

Everything is coming up relational... but what does it all mean?

Getting to grips with ‘relationality’ – the new idea that’s been around for millennia.

In a [previous article](#), we explored the need to shift from transactional to more relational approaches in our Human Service systems. Since then, conversations on all things ‘relational’ have continued to grow. The momentum is encouraging, but with so many concepts emerging, it’s easy to lose sight of what it really means, and why it matters.

We’re hearing a lot about relational care, relational practice, relational contracting, and relational service models. These concepts are not interchangeable, but neither are they competing with one another. They are different expressions of a broader idea: relationality. This article explores what each of these ideas is about, and how they collectively point toward systems change.

This remains an emerging space, so we share this as our perspective – not a definitive answer. We welcome you to challenge and build on this contribution.

It can be tempting to say: “Stop quibbling about language and get on with the work!” We’d agree to a point... but, when it comes to coordinating action on systems change, clarity does matter.

‘Relational’ is so hot right now

Across multiple human service systems, familiar patterns are repeating:

- Service demand continues to rise faster than periodic investment increases.
- People engaging in services increasingly feel stuck – circling in systems that struggle to respond to the complexity of their lives.
- Frontline staff feel both stretched and constrained at the same time, contributing to increased burnout and churn.

These are not isolated problems. They are the predictable outcome of fragmented and transactional systems, attempting to respond to lives that are inherently connected and relational. Specifications, forms, targets, eligibility rules and compliance requirements can never fully account for all the nuance of relationships, histories and contexts.

The growing focus on ‘relationality’ signals increasing pressure for systems change. Under the status quo, the same patterns will continue, and the people most affected by dysfunctional systems will continue to bear the cost.

Relational Care: people experience systems through relationships

When people talk about their experiences of services, they rarely reference governance structures, funding contracts or program logics. Instead, they talk about how they felt. Did I feel safe? Was I listened to? Did I have to repeat my story? Were decisions made with me, or about me?

Relational care acknowledges that people experience systems primarily through relationships. There's compelling evidence that trust, continuity and respectful human connection contribute to better outcomes across a wide range of service domains. This is why relational care matters.

The Centre for Relational Care captures this shift by talking about moving from “child protection systems” to “child connection systems.” This reframes relational care and human connection not as a byproduct of service delivery, but as the central purpose of the system itself.

Relational Practice: delivering support should be all about relationships

If relational care focuses on experience, relational practice describes how support is delivered. It points to a different way for human service workers to engage with people seeking help: not as cases to be managed, but as individuals with agency, strengths and expertise in their own lives.

Relational practice requires change in what workers do day to day, in how they interact with people and colleagues, in the culture that guides their practice, and in how their time is allocated. The focus shifts toward trust, relationships and outcomes, rather than primarily toward activity, outputs and compliance. These ways of working provide the foundation for trauma-informed, strengths-based and restorative approaches.

Workers, like the people they support, want to feel connected and human in their roles. In [Radical Help](#), Hilary Cottam describes how safeguards intended to protect workers can instead produce disconnection, reduced job satisfaction and poorer mental health outcomes.

It's hard to deliver relational practice inside transactional systems

Despite increasing recognition of the value of relational practice, it remains difficult to sustain within transactional systems. Cottam notes that in some human services systems, workers spend up to 80% of their time on bureaucratic tasks, leaving little time for meaningful engagement with the people they are there to support.

Programs, departments and funding streams are organised around problems, rather than around developing a full understanding of the humans experiencing it. Now, the system sees Rob as an alcoholic and refers him to the local alcohol rehab program; instead, trust-based conversations with Rob would reveal that he is self-medicating and what he really wants is help navigating his relationship with his kids.

Humans naturally orient toward relational ways of working. First Nations communities rightly remind us that what is now described as relational practice has existed for millennia. This is not a new idea; it is deeply human.

When relational practice is crowded out, the problem is rarely individual capability or commitment. People are not the problem; incompatible systems are.

Many funding contracts already articulate relational aspirations, such as deep engagement, collaboration and person-centred outcomes. At the same time, those same contracts often include short funding cycles, rigid eligibility rules, output-driven measures, reporting and heavy compliance burdens. The result is an operating environment that works against stated aims. Asking people to act relationally within highly transactional contexts creates confusion, anxiety and burnout

Relational models: Aligning intent with structure

Relational models take a further step by redesigning a total program or solving one community challenge, rather than aiming for whole-system change. They start from a simple premise: if we want relational care and relational practice, the surrounding structures must be designed to support them.

Relational models adopt different approaches to everything to do with the program, including commissioning, practice, measurement and reporting, compliance, governance, organisational culture settings. All these structures must decentralise power and control, prioritise relationships and outcomes over activity, and embed collaboration and learning as drivers of change.

These structures matter in a context of volatility, uncertainty and complexity. Under such conditions, central decision-makers struggle to see what is happening on the ground or to adapt quickly enough. Evidence from fields such as biology, disaster response and engineering shows that systems with distributed decision-making are better at sensing information at the edges, adapting safely and learning from failure. In volatile environments, over-centralisation can become a risk rather than a safeguard.

Relational models do not remove control; they reposition it.

We have loved learning more about how relational models are achieving results and evidencing effectiveness, especially the [Liberated Method](#) in the UK. In Australia, relational models are being piloted, evaluated and are ready for scaling up, such as the [Sunshine Project](#) in Western Australia and [Person-Led Coaching](#) in NSW. Here at the Possibility Partnership, we have worked with several NSW communities to develop a test-and-learn relational model to achieve better outcomes for children in those communities. If you'd like to know more about any of this work, we invite you to [get in touch](#).

A new relational systems tool kit is emerging

As well as these emerging relational models, innovation efforts across Australia have been developing and testing the new tools we'll need for our future systems. Two ideas have special energy right now.

- **Local decision-making approaches**, including collective impact and place-based community-led initiatives, are prototyping governance arrangements that support relational approaches. These initiatives embed local innovation and rapid learning cycles to improve responses and outcomes for people and communities.

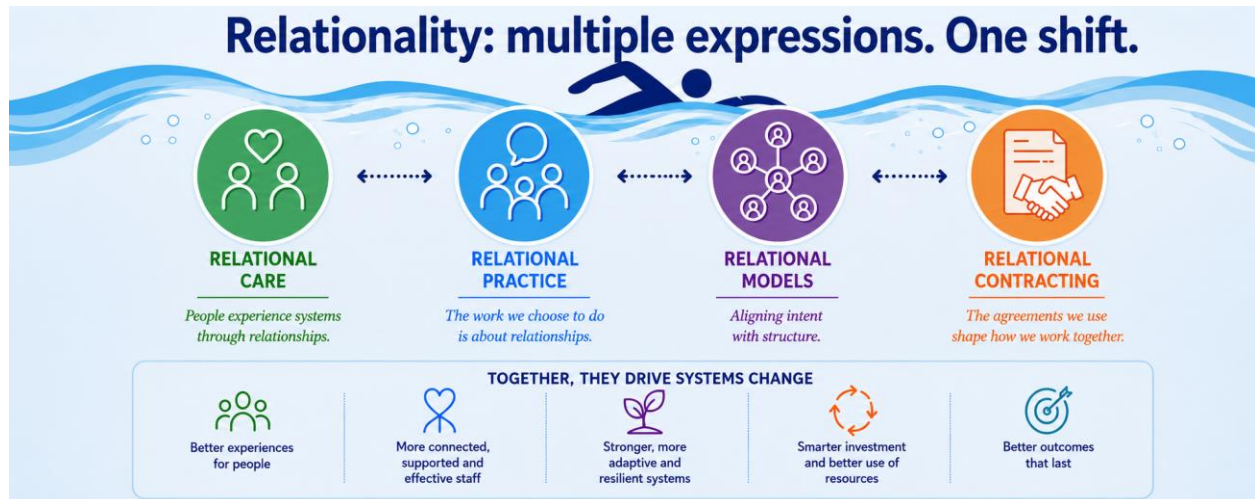
Much of this powerful work has been driven from the ground up, and has achieved meaningful local gains. But the impact will be limited unless learning is applied at a broader system level.

- **Relational contracting: shaping systems at the centre**

Formal Relational Contracting recognises that in complex human services, future conditions cannot be fully predicted upfront. So instead, contracts should be designed to support learning and adaptation over time through collaborative relationships between funders and providers. Australian examples, including South Australia's Homelessness Alliance and the Jobs Victoria Employment Network, demonstrate that these approaches can be both practical and effective.

Commissioning is a powerful lever for change. By shaping how money flows, where decisions are made, and how organisations work together, commissioning influences multiple dimensions of system behaviour.

Swimming in the water of relationality



Put simply:

- **relational care** is about people's experiences;
- **relational practice** is about how support is provided;
- **relational models** are structured responses that enable these ways of working; and
- **relational contracting** is one of the levers that shape the system.

These are all ways in which relationality finds expression in the world of human services; however, if we focus only on the expressions, we risk missing the bigger picture.

This work is not about creating a new menu of 'relational' options. It's about reshaping the conditions in which we each live and work, so that relationality operates at every level. It's about changing the very water we're all swimming in, to make the system itself more capable of supporting relational approaches.

A more relational future requires change that is top-down, bottom-up and inside-out. We should be asking "How do we create systems where relational ways of working can take root, grow and remain coherent over time?"

And "Could *enabling better relationships* become not just the method, but the very purpose of the system?"

Redesigning systems, not language

While this article focuses on concepts and language, what matters most is how we act on our belief in the value of relationships. We are in the early, fragile stages of a movement that asks us to redesign systems, change conditions and change ourselves.

The real work ahead is in reshaping our systems, piece by piece, so that relationality is no longer an innovative case study. It's the norm.