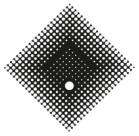

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The obligations and opportunities of 'friendship as method' in youth mentoring research: investigating the intersections with youth work epistemologies

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The obligations and opportunities of 'friendship as method' in youth mentoring research: investigating the intersections with youth work epistemologies

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ABSTRACT

Utilising pre-existing friendships between participants to create an environment of safety and trust when researching with young people aligns well with ethics of care and reciprocity underpinning participatory methods and youth work practice. Recent innovations in participatory and co-design methods have emphasised the importance of interpersonal and practice skills in participatory research, as well as the somewhat contradictory aim to de-centre the researcher. In this paper, we examine the potential and pitfalls of friendship as method(ology) with the aim to de-centre the researcher in the interview by prioritising the existing friendship between participants. We examine interviews between mentees and mentors from an evaluation of the Sammy D Foundation Northern Youth Mentoring program to consider, first, the insights that friendship as method might provide into the social world of young people in a mentoring program; and second, the alignment between this method and youth work epistemologies. We argue that friendship as method provides rich – if unanticipated – insights, prioritises relational values, and aligns well with youth work epistemologies, but also sheds new light on problems of power inequalities and ethical obligations inherent in relational work with young people.

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Introduction

Young people's participation has been a long-standing central theme of youth work and youth studies (Collin and Swist 2016; Corney et al. 2020). Despite due scepticism about genuine advancements in young people's participation (Corney et al. 2022), the recent focus on co-design has prioritised the interpersonal skills typically possessed by youth work practitioners alongside the decentring of the researcher in knowledge creation

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(Lohmeyer et al. 2024b; Loveridge et al. 2024). However, the dual focus on both decentring the researcher and centring interpersonal skills in research has a somewhat contradictory flavour. In this paper, we examine the potential of a research methodology that aims to decentre the researcher by removing them from the research encounter (i.e. interviews). Applied to research concerning a youth mentoring program, this method, *friendship as method(ology)*, involved facilitating interviews between mentors and mentees without a researcher present. This paper examines the opportunities, and obligations, of using the '"friendship trust" between participants to unlock experiences' (Heron 2020, 1) and gain insights into the social world of young people in a mentoring program. There are important distinctions between friendship as method and participatory methods. Bennion and Rutter (2024) argue that the 'former platforms power and utilises the research process to make change, whereas the latter platforms rich emotionality and shared lived experiences' (4). However, shared between these two methods is a prioritisation of relationships in research as (at least) equal to the knowledge production outcomes. We argue that, while this method shares similar epistemological foundations to youth work, it is also marked by the tension of power inequalities and obligations of vulnerability.

This paper has its origins in a funded evaluation of the Sammy D Foundation Youth Mentoring Program to evaluate the impact of the mentoring program on participants' wellbeing and offending behaviour, as well as the mentee-mentor matching process. As a secondary analysis, however, this paper takes another look at the evaluation data with a focus on, firstly, the insights that friendship as method might provide into the social world of young people in a mentoring program; and secondly, the alignment between this method and youth work epistemologies. We begin with an introduction to youth mentoring and, subsequently, the contested underpinnings of youth work knowledge. Following this, we outline the intersection between participatory and co-design methods and friendship as method. After describing this project's methods, we present and discuss the data simultaneously to facilitate rich engagement.

We conclude that friendship as method produces rich and emotional insights into the social world of young people in a mentoring program that are at times humorous, affectionate and personally discrediting. We argue that while friendship as method reflects the prioritisation of relationships of trust, care, reciprocity and agency in participatory research, it also highlights ethical obligations and power inequalities that are not easily resolved. While these contingent insights offered by friendship as method into young people's social world align with youth work epistemologies, we highlight the utility of dialectical critical realism and epistemological relativism for supporting the interpretation of these insights.

Youth mentoring

A popular narrative of mentoring describes the mentor as older and/or wiser, guiding a younger or less experienced mentee (MacCallum and Beltman 1999), with origins that can be traced to Homer's Odyssey (Colley 2002). Mentoring has been elsewhere described as 'an enduring and emotionally salient tie with an important adult' that provides a young person with 'an ongoing pattern of support and guidance' (DuBois and Karcher 2013, 5). Friend and friendship have been used to describe the nature or aims of mentoring relationships (National Mentoring Partnership 2005; New Zealand Youth Mentoring Network 2016). Mentoring has less formality than professional practice, reflecting many

of the attributes of friendship such as trust, belonging, emotional connection, and perhaps even love (Bennion and Rutter 2024).

While mentoring is a popular mode of providing support to young people to navigate life's challenges, it can also be characterised as both hierarchical and deficit-based (Kirk and Day 2011). It assumes that the mentor has some quality – age, experience, skills, material or social advantage – that the mentee lacks. Yet, mentoring is not restricted to this traditional model and represents a broad, if ill-defined, umbrella under which peer-mentoring, group, and near-age arrangements are employed (Lohmeyer et al. 2024a), potentially more closely reflecting a friend-like relationship. Not all work with young people is youth work. However, mentoring is often incorporated into the practices of a youth worker (Cooper 2018; Philip 2008; Sapin 2013). Youth work is performed under many job titles, with the nature of the relationship – i.e. one that promotes the participant's agency within a critical position to their social context (Cooper et al. 2024a; Corney et al. 2023; Sapin 2013) – perhaps best defining a youth work relationship. There is an incompatibility between the popular hierarchical conceptualisation of mentoring and the aspirations for power sharing in youth work ethics (Ara Taiohi 2020; IYW n.d.; YACVIC Inc 2008; YACWA 2003). However, the role of 'friendship' and youth worker as 'significant other' may reduce both the deficit and hierarchical elements inherent to traditional mentoring and the theoretical incompatibilities between mentoring and youth work (Corney and du Plessis 2010).

Philip and Spratt (2010) critique the proliferation of professionalised adult–child relationships, or 'professional friendships' (43), as they reflect a welfare model of surveillance rather than promoting children and young people's agency. Yet they argue there are contexts in which professional friendships promote choice and agency, such as the community-based contexts of this project, better reflecting the nature of organic friendships. While the quality of the match between mentor and mentee – based on shared interests and experiences, for example – is commonly regarded as a key factor in successful mentoring practice (Brookes, Lohmeyer, and Seymour 2025), this risks underestimating the inherently hierarchical nature of the mentoring relationship (Christie 2014, 960). As seen in the excerpts in the paper, positive feelings and a sense of connection are clearly important; however, it is equally clear that these do not negate the power relations, most notably the socio-culturally entrenched adult–child hierarchy, that shape the mentor-mentee relationship. While exploring the significance of power relations in the at-risk youth mentoring context is beyond the scope of this article, we feel that this cannot go unacknowledged.

The Sammy D Foundation's Northern Youth Mentoring Program is built on positive youth development that affirms all people possess strengths that, when supported, can lead to positive healthy development (Burkhard et al. 2020). This is opposed to a deficit model that focuses predominantly on the presence of problem behaviours during adolescence (Lerner et al. 2021). In the Sammy D mentoring program, a young person is voluntarily matched with a positive adult role model who meets with them for 3 hours every week, over a period of 9 months. During this time, the mentor shares their life experience, skills and knowledge, supports the young people to identify their strengths, and to set and reach their goals. Mentors and mentees are matched based on shared interests, location, preferences identified by the young person, and the previous experience of the mentor. Sammy D mentors in this project were paid and were provided with training and regular supervision from the program coordinator. The coordinator regularly checks in with mentees and their families through the program. While there are important

tensions between youth work and youth mentoring, we explore what they have in common in this paper – that is the potential to create a safe and collaborative research encounter.

Youth work and knowledge

Professional youth work has developed across international boundaries in both institutional and community settings; however, defining its practices has been described as a 'perennial problem' (Kiilakoski and Kauppinen 2021, 86). Williamson (2015, 7) suggests that 'youth work is routinely defined in terms of what it is not rather than articulating more precisely what it is'. The European community has invested in creating common conceptualisations of youth work that cross country-specific contexts and practices and are found in various declarations ([COE] 2017; European Union 2018). More recently Corney et al. (2020, 2022, 2023, 2024) have defined youth work as an educational practice (informal and non-formal), framed by human rights and grounded in the pedagogic theories of Freire (1972).

Youth work is sometimes described as a relational practice (Sercombe 2010a), however, conceptualisations of the relationship between youth workers and young people are regularly contested (Cooper et al. 2024a). *Friend* has been used to describe this relationship, though usually in terms of describing the behaviour of the youth worker as *friendly* (i.e. caring, equal, fun), but not a *friend* in terms of an informal social relationship with the accompanying obligations and vulnerabilities (Roberts 2009; Sercombe 2010b). Despite the diverse foundations for defining youth work, Corney et al. (2023) argues social pedagogy has the most resonance, or is the least offensive as an umbrella term, with its emphasis on fostering creativity, social responsibility, critical consciousness and agency for change (Cremin and Chappell 2021).

The theoretical base of youth work is contested (Davies 2012; Seal 2019a, 2019b). Seal (2014), for example, asked whether youth workers were 'post-modern chameleons or cherry-picking charlatans?'. Historically, sociological analysis underpinning youth work in the UK, Australia and parts of Europe has been influenced by liberal/progressive Judeo-Christianity, Marxist, feminist and post-colonial thinkers (Bourdieu 1977; Corney 2004; Gilroy 1987; hooks 1984), and latterly Critical Race theory (Achilleos, Douglas, and Washbrook 2021). With distinct faith-based and non-faith-based versions (Chazan 2003; Khan 2011), youth work is often also influenced by humanistic psychology (Rogers 1980), with a strong focus on individual potential and growth, normative child and adolescent development, and person-centred practice. Closely associated with the ideals of the virtuous practitioner (Banks 2020) or therapeutic practitioner (Carr 2022), it relies on contested versions of what makes for the 'good life' (Bessant 2009; Hart 2017).

While there are differences between these theoretical perspectives, it is the holding of them in tension that defines much youth work practice. Common to all these perspectives is a dynamic, dialogical view of knowledge creation and a commitment to an evolving praxis (Freire 1972; Ord 2009). In this sense, Smith and Seal (2021) argue that youth and community workers are critical realists, recognising that there are operative forces, economic, social and political, outside of human meaning making and perception and that youth work practice provides points of reflection and illumination for others (Higgs and Cherry 2009). As such, youth work knowledge is situated in the priorities of

a profession that is in relationship with young people. These priorities are emancipatory and praxis-orientated (Freire 1972), and hence find strong resonance with the priorities of participatory and co-design methods.

Friendship and participatory methods

Bennion and Rutter (2024) described *friendship as method* as 'an approach whereby researchers use the research process to build and develop friendships' (10). Heron (2020) argues that the focus of research methods literature has commonly been on the relationship between the researcher and the participant, rather than between participants. While research that focuses on or utilises the friendship between participants is rare, friendship has the potential to create a more conversational experience than traditional research, providing deeper insights and offering greater fluidity, open-endedness and democratic exchange. Importantly, Owton and Allen-Collinson (2014:, 285) argue 'Although described as a "method", perhaps it would be more accurate to characterise this approach as methodological'. This is to say the practical method, in this study, is interviews and friendship is a philosophical orientation (methodology) towards disrupting the power imbalance between researcher and participants. We continue to use the shorthand *friendship as method* in this paper to capture both practical and philosophical but acknowledge when necessary the distinctions.

Friendship as method has been employed by Heron (2020), and Lohmeyer, Macaitis, and Schirmer (2023), in the context of Higher Education to explore students' experiences of higher education through peer interviews. Bennion and Rutter (2024) reflect on their experiences of applying the method in primary schools, arguing that the method exists on a spectrum of liberating and restrictive relationships. Owton and Allen-Collinson (2014) examine the challenges and advantages of friendship between researchers and participants in interviews and ethnographic work, observing that, while there are pitfalls to friendships in research, 'reciprocity, supportiveness and care' are important in all research encounters. They argue a trusting relationship is essential for participants to feel safe and to be open in interviews, and existing friend-like relationships offer advantages. Furthermore, Tillmann-Healy (2003) emphasises that it is not necessary to adopt the 'whole vision', but instead researchers can approach participants 'from a stance of friendship' (745).

This stance of friendship resonates with contemporary youth participatory and co-design research methods. In addition to the foundational right to participate in decisions that impact children's lives (United Nations 1989), participatory research methods start with important epistemological assumptions about the subject's role in knowledge creation. To counter the historical practice of researching young people's lives through proxies (Allen 2009), youth studies scholars prioritise young people as active and capable agents and experts in their lives (Loveridge et al. 2024). As a result, a 'family of approaches' (Loveridge et al. 2024, 8) have emerged, including cooperative inquiry (Bowler et al. 2021, 15), co-production (Hartworth, Simpson, and Attewell 2021) and participatory design (Bowler et al. 2021, 15), that privilege participants' knowledge and rights in the research process (Collin and Swist 2016, 308). While each of these approaches has unique elements, central to all of them is the recognition that 'how people relate to each other during the research process' (Abma et al. 2019, 7) is equally as important as the knowledge generated.

The centrality and sustainability of relationships are a priority of participatory research methods (Banks et al. 2013) and feminist ethics of care (Loveridge et al. 2024). Rather than 'one-off snatch and grab research' (Loveridge et al. 2024, 5) designed to gather objective truths, participatory approaches prioritise 'relational virtues, such as trustworthiness (reliability and not letting others down)' (Banks et al. 2013, 266). These approaches value the ability of researchers to read participants' non-verbal and social 'cues' (Loveridge et al. 2024, 15). Youth and community practice experience can support the sustaining of a mutually beneficial dynamic nexus between the priorities of practice and knowledge creation (Lohmeyer et al. 2024b). These approaches value situated and relational knowledge that reveals deeply personal insights and experiences. In this paper, we apply the principles of valuing relationships of trust, agency and care underpinning friendship as method(ology) to explore the possibilities of mentoring relationships for facilitating research interviews. While there are caveats and concerns about the unresolved power inequalities, we argue that mentoring relationships prioritise trust, agency, and care in a way that allows for an analysis of the potential of friendship between research participants to provide new insights.

Project methods

The evaluation of the Sammy D mentoring program using friendship as method provided the opportunity to interrogate its epistemological resonance with youth work and participatory methods. As such, this paper explores the following questions:

1. How might friendship as method provide insights into young people's social world in the context of mentoring?
2. How might this method align with youth work epistemologies?

The data collection method for this project was designed to leverage the existing trust relationship between mentors and mentees. While the assumption that a trusting relationship exists between the mentors and mentees may not be the case for all mentoring relationships, the significant support offered by Sammy D throughout the program makes this more likely than not. In addition, following ethical research principles, mentees and mentors were provided with multiple opportunities to withdraw from the project without explanation or consequence, and some potential participants did indeed decline further involvement. Ethics approval (no. 5834) was granted by the Flinders University Human Research Ethics Committee.

Friendship as method centres existing trust relationships and decentres the researcher in the interview encounter. While certainly the researcher retains significant power and control over the rest of the research process, this method(ology) offers a unique opportunity to value both practice experience and the priorities of participants (e.g. safety and trust). While this method raises new ethical considerations, including the potential for mentors to unduly influence the conversation, it also attempts to address issues of power and vulnerability inherent to adult–child research.

Sample

Mentors and mentees from the Sammy D Northern Youth Mentoring program were invited to participate in the research. Their participation in the mentoring program was

Table 1. Mentee demographics.

Age		Gender		Ethnicity	
7–9	3	Female	4	Australian	4
10–13	6	Male	7	Indigenous	2
14–17	2	Non-binary	0	African	1
				Not specified	4

Table 2. Mentor demographics.

Age		Gender		Ethnicity	
18–20	2	Female	2	Australian/Caucasian	3
21–30	3	Male	3	Indigenous	1
+31	1	Non-binary	0	African	2
Not specified	2	Not specified	2	Not specified	2

not contingent on their participation in the research. Mentees in the mentoring program were between the ages of 7–17 years (inclusive) and mentors in the program were 18 years of age or older. In total, the program had a capacity for 30 mentors and 30 mentees. We recruited 11 mentor–mentee pairings from this pool; however, 3 mentors were connected to multiple mentees. The total participant pool was 11 mentees and 8 mentors ($n = 19$). Tables 1 and 2 summarise the participants' demographics.

Recruitment

Potential participants were informed about the research during the mentoring program intake. The Sammy D Foundation provided contact details of mentors and mentees to the research team who independently contacted the potential participants, and mentees' parents/guardians, to secure their consent and arrange a time for the interview. Participants could decline at any stage of the research. The Sammy D Foundation was not notified of who elected to participate.

Data collection

Interviews were arranged to take place in a location that was comfortable for the participants; typically, where they regularly met, e.g. youth centres, cars, libraries and local parks. To accommodate the flexible location, the interviews were recorded using a web-conferencing platform. The participants met together in person and a member of the research team met with them via web-conferencing. Before the interview, the researcher provided a list of questions created for the evaluation and offered guidance about how to conduct the interview. The guidance included that it was important for the participants to use the questions as a starting point for a conversation where they could both share their experiences. The researchers requested that they talk through all the questions, but that they did not have to answer any that made them uncomfortable. Once the recording had started, the researcher left the online meeting. When the time allotted for the interview had elapsed, the researcher logged back into the meeting and downloaded the recording. Interviews were ideally conducted during the last 4 weeks of the 9-month mentoring relationship and varied in length from 8 to 30 min. Transcripts have been anonymised,

however, participants have been given pseudonyms, rather than codes, to emphasise their humanity.

Data analysis

The audio recordings of the peer interviews and self-reflections were transcribed and then coded using NVivo software. The excepts in this paper were identified through multiple rounds of reflexive thematic coding (Braun and Clarke 2019). The first round of deductive coding focused on identifying significant insights in line with the research questions for evaluating the mentoring program. These codes were then organised into thematic networks or clusters (Attride-Stirling 2001) followed by a second round of coding or 'focused coding' (Silverman 2006; Taylor, Bogdan, and DeVault 2015). Attention was also given during this second round to the impact of the trust relationship between mentor and mentees on the interview experience. The secondary analysis of the data was conducted by the original research team with invited contributions from authors C–E to the theoretical and contextual components of the paper. Our secondary analysis aimed to explore the kinds of insights that it might be possible to generate within a trusting, friend-like, relationship. Thus, despite the relatively small scale of this project, the extracts considered here have contingent value that offer depth (Braun and Clarke 2006; Taylor, Bogdan, and DeVault 2015) and 'something important in relation to the overall research question' (Braun and Clarke 2006, 82). As such, attention was paid during coding and analysis to instances that reveal something significant about the kinds of insights a pre-existing trust relationship can produce. Finally, we discuss how these social dynamics reflect the epistemological assumptions and orientations of youth work knowledge.

Limitations

This paper has been co-authored with staff from the Sammy D Foundation. Further details on the collaborative development of the evaluation's original aims and research questions in partnership with Sammy D are described in Brookes, Lohmeyer, and Seymour (2025). This collaborative approach to working with industry potentially limits a critique of the organisation and its processes; however, the success of the program, the organisation and its processes are not the focus of this paper. The decision to co-author with industry partners is founded on the belief in the importance of co-design and collaboration with knowledge users and recognises knowledge ownership extends beyond academia. There are many compromises in removing the researcher from the research encounter. While we do not ascribe to positivist assertions that only a trained objective scientist can collect and analyse data (Strega 2005), this method does forfeit the skills and knowledge a trained researcher brings to the process.

Findings and discussion

Friendship and love

The participants in this study were invited to ask each other a series of questions, including what they thought made for a good mentoring match. This question provided insight

into the features of their relationships that helped them to connect and establish a foundation of safety and trust, a priority in participatory methods (Banks et al. 2013). Many of these were known features of successful mentoring matches and supported creating an ethical and relationally safe space. Yet, other references to cultural safety and love seemed to challenge the boundaries of 'friendship'.

Alex (mentor):	Like what do you think … a mentor and a mentee, a good match, like what do they need, be able to be a good match?
Elliot:	Like do, like the same interests and being able to understand each other and communicate.
Alex:	Yeah, and actually talk to each other.
Elliot:	Yeah.
Alex:	Yeah, I think that's important. It'd be kind of funny if we sat here and didn't talk for three hours.
Elliot:	Yeah.
Alex:	That wouldn't be good for anyone.

For Elliot, having a shared interest, and being able to 'understand' and 'communicate' with each other were important to helping them 'talk'. Building rapport is likewise a common strategy in qualitative interviewing and essential for participatory research; however, this pair has already built a foundation and developed an 'emotionally salient tie' (DuBois and Karcher 2013, 5) that enables their conversation. With months of mentoring sessions that last for hours, this kind of foundation offers significant potential for creating a safe environment that is unattainable for researchers without a pre-existing relationship with participants.

Kai (mentor):	– cultural connection?
Lane:	Me and you have the – our families are right near each other. So it was like clicked very well, it was like, oh are you are from NT? And then you're like yeah my family's from there too. It was like, … .
Kai:	Yeah, probably related somehow.
Lane:	Somehow.
Kai:	So I think yeah both of us being Aboriginal, coming from smaller places, moving to a big city is something that we've definitely connected on.

For research with Indigenous Australians, cultural safety in data collection is critical (Cantley 2024). A cultural connection between researchers and participants is a clear starting point for creating culturally safe spaces. Contemporary calls for protected Indigenous methodologies and Indigenous data sovereignty extend this safety beyond the research encounter and to ownership of knowledge (Cantley 2024). Friendship as method offers the potential for creating a safe space by removing the (white) researcher and culturally unsafe questioning practices from the conversation. However, this method is not an Indigenous methodology and does not resolve issues about data ownership. Yet, like Elliot, the friendship developed between the participants over the mentoring relationships meant they 'clicked very well'.

River (mentor):	Yeah, how does your mentoring effect you and your family?
James:	Happy.
River:	Makes you happy, so it's good for your family?
James:	Can we … -
River:	Wait, let's just take a second, why does it make your family feel better?

James: Because they love you.
River: Because they love me.
James: Yes. … I do.
River: Do you love me?
C: Mm hm.

If friendship is a contested description of the nature of a mentoring relationship, then certainly so is 'love'. Love can be interpreted as describing the depth of care and trust in the relationship. However, it is also unsurprising that children and young people with limited experience with trustworthy and safe adults may experience the relationship with a mentor or worker as loving (Sercombe 2010a, 98). Capturing the depth of trust and safety expressed as love may be beyond the capacity of short-term qualitative research, potentially adding 'significant layers' (Tillmann-Healy 2003, 741) and unattainable insights into participants' social worlds. However, this kind of vulnerability raises ethical questions and 'a new set of obligations' (Tillmann-Healy 2003, 743) about what can and should be done with this knowledge, particularly if they disclose personally discrediting information. The participants voluntarily consented to participation, however, in the context of this relationship participants might not always have been conscious of who was listening (i.e. not just the other participant), and what might be done with the information. While friendship as method might offer new insights into participants' lives because of the context provided by friendship trust, it also highlights the complexities of consent and ethical dilemmas when working relationally with young people.

Insights formed in safety and trust

Friendship as method offers added insight into the social world and realities of practice. These insights are personal and contextual beyond the quantitative outcomes often prized by funding bodies, instead connecting with participants' humanity, thus, raising new and potentially conflicting obligations. In the excerpts below, participants respond to questions about the impact of mentoring on their lives.

Hunter (mentor): Do you think mentoring has made you feel more happy or do you get to do more of the things that make you happy-?
Wren: I get to do more of the things that I didn't used to – well I get to do more things that I, well now do with you because Pop's had an eye injury, because he can't drive, he can't – he usually takes me fishing and all that and takes me places and that.
Hunter: So we've been able to get out and about?
Wren: Yeah.
Hunter: And do activities together?
Wren: Yeah. … It's changed because I've got to get more active outside, because like as I said, pop's injury and then Nan can't really take me places because she has … my baby sister.

Wren appears to be cared for by their Nan and Pop. A drawback of removing the researcher from the interview is losing the opportunity to ask follow-up questions (Heron 2020); hence, we don't know more about Wren's living situation. The mentor is also more likely to prioritise their relationship with the young person rather than producing usable data. In this section of the interview, participants were discussing wellbeing; a

notoriously tricky concept even for youth scholars (White, Wyn, and Robards 2017). Questions about the impacts of mentoring on a mentee's 'happiness' were not part of the interview schedule. Yet, the mentor's decision to ask about happiness provided an important insight into the mentee's social world, while also highlighting the mentor's ability to read and respond to the mentee's 'cues' (Loveridge et al. 2024) and needs. The impact of the mentoring on Wren's life is powerfully, but partially through an evolving praxis (Seal and Harris 2016), captured in this short story made possible by the friendship context of the mentoring relationship.

River (mentor):	… has mentoring changed your life?
James:	Seeing you all the time.
River:	… Yeah, in what way has it changed your life?
James:	In the old room.
River:	The old room, what old room are you talking about?
James:	We used to live in a hotel, I hate the room so much, then we moved to a house, then I see you.
River:	And you like this new house?
James:	When was my first day of seeing you, on Tuesday?
River:	First day of what, of seeing me?
James:	Yeah.
River:	Yeah, the first day was on a Tuesday, I came to your house, do you remember that?
James:	Yeah.
River:	I think you were playing Mario Kart.
James:	Yeah, I was. Did I have a Nintendo?
River:	Yeah, you were playing on your Nintendo Switch when I first met you.

Like the 'love' earlier articulated by James, this excerpt shows how the conversation unfolds in non-linear terms reflecting a dialectical process of knowledge creation (Seal and Harris 2016). Asking initially about how the young person's life has changed, the conversation drifts quickly between their experience of living in a hotel, the first day they met, and playing video games. It isn't clear if the mentor played a role in the change in accommodation, again demonstrating the drawback of the absence of a researcher who might ask follow-up questions. Regardless, this methodology has provided a rich insight into the important emotional support the mentor provided during this period. As such, this insight demonstrates the depth of the relationship, and while the depth of the relationship doesn't guarantee the depth of insight (Owton and Allen-Collinson 2014), it does help create the opportunity for deep emotional insights.

Sloan (mentor):	Alright, so what is the best thing about your mentor match? So, what's the best thing about matching with me?
Ryan:	I don't know.
Sloan:	They're tough questions. So, I think the best thing about being matched with you is when we first started our sessions, you were wrapped up like a burrito, and you didn't want to come out and meet me, and you felt a bit overwhelmed and daunted meeting a new person. And I have been lucky to see you grow and become a person, and develop with all your skills, and I feel privileged that, you know, we've shared laughs, and we've had new experiences, and some of them have been challenging.

In this interview, most of Ryan's responses were 'I don't know'. This interview demonstrates how, despite the opportunity, friendship as method does not guarantee deep insights from participants. Very little else is said by the young person about their experience throughout the interview, and we are left with only the mentor's account to provide details of their experience. The mentor providing an account of their experiences presents many questions, including if there was a trusting relationship between the mentor and mentee, if the young person has felt coerced to participate, and if it is ok for the mentor to speak as a proxy (Allen 2009) on the young person's behalf. Owton and Allen-Collinson (2014) argue there are 'limits to the "democratisation" of the research relationship' (287) and the method does not resolve all issues of power inequalities such as the hierarchies in a mentoring relationship. This excerpt provides a potentially powerful account of the progress of a young person who started 'wrapped up like a burrito' and the value of relationship-based work with young people that is likely inaccessible without the mentor's involvement.

Agentic potential and emotional conversations

The interviews in the project between mentors and mentees were dialectic rather than the direct style of an interview. This produced interactions that were, at times, tangential or entirely off-topic. However, there were moments captured that spoke to the nature of the mentor–mentee relationship in unexpected clarity. James again provided a rich example of what friend-like conversation looks like and the kinds of insights friendship as method can provide.

James:	Who's that, who am I pointing at? [pointing at the computer screen]
River (mentor):	I'm not sure.
James:	Who am I pointing at?
River:	Is it Steve?
James:	No.
River:	Is it the bee?
James:	No.
River:	Who is it? Is it me?
James:	No.
River:	Is that a tree?
James:	No. Who am I pointing at?
River:	Is it me?
James:	No, it's that, the water.
River:	Oh, the water. Is there anything else-
James:	Minecraft. Minecraft is like the best game in the world.
River:	So do you think it's important to you that you have a mentor that meets your preferences, so you said a boy?
James:	Yeah. Wait, can I sing a song quick?
River:	No, we don't have time.
James:	Wicky wow, wow, wicky wow, wow.
River:	Wicky wow, wow.
…	
River:	Yeah, we're just talking about mentoring, is there anything else you want to talk about mentoring?
James:	Thank you from seeing you and I like and thanks for watching our video, subscribe and hit the bell.

River:	Subscribe and hit the like button.
James:	Yeah, hit the bell and like the button.
River:	And hit the bell to get notifications.
James:	To then if you go down-
River:	And leave a comment on the video?
James:	Yeah, leave a comment, leave one like on the video and when you do that we can make more videos.

In this excerpt, the mentee and mentor, led by the mentee, play a guessing game, break into song, and play-act as social media influencers. The importance of play and fun in mentoring is humorously captured in this short exchange that would unlikely have occurred with an unknown researcher, and the context of the broader interview further evidences the strength of the rapport and connection between the two. Alternatively, this exchange demonstrates something of the fluid power relation in mentoring, evident in the agency afforded to the young person through the trust relationship. While friendship as method isn't a solution to power imbalances, it is difficult to imagine this exchange happening with someone unfamiliar. This insight speaks to the importance of the relationship or the context of participatory practices that afford or limit the possibility for action (Andersson 2017). As such, this excerpt provides a rich insight into what agency and resistance can look like in research and practice, and how the presence of an unknown researcher might quash these kinds of agentic displays.

Reese:	Or like all of it's good because like I've been able to tell you all my drama with relationships and you're like, "Yeah, no drop him".
Parker (mentor):	Yeah.
Reese:	Or like, "Keep him", or like so if you ever get a vibe-
Parker:	Oh he sounds good … I can hear one thing about a boy and tell you if it's a red flag.
Reese:	And you're like, "No". So, I guess that's like helped me a lot … And my friendships, I've been able to like what happened with my sister and you're just like, "Yeah, no, drop that. Drop her".
Parker:	That's my response to everything; get rid of it, get rid of them.
Reese:	Drop her, get rid of them. … like there was lots of people that like … horrible to me like I kind of like cut them out because I don't really have time for them.
Parker:	Yeah, that's good. An unexpected effect is you cut out the bullshit.
Reese:	Pretty much … . I cut out all, not all the drama like there's, of course, going to always be drama, but like cut out the unnecessary drama that people want to bring you into … so you're just like disengaging yourself from that person for a bit like each week a different amount of times and then you're going to realise that they're- … You're not-
Parker:	Fulfilling my life with positivity.
Reese:	You're not fulfilling my life purposes like … Please leave.
Parker:	If people aren't lifting you up then cut them out.
Reese:	Dragging down themselves and like kick them out the doorway.

Demonstrating the agency afforded to participants in a different way, Parker's advice-giving to 'drop' and 'get rid of' people from Reese's life, arguably, borders on inappropriate, raising, again, the potential concern when participants disclose personally discrediting information. However, in social pedagogic conversations like this 'sparks fly', a conversation erupts, and 'misunderstandings [can] deepen, anger or contempt be

expressed' (Batsleer 2008, 9). The way this advice is delivered reflects an informality and directness of speech that is likely linked to the context created through friendship.

Conclusion

This project aimed to investigate how friendship as method(ology) might provide insights into young people's social world in the context of mentoring, and how this method aligns with youth work epistemologies. The conversations in the data between mentees and mentors demonstrated a significant emotional bond that provides a context of trust and safety. This context produced insights into participants' social world that might not otherwise been accessible, including significant stories of change, playful interactions, and expressions of deep affection. These insights came at the cost of contextual details and the specific interview questions that a professional researcher might have asked. However, conversely, the rich emotional insights that were gathered were likely unattainable if a researcher was present. This is the promise and cost of decentring professional researchers from the process.

The insights gained through this method revealed not only the nature of the relationship between participants but also the obligations that come with this relationship and its limits. For example, mentors might be able to speak on behalf of a young person or be just another adult proxy. Likewise, personal disclosures in a trust relationship might be discrediting or deeply affectionate. While based on a small data set, the findings from this study pose questions that can inform the continued debate of the broader obligations and limits that might apply to relationship-based work with young people. Furthermore, these questions are likely to also be important considerations for all researchers collecting data with young people. The acknowledgement of these obligations, in part, underpins the rise of participatory methods generally, as does the recognition that youth workers come with experience, skills and epistemologies to navigate these obligations.

Friendship as method aligns with the critical realism and epistemological relativism of youth work as the insights are gathered through a relationship with a young person that provides a partial and contingent view of their social world, made possible through the evolving cycle of praxis and a dialectical view of knowledge creation. Yet, the complementary elements of friendship as method and youth work do not offer easy solutions to the challenges within this form of data collection. These questions and challenges might instead inform the continued development of professional and personal boundaries in research and practice with young people. The problems of power inequalities in mentoring and friendships are a tension to be identified, discussed, and held rather than quickly resolved. These issues are also not absent from other forms of data collection but may be more visible in this context. Friendship as method reflects many of the values of participatory methods in the prioritisation of relationship, trust, care, reciprocity and opportunities afforded for participant agency, though not always its fundamental aims. Friendship as method thus brings a unique set of obligations and opportunities to research with young people.

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