THE ROLE OF INTER-AGENCY COLLABORATION IN 'JOINED-UP' CASE MANAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

This article reports on research into the relationships that a group of case managers formed with local service providers in order to deliver integrated, 'joined up' services to young people experiencing homelessness and unemployment in the state of Victoria, Australia. Using a two-part customised survey tool, we explored the number and nature of relationships with other agencies. Two focus group discussions contributed to the interpretation of the survey findings. We found that these case managers maintained many relationships, mostly with housing and employment service providers. These relationships were predominantly cooperative in nature, and most could not easily be characterised as collaborative. Our research supports the view that, in an increasingly complex social service system, other forms of cooperation are usually appropriate for achieving the types of inter-organisational relationships that are important to assisting shared clients. Further, this research supports the notion of a relationship continuum, finding that ratings of relationship elements were positively correlated with relationship type. This research indicates the importance of considering the pragmatic, contextual, situated practices that comprise inter-agency relationships, their fitness for purpose, and the importance of cooperation for effective service provision.

INTRODUCTION

Internationally, many governments, communities, service providers and front line workers have identified silo-style programs and services as problematic. In Australia and other Western countries, strategies including partnerships, collaboration, service integration and joining up have been used to overcome fragmentation and over-bureaucratisation. This was particularly notable in Third Way policies adopted in the UK (Milbourne 2009). Collaboration is an explicit but often not clearly defined component of the approach of many government policies, initiatives and programs including the Australian Government's (2008) homelessness policy and their Stronger Families initiative. Another recent Australian example was YP[4], a trial of joined up services for young people experiencing both homelessness and unemployment. It was initiated by four medium-sized non-government organisations in Victoria, Australia, in an effort to overcome service fragmentation. The YP[4] model included joining up services at system as well as front line levels. This was to be achieved by the development of partnerships and collaboration with other service providers such as mental health, drug and alcohol, housing and employment services (Horn, 2004). The YP[4] approach emphasised building relationships with clients, understanding the diversity and complexity of the issues faced by clients, and ensuring that the response to individuals' needs was better coordinated and more holistic than would usually be possible.[1]

During the service delivery phase of the YP[4] trial, research was carried out on the experiences of the people implementing the joined up service delivery model. This paper reports on one aspect of that research, an inquiry into the inter-agency (also at times interprofessional) relationships that YP[4] front line service delivery staff (case managers) developed with other services. Other aspects of the YP[4] research, including participant outcomes are reported elsewhere (e.g. Grace & Gill, 2008; Grace, Batterham & Cornell, 2008).

In January 2007, there were seven YP[4] case managers, each employed by one of four service providers participating in the trial. The case managers were a diverse and multi-professional group with varying backgrounds, qualifications and employment experiences including nursing, social work, education and youth work. Case managers met regularly to coordinate their activities and share practice-based learning. Each service provider has a unique organisational culture, history and profile. Some have more experience in delivering services to unemployed people; others have more experience in responding to homelessness or to young people.

The research drew on published typologies of relationships between services (Stewart, Petch & Curtice, 2003; Corbett & Noyes, 2007) to develop a customised survey tool focussing on inter-organisational relationships. Focus group discussions provided feedback about the meanings of the survey findings. The research aimed to explore the relationships that the seven YP[4] case managers had with other services, including any correlation between the relationship elements (Stewart et al. 2003) and the relationship types (Corbett & Noyes 2007). The key question addressed in this study was: with which types of community service organisations do YP[4] case managers maintain relationships and what is the number, type and quality of these relationships? With 'collaborative relationships' as an explicit ideal of both government policy and this particular trial, we wanted to explore how the inter-agency relationships played out in practice.

BACKGROUND

At its simplest, a relationship is a connection or association with another (Centre for Strategic Relations, 2007). Relationships in inter-agency practice are, however, far from simple. Various authors have proposed ways of understanding the multi-dimensional nature of relationships at an inter-agency and interprofessional level within the community services sector (e.g. Lloyd, Kendrick & Stead, 2001; Milbourne, Macrae & Maguire, 2003). In this paper, we rely on Whittington's (2003) definition of the key terms of partnership and collaboration. He argues that partnership can

be understood as a state of relationship – at organisational, group, professional or inter-personal level and that collaboration is an explicit process of partnership in action. In this article we favour the term 'relationship', except when referring to literature that uses the term 'partnership'.

The academic literature on inter-agency relationships including collaboration and partnership, unlike much government policy, acknowledges the complexity and sophistication of inter-agency and interprofessional work. Milbourne et al. (2003) argue that multi-agency partnerships are most likely to reach their potential when the difficulties of implementation and other context-related challenges are well understood. Riddell and Tett (2001) argue that fitness for purpose should be emphasised when choosing the best approach to partnership work. For example, is the purpose of the relationship to ensure successful referrals, or is the relationship intended to promote shared case planning? Huxham and Vangen (2004) carried out fifteen years of action research focusing on the practice of collaboration. They suggest that collaborative inertia is the most common outcome of attempts at collaboration and conclude, somewhat challengingly, that it is better not to attempt to work collaboratively, if other alternative ways of working together are available. Indeed, research shows that collaboration can lack durability and suffer from operational and implementation difficulties (Stead, Lloyd & Kendrick, 2004). To combat this, what is needed is a, "complex and nuanced understanding of the new and often ambiguous problems posed by policies surrounding partnership working, if such problems are to move towards the desired collaborative solutions" (Milbourne et al., 2003, p. 33).

Many researchers have developed models for collaboration and identifying the circumstances in which collaboration is most likely to occur (e.g. Bronstein, 2003; Akhavain, Amaral, Murphy & Uehlinger, 1999; Salmon & Faris, 2006, Easen, Atkins & Dyson, 2000; D'Amour, Ferrada-Virela, Rodriguez & Beaulieu, 2005). Akhavain et al. (1999 p.4) note that, "collaboration is based on the following assumptions: All individuals are interdependent in the system, all individuals are

connected to the same goal, each contribution is of equal importance and value and each contribution affects the outcome".

Within academic writing, in contrast to government policy, 'collaboration' is quite tightly defined, often as part of a typology or continuum of relationship types (for example Frost, Robinson & Anning, 2005; Corbett & Noyes, 2007; Huxham & Macdonald, 1992). Despite the possibility that relatively simple models such as these will not capture the complexity of lived experience, they nonetheless hold analytical appeal. Corbett and Noyes (2007), building on the work of Ragan (2003), propose a relationship intensity continuum. We explain this work, as well as the work of Stewart et al. (2004) in some detail here, as these authors significantly influenced the construction of our survey tool. Corbett and Noyes (2007) identified six relationship types on their continuum:

1. *Communication* may involve the development of procedures for information sharing, regular inter-agency meetings or informal service 'brokering'. Individual programs remain totally separate.

2. *Cooperation* could involve the creation of inter-agency taskforces or advisory groups that review plans and/or the development of consensus regarding good practice.

3. *Coordination* is evidenced by formal inter-agency agreements, joint mission statements, joint training programs, contractual procedures for resolving inter-agency disputes and/or temporary personnel reassignments.

4. *Collaboration* could involve a single application process across agencies or common case management protocols. At this point in the relationship, parties are generally willing to relinquish some of their autonomy in the interest of mutual gains or outcomes. Changes in agency, group or individual behaviour to support collective goals or ideals are a feature of collaboration.

5. *Convergence* is apparent when agencies restructure their services, programs, memberships, budgets, missions, objectives and staff in an effort to pool their resources.

6. *Consolidation* features seamless interagency service delivery teams and the adoption of a common identity. Service users of converged or consolidated organisations are unlikely to be able to identify with which agency they are interacting.

Building on the work of Hudson (1987), Stewart et al. (2003) present a detailed matrix of drivers and barriers to integrated working. They highlight these drivers and barriers at three different levels - national policy frameworks, local planning context, and operational factors. Their drivers/barriers to integrated working at the operational level include relationship characteristics such as communication, attitudes, flexibility, clarity of roles and responsibilities, opportunities for creative thinking, and benefits to clients.

In reviewing the literature, we identified several authors of tools for assessing partnerships, notably Weiss (2001), Weiss, Anderson & Lasker (2002), and Browne et al. (2004). Weiss (2001) and Weiss et al. (2002) developed a well-accepted tool for assessing partnership synergy and the dimensions of partnership functioning. In 2004, Browne et al. developed and tested a new measure of human service integration that quantifies the scope and depth of the effort involved in inter-agency partnership. Weiss's (2001) and Browne et al.'s (2004) measurement tools are more sophisticated and complex than were required by YP[4]; the target respondents of these tools are assumed to have a higher level of governance and management responsibility than have the YP[4] case managers. Review of these tools, however, informed the structure of a customised measurement tool created specifically for this research. As previously noted, the work of Corbett and Noyes (2007) and Stewart et al. (2003) was most influential in the design of this new tool.

METHODS

A sequential mixed methods design was employed (Creswell 2009), including a survey followed by two focus groups. The survey (see http://research.vu.edu.au/research-archive/YP4/Appendix1_SurveyTool.pdf) was used to document the number of relationships, the agencies and services with which relationships existed, the different relationship types, and the different profiles of relationship elements. The focus groups were used to enhance the validity of the interpretation of the survey findings.

Ethics

This research was approved by the YP[4] Ethics and Evaluation Advisory Group, a group with relevant expertise that reviewed all aspects of the YP[4] evaluation. The main ethical challenge in this research was the involvement of the YP[4] trial manager as one of the researchers. The risks of a dual relationship with research participants were managed by having final year social work students on placement carry out the data collection, with the trial manager/researcher seeing only de-identified data.

Quantitative data collection and analysis

All seven case managers completed the surveys, providing a 100% response rate and an exhaustive sample. Each case manager completed Part 1 of the survey just once, giving a total of seven responses. Part two of the survey was completed for at least ten different agencies which case managers had existing relationships with as part of their role on YP4. Responses were received for 71 agencies, as detailed in Figure 1. The case managers had a range of professional backgrounds, including nursing, social work, education and youth work. They had relationships with organisations from sectors including health, education, employment, welfare, and recreation, as detailed in Figure 1.

Part 1 of the survey asked the case managers to identify the number of relationships they had with Centrelink (the Australian government's income support agency), housing, employment, education and training, health, legal and other services. It then asked for details of any organisations or service providers with whom the case managers would like to have a relationship, but where no relationship currently existed.

The second part of the survey explored the nature of the relationships. Each case manager was asked to complete this second section for each of ten organisations or services and to choose organisations that illustrated the range of their relationships with other agencies. Items 1-10 on Part 2 of the survey are based on Stewart et al.'s (2003) work on the elements of relationships that act as drivers and barriers to integrated working. These included: trust and communication, organisational culture and attitudes, change management and enabling staff, professional behaviour, and outcomes. Item 11 asks about relationship type.[2]

Based on our knowledge of the YP[4] trial, we used the first four of Corbett and Noyes' (2007) six relationship types. We did not use their types 5 and 6 Convergence and Consolidation, as these two relationship types were not possible for workers within the YP[4] model. Rather than describe the first relationship type as Communication, we called it Minimal active relationship, as this was considered to be more meaningful within the YP[4] context. We however retained relationship types 2, 3 and 4 with their original names of Cooperative, Coordinated and Collaborative (Corbett and Noyes 2007), see Table 1.

Table 1: Relationship types and features

Type	Description	Features
A	Minimal active relationship	Basic communication and referrals
B	Cooperation	Assisting and supporting each other with respective activities; sharing information

C	Coordination	Joint activities and more intensive communication; joint planning and synchronisation of goals
D	Collaboration	Some relinquishing of autonomy to reach mutual outcomes; collective behaviour
E	Other	Case manager to specify

The first four of these five options were understood as a continuum, where Type A represents a more minimal style of relationship and Type D represents a more extensive relationship. Case managers were assured that no one type of relationship would be seen as better or worse than any other type of relationship. In recognising that a continuum is not the only way to conceive of relationships, case managers could nominate relationships as 'other' (Type E) and describe those relationships in their own terms. The letter introducing the survey explained that the project was about all inter-agency and interprofessional relationships, not just those that could be seen as positive.

The customised survey tool was piloted with three (non-YP[4]) case managers employed by one of the service providers and minor adjustments were made. Once feedback was incorporated and the survey tool was finalised, the survey was issued to the seven case managers who were employed at the time.

The survey data were entered and analysed in SPSS. Analysis included attention to correlations between the relationship elements (Stewart et al. 2003) and the relationship types (Corbett & Noyes 2007). We ran basic descriptive statistics for Part 1 of the survey (n=7). For Part 2 of the survey (n=71), a correlation matrix was generated for each of the 10 items in the scale using Pearson's r

**Qualitative data collection and analysis**

Draft survey findings were prepared, and presented to two focus groups – one consisting of the case managers and the other consisting of service representatives who were knowledgeable about the

service network, and the geographical and historical contexts of the YP[4] trial. All seven case

managers participated. The group included people with backgrounds in a range of disciplines

including nursing, social work, education and youth work. The YP[4] Ethics and Evaluation Advisory

Group nominated service representatives to be invited to participate in the second focus group.

Those attending included representatives of homelessness services, Centrelink, an employment

service, and housing services. The survey findings were presented to the groups, and they were

asked for their interpretations of these findings. In addition, the case managers' group was asked:

'What would it take for case managers to decide that a relationship that they have is truly

collaborative?' Extensive notes were taken during the group discussions. The case managers' and

service representatives' contributions to the analysis are explicitly identified in the findings section

of this article.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Each case manager had relationships with dozens of other service providers. The seven case

managers had a total of 337 relationships with external agencies and services. These services fall

into fifteen distinct categories, although the creation of these categories is somewhat arbitrary as

some services have diverse offerings and traverse a range of functions. Figure 1 shows the variety of

services with which YP[4] case managers had relationships and the number of those relationships, in

order of frequency.

Figure 1: Number of relationships held by YP[4] case managers
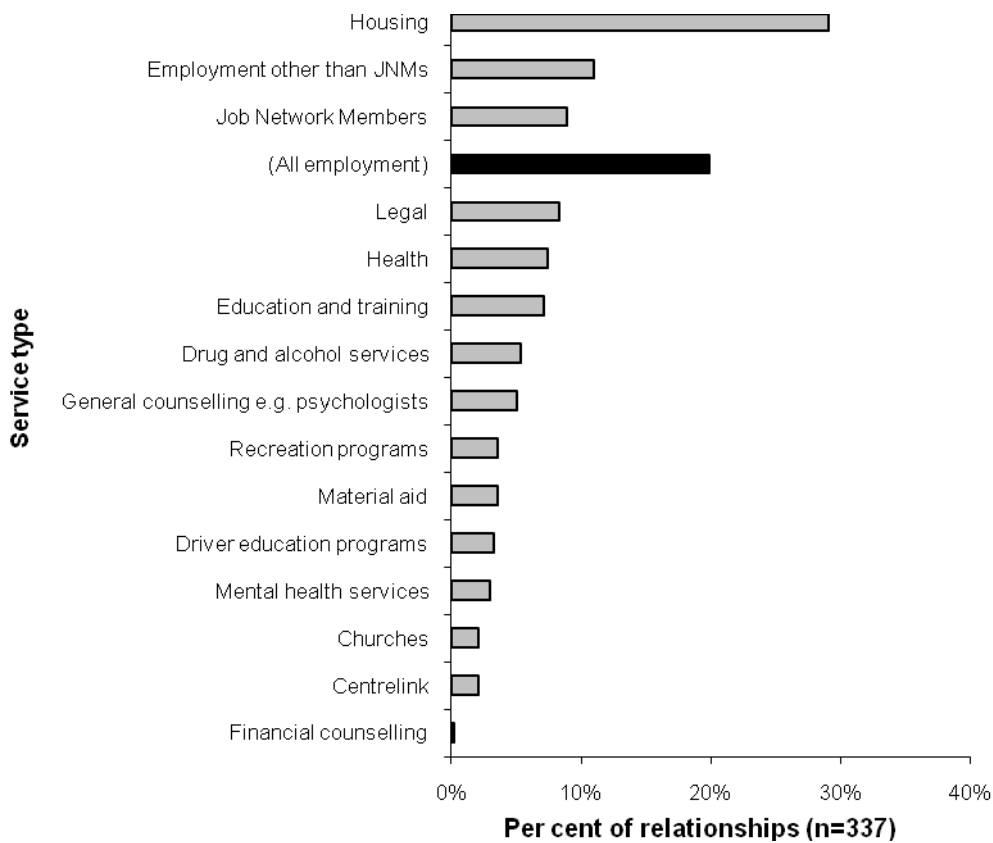
Case managers (n=7) each had between 19 and 67 relationships with local services. Figure 1

illustrates that most relationships were with housing services (98, or 29% of all relationships). The

second highest number of relationships was with employment services (67, or 20% of all

relationships). Thirty (45%) of these relationships were with Job Network members., now known as

Job Services Australia. In some respects, the number of relationships is an artefact of the number of

services of a particular type. The case managers' focus group discussion indicated that had we

counted the number of contacts between staff, Centrelink would have been much closer to the top of

this list.

Desired relationships

According to the survey, case managers wished for relationships with community health centres, mental health services, and drug and alcohol services, especially detoxification programs. The case managers' focus group discussion confirmed that these were the services that clients had difficulty accessing. Case managers indicated that access difficulties were related to chronic under-funding of these sectors and the prioritising of crisis work within them; they also believed that they could better assist participants in accessing these services if their own relationships with these service providers were more developed.

The elements of relationships – our relationships scale

As noted above, the survey drew on the understandings developed by Stewart et al. (2003) regarding the constituent elements of relationships. As shown in Table 2, analysis of the 71 relationship profiles showed that the elements of the relationships were all closely related. This was reflected in significant medium to strong positive correlations between all the items. On the whole, the more positive the rating on one item, the more positive the rating on other items. This suggests that the items we developed do not reflect distinct elements of workers' relationships, but rather, the overall quality of the relationship was reflected fairly uniformly across these elements. This finding supports the notion of a relationship continuum.

Table 2: The correlation matrix showing relationships between all 10 items of our relationships scale

	Our partnership has established trust that permits risk-taking	Open, honest, and transparent communication is facilitated by our partnership	Our partnership fosters a 'we have nothing to lose' attitude amongst workers	Our partnership promotes a "can do" culture	Staff in our partnership have the opportunity to be flexible and to learn as they go	Our partnership has clearly defined roles and responsibilities	Our partnership focuses on client need, not on what is best for partners	Our partnership promotes opportunities for professional to think creatively	In our partnership, we see real benefits being achieved by our clients	The benefits of our partnership are shared equally between us (as service providers)
Our partnership has established trust that permits risk-taking	1									
Open, honest, and transparent communication is facilitated by our partnership	.819**	1								
Our partnership fosters a 'we have nothing to lose' attitude amongst workers	.683**	.688**	1							
Our partnership promotes a "can do" culture	.768**	.869**	.776**	1						
Staff in our partnership have the opportunity to be flexible and to learn as they go	.655**	.698**	.725**	.736**	1					
Our partnership has clearly defined roles and responsibilities	.567**	.672**	.416**	.546**	.516**	1				
Our partnership focuses on client need, not on what is best for partners	.688**	.711**	.678**	.713**	.655**	.409**	1			
Our partnership promotes opportunities for professional to think creatively	.786**	.795**	.714**	.832**	.796**	.588**	.806**	1		
In our partnership, we see real benefits being achieved by our clients	.754**	.850**	.645**	.751**	.719**	.632**	.701**	.832**	1	
The benefits of our partnership are shared equally between us (as service providers)	.666**	.710**	.533**	.719**	.654**	.648**	.552**	.720**	.823**	1

Please note that ** indicates significance at $p<0.01$. Valid n varied between 70 and 71 for these items.

Types of relationships

Most commonly, case managers described their relationships as cooperative (51%) or minimal (34%), with only 11% of relationships described as coordinated and 4% of relationships described as collaborative. No relationships were described as 'other'. These findings are summarised below in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Types of relationships held by YP[4] case managers
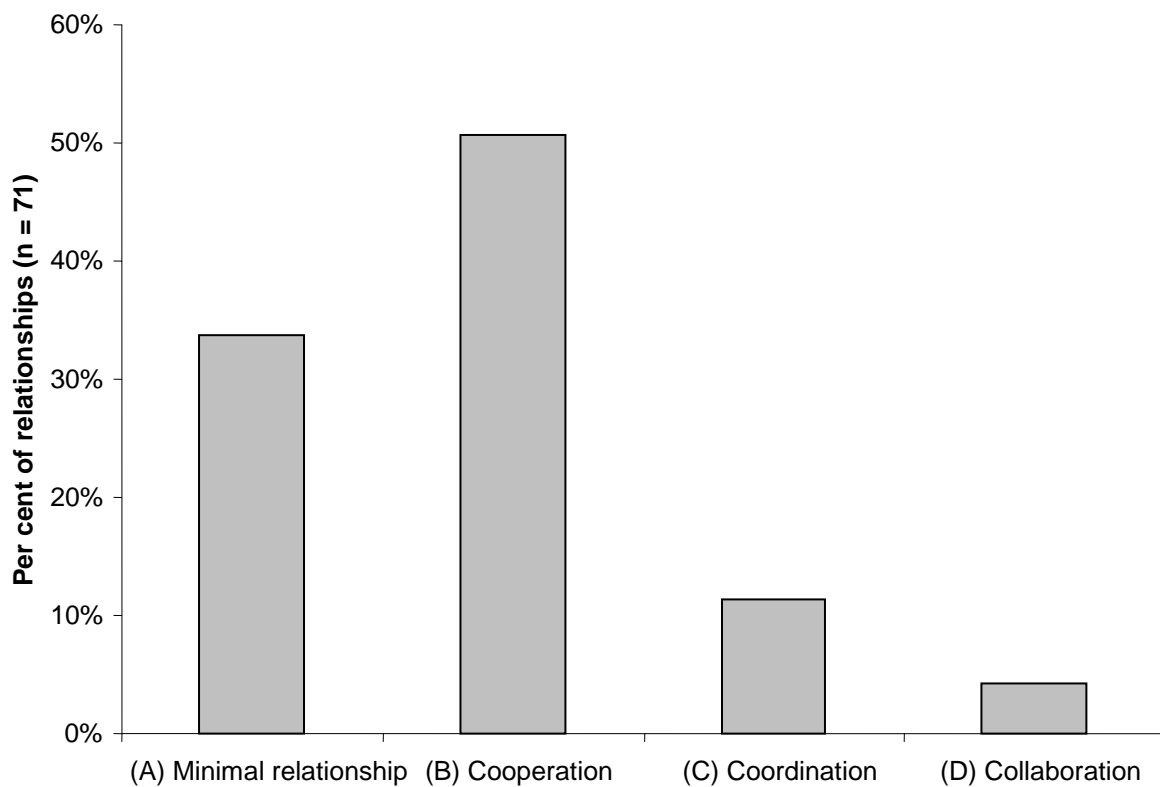
The three relationships that were classified as collaborative were with Centrelink, a Job Network Member and a general counsellor. When the case managers' discussion group was asked about these relationships, they attributed the development of this type of relationship to strong personal connections and pre-existing relationships between workers in the two organisations, and organisational cultures in both organisations that supported and valued this style of working together. Of the seven relationships that were classified as 'coordinated', three were with employment services, while the remaining four were with drug and alcohol, mental health, housing

and Centrelink services. Minimal relationships and cooperative relationships were common across all service types.

Correlations between elements of relationships and relationship types

We explored the correlations between workers' classifications of their relationships in terms of the four relationship types and the ten items designed to measure the constituent elements of these relationships. The high correlations between elements, along with the limited number of responses meant that a multiple regression analysis was inappropriate. The relationship type information was treated as an ordinal scale variable – with 1 being a minimal relationship and 4 being a collaborative relationship. Correlations were then undertaken between each of the ten items measuring the characteristics of relationships and the relationship classification or type. We found that each of the ten elements was significantly positively correlated with relationship type. As shown in Table 3, the stronger the agreement with any of the ten items, the higher the relationship was likely to be rated in terms of type, or the closer to collaborative it would be perceived

Table 3: The correlations between relationship type and each of the 10 items measuring elements of the relationship.

Items measuring relationship elements	Correlation coefficient	n=
1. Our relationship has established trust that enables risk-taking	.493[**]	71
2. Open, honest, and transparent communication is facilitated by our partnership	.520[**]	71
3. Our partnership fosters a 'we have nothing to lose' attitude amongst workers	.374[**]	70
4. Our partnership promotes a "can do" culture	.540[**]	71
5. Staff in our partnership have the opportunity to be flexible and to learn as they go	.362[**]	71
6. Our partnership has clearly defined roles and responsibilities	.313[**]	71
7. Our partnership focuses on client need, not on what is best for partners	.504[**]	71
8. Our partnership promotes opportunities for professionals to think creatively	.525[**]	70
9. In our partnership, we see real benefits being achieved by our clients	.442[**]	70
10. The benefits of our partnership are shared equally between us (as service providers)	.370[**]	71

* Spearman's ρ was used to calculate these correlations

Case managers' understandings of relationships with other services – qualitative findings

The case managers' focus group discussion confirmed the survey finding that they have large

numbers of relationships with diverse service providers. They suggested that this could be an

associated with experience:

Relationships are about years of working in the sector (YP[4] case manager)

They indicated that meeting client need is often predicated on the extent and quality of inter-agency

relationships. In relation to the finding that case managers' relationships are mostly cooperative, the

discussion revealed that relationships form around the personal and pragmatic concerns of case

managers and their clients. Collaboration, as defined by the academic literature, does not occur as

frequently as one might expect. Case managers indicated that they wanted to build and maintain

their relationships and seek out new relationships that may benefit their clients, rather than pursuing

formally defined collaboration. According to the case managers, they found cooperative

relationships to be sufficient to achieve their aim of facilitating participant access to services:

Sometimes there is little need to have a strong relationship and that doesn't mean that

clients are not using the services (YP[4] case manager)

This is consistent with Riddell and Tett's (2001) suggestion that fitness for purpose should be

emphasised in developing relationships.

In response to the focus group question which explored case managers' views about a relationship

that they have which is truly collaborative, the following characteristics were generated by

participants: frequency and consistency of contact (communication); the 'personal touch' –

opportunities to put a face to a name and connect personally with other workers; a shared focus on

or orientation to the client; a sense of mutuality and a shared vision; trust and respect; an equality of

commitment; the ability to negotiate (and back each other up); and helping behaviours (not competitive behaviours).

These characteristics supports the notion of a relationship continuum, as the case managers identified relationship elements that could be present to a greater or lesser degree in cooperative and coordinated relationships as well as in 'collaborative' relationships as defined by Corbett and Noyes (2007). These characteristics are also reflective of Stewart et al.'s (2003) relationship elements that formed the basis for our survey items: communication, attitudes, flexibility, clarity of roles and responsibilities, opportunities for creative thinking and benefits to clients. However, the case managers' list of characteristics is more personal and pragmatic than the items included in Part 2 of our survey. For example, rather than the more formal, 'open, honest and transparent communication is facilitated by our relationship' (YP4 survey, Part 2), case managers stated more pragmatically and personally 'frequency and consistency of contact (communication)' (YP[4] case manager) and 'the 'personal touch' – opportunities to put a face to a name and connect personally with other workers'(YP[4] case manager).

Service representatives' understandings of relationships with other services

The focus group data with the service representatives exploring what the survey findings meant emphasised the importance of geographic characteristics, organisational history and culture, and organisational service delivery profiles. For example, participants noted that state wide services are more likely to be based in inner Melbourne than in any other trial site. This could suggest that one service located in this setting could have two 'layers' of services with which to maintain relationships – local services as well as state-wide services with a local presence. These comments resonate with statements by Milbourne et al. (2003) and Henneman et al. (1995) regarding the importance of contextual factors in inter-agency relationship development.

Limitations

Limitations of the study include the small sample size, making it exploratory rather than producing findings that could be generalised. The study was conducted in one State of Australia, and should be interpreted with this limitation in mind. The research focussed on the experiences and perceptions of front-line service delivery staff, rather than direct observation of inter-agency practices. This means that the findings are based on recall and self-report, with the associated limitations of possible bias towards social desirability and participants describing their actions in the best possible light. The case managers demonstrated a preoccupation with operational factors. The research thus gives little attention to national policy frameworks and local planning contexts, the other two levels identified by Stewart et al. (2003). Nevertheless, this focus on the operational level provides a balance to literature that focuses on management and supervisory rather than front line staff experiences.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The research reported in this paper set out to explore the relationships that YP[4] case managers established with other community service organisations. We found that each case manager maintained dozens of relationships, mostly with housing and employment service providers. The considerable number of relationships held by case managers reflects the number and range of services that people affected by homelessness are likely to access and the consequent complexity of case management work. Despite the number of relationships, case managers identified services with which they would have liked stronger relationships. The existing relationships and those sought by case managers reflect the personal and pragmatic concerns of case managers and their clients.

Further research is required to refine understandings of collaborative, coordinated, and cooperative inter-agency relationships. Policy and practice implications of this research include the need to take account of the pragmatic, contextual, situated practices that make up inter-agency relationships, their fitness for purpose, and the importance of cooperation for effective service provision.

Notes

1. More information about YP[4] is available at: http://www.yp4.org.au/

2. For further details on the survey see:
http://research.vu.edu.au/research-archive/YP4/Appendix1_SurveyTool.pdf

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Declaration of interest

One of the authors was the YP4 trial manager at the time the research was carried out.

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