” that take place between parent residents whose families have been traumatized by early childhood service providers and representatives of those same agencies.³⁷ The goal of these conversations is to acknowledge that, through painful or traumatic events that have occurred in the past, the felt trauma still exists in the present and needs space for

³⁶ Sidky, Gihan. 2017. “The Power Game: Power Dynamics between the Teacher and the Students in a Graduate Seminar.” *English Language Teaching* 10 (5): 179–92.

³⁷ “The Relational Work of Systems Change (SSIR).” n.d. Accessed September 23, 2024. https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the_relational_work_of_systems_change.

collective healing to support future relationship building. “Relationship Repair” is a key skill set in relationship building across power and includes apologizing when making mistakes and repairing a relationship in real-time as well.

Another way that relationship practitioners need to bridge the gap across power includes another theme, “creating shared understandings” through co-creating language, making language accessible and ensuring language isn’t biased. Oftentimes it is expected of patients to understand complex terminology that makes healthcare inaccessible for them. There is very important work being done by many health professionals and organizations such as Health Research BC, and professional editor Iva Cheung, on the importance of “plain language” and health literacy.³⁸ Cheung explains plain language (communication that your patients can understand), in healthcare as a power equalizer that reduces mental load on patients, increases understanding, and helps patients feel more involved in their own healthcare.

6.3 Changes for Organizations to Support Relationships Across Power

The ability of individuals to build better relationships across power is deeply tied to their organizations’ conditions, barriers and resources. The findings for organizational changes that support relationship building are supported by Jody Gittel’s work in comparing organizational structures of airlines and how effective they are for positive relationships and employee wellbeing.³⁹ Gitel supports the push for collective leadership, team oriented recruitment and “horizontal coordination,” or what we referred to as internal collaboration.

³⁸ “Power Dynamics and Plain Language in Healthcare.” n.d. Accessed September 2, 2024. <https://www.wordrake.com/blog/power-dynamics-and-plain-language-in-healthcare>.

³⁹ Gittel, Jody. 2003. “The Southwest Airlines Way: Using the Power of Relationships to Achieve High Performance.” *Industrial & Labor Relations Review* 57 (January). <https://doi.org/10.2307/4126671>.

Jody's work supports the need for internal staff collaboration. She observes that the Southwest airline system prioritizes cross-functional conflict resolution and shared accountability through more involved internal meetings, conflict resolution and support. This allowed for better relationship building and true problem solving with peers, employees and managers over a more individual performance based staff relationship.

Jody's work also supports the need for "selection for teamwork" in the recruiting process for employees that intentionally focus on working on teams. We found our interviewees support this request of HR in organizations and also suggest having training for everyone to exemplify how to prioritize relationships with clients and their teams.

Lastly, Jody found that "horizontal coordination" (problem solving with others on the frontline rather than going up the chain) was a practice that supported relationship building.⁴⁰ We touched on this with interviewees as they brought up collective leadership and observed the differences and powerlessness they felt when their organizations prioritized top down leadership, rather than allowing middle management and on the floor clinicians and providers to make decisions and solve problems.

We understood from our interviewees that these changes would be difficult for organizations to make, however any work towards these goals would allow more empowerment, flexibility and autonomy for many practitioners, clinicians and professionals. These organizational conditions are essential and needed for individual professionals to be able to take individual steps to centering relationship building and relationship building across power.

⁴⁰ Gittel, Jody. 2003. "The Southwest Airlines Way: Using the Power of Relationships to Achieve High Performance." *Industrial & Labor Relations Review* 57 (January). <https://doi.org/10.2307/4126671>.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

With the goal of supporting the public living in the UK in accessing healthcare, education and government, along with building strong relationships with their service providers, I have a two key recommendations for Bridget Phillipson: Secretary of State for Education, Wes Streeting MP (Chair), Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, and Joanna Killian, Chief Executive, Local Government Association (LGA).

1. **Mandatory research-based trainings specifically on power, awareness of power dynamics and conscientious use of power.** These would be geared towards medical clinicians, educational professionals, employees in county and district councils and public service professionals, working with the UK public, particularly in the beginning of these professionals' careers.
2. **Increase in research funding towards service accessibility and service provision through the lens of power dynamics.** This research should include qualitative, consent-informed interviews from a larger range of practitioners and service users about their experiences, and what they need to feel in power, specifying intersecting power dynamics (e.g. identity/ lived experience differences).

There are many professionals with positional power working with the public, who do not understand the power they hold. In order to make services accessible for everyone and increase belonging for everyone, power dynamics must be investigated.

8. IMPACT

The mandate for the Samuel Centre for Social Connectedness was based on Kim Samuel's work, which proposes that social isolation and lack of belongingness comes from a lack of connection to people, place, purpose, and power.⁴¹ Social isolation can stop a person from having meaningful relationships, authentically expressing themselves, feeling connected to collective outcomes, or realizing a sense of mission as part of the bigger whole.

If we look at power, Kim states that belonging is found in our relationship with power, and our capacity to participate meaningfully in the decision-making structures of the broader whole.⁴² For people to access larger structures in society and feel comfortable sharing their voice and dreams, they will need to connect with individual people; professionals such as teachers, doctors and local government officials. It is therefore paramount that these professionals know how to empower people and reduce the feeling of powerlessness that people may feel when accessing these services and structures.

With my personal experiences within the healthcare system, being a trans person of colour, I've felt deeply powerless in interactions with various doctors in Canada who weren't willing to listen to me or provide much care and empathy. This led to me not feeling comfortable seeking healthcare for many years. I know many people share my story and doing this research has deeply empowered me, allowing me to explore situations through the lens of power dynamics and ask myself why I might be feeling uncomfortable advocating for myself, or why someone might be uncomfortable asking

⁴¹ Samuel, Kim. 2022. "On Belonging: Finding Connection in an Age of Isolation."

⁴² Ibid.

for things from me. This work has changed how I view the world and I hope it supports a paradigm shift in bringing power and power dynamics to the forefront of conversations around barriers to service access.

Lastly I'll share an example of the positive impact that professionals honing the skill sets mentioned has for people meeting them. One participant who worked in a city council described an experience with a citizen that they were supporting;

We were introduced to someone at a point in her life where she was facing some really difficult challenges with her health. She was dropping out of society very, very quickly and wanted to reconnect with people. We just listened and built up that trusted relationship with her, helped get her a good wheelchair and supported her re-entry into her community. I smile when I talk about it because you bring it to the present day, and just a couple of weeks ago, she completed the Race for Life.

As the story from our interviewee suggests, if he wasn't able to listen and empathize and listen to this person seeking care, empower her and support her autonomy, she may not have received the care that she needed. She may not have felt comfortable seeking help, sharing her story or advocating for her needs. This support in the longer term had provided her access to people, purpose and power.

In order for people to feel empowered, professionals with the positional power need to invest in learning specific skills, practicing behaviours and acquiring knowledge about power dynamics that support empowering their patients, students and clients. Organizations also need to invest in changing management structures and conditions to support relationship building and their internal staff.

8. CONCLUSION

Building strong relationships across power dynamics will require intentional skill sets and behaviours from professionals with positional power. This study focused on

service providers within the public sector of the UK, however we believe that these skill sets and behaviours will be helpful to professionals outside of the public sector and the UK.

The skill sets and behaviours that were identified as crucial to building strong relationships across power dynamics include: role clarity and boundary setting, creating shared understandings, constant and conscious awareness of power and how it's used, collaboration wherever possible, building a personal connection, client autonomy and empowerment, relationship repair and being expansive about your role, and questioning imaginary rules. Specific behaviours associated with each skilset is located in the summary of findings in Table 1.

The other layer of relationship building was organizational conditions that support the building of relationships across positional power. The key findings for organizational conditions that affect relationship building across power dynamics are found in Table 2. These conditions include community and external connections, internal collaboration, recruitment and training that centers teamwork and people skills, and lastly a focus on collaborative leadership.

A few lessons learned throughout the interview process were that expert interviews are a great format for collecting specific behaviours, skillsets and tips for building strong relationships across power dynamics. Semi-structured interviews worked well to elicit specific responses and examples and slowly built trust with the interviewees. Another finding included being flexible and allowing participants to veer off course and talk about what they felt was most important, while also simultaneously probing for specific answers was effective in collecting data.

For future research, increasing the scale of research conducted outside of healthcare, education, local government within and outside the UK, would be beneficial. This study is limited in scope with 6 in-depth expert interviews, however we gained consistent and specific findings across the interviews that we think will prove valuable to many service providers. It is necessary to have a similar study conducted with more participants to validate these findings and see if there are other skill sets, behaviours and organizational conditions that we've missed. We also recommend that more research is conducted with clients and service users, particularly with intersections of different lived experiences, to gather what makes them feel safer and more empowered working with professionals who hold more power than them.

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