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The Co-option and Oppression of a Social Justice Movement: Professionalized Peer Support Services



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When a social justice movement begins to go mainstream and become institutionalized, it then becomes extremely vulnerable to co-option. One definition of co-option is “to assimilate, take, or win over into a larger or established group.” Once a social justice movement becomes co-opted, it has in turn been immobilized as it is swept up into becoming a part or extension of the larger group or system(s) it initially sought to dismantle and transform. Both co-option and oppression are insidious and sneaky processes: the path to co-option is often paved with the very best of intentions and the oppressed are often at first unaware of their own oppression.

After having spent more than a decade contributing to the training and integration of people with lived mental health or substance use disorder experience into paid peer support staff roles, it is beyond evident to me that a harmful and oppressive co-option has occurred. Institutionalized peer support has had a positive impact in many peoples lives for sure, but from a larger standpoint, the institutionalization of peer support has ultimately demobilized the very social justice movement from which it was birthed. The co-option of people with lived experience into the system has essentially oppressed and marginalized a substantially large number of the very people who would be the ones to dismantle and transform these broken systems. We see evidence of the oppression and marginalization of professional peer staff in multiple studies reporting low wages, high burnout, low job satisfaction, high role confusion, lack of perceived power and influence, etc.

The co-option of people with lived experience, or people in recovery, began long before many of us entered the scene. For anybody involved with professionalized peer support, it is important to understand the history of how we got to where we are today. I recommend learning about the Mental Health Consumer Rights/Psychiatric Survivors/Ex-Patients Movement that emerged in the late 1960's. For the purpose of this article, I will not be chronicling this history, however it is extraordinarily important that those of us involved in any way with professionalized peer support services, both in mental health and substance use disorder service systems, do our due diligence in understanding our own history.

While I will not be chronicling the history of how we got to where we are today, what I do hope to do in this article is spark some critical thinking and introspection for those of us now involved with institutionalized peer support services. As noted earlier, it is common for those who have been co-opted and oppressed to be unaware of their own co-option and oppression. And again, for over a decade, I certainly served as an unknowing actor in the co-option and oppression of myself and other people with lived experience.

To spark this critical thinking and introspection, the following are some questions for professional peer staff to consider:

- **Do I (or peer staff) have true power in the system?** Do I have the power and influence to change policies and practices? Do I have the autonomy to do what I

perceive as best or most helpful? Do I have access to the resources and supports I need to do my job most effectively? Are my ideas and opinions truly respected, valued and heard?

- **Do I (or peer staff) feel equally valued as other roles in the system?** Do I garner the same level of respect as my non-peer staff colleagues? Do I feel like an equal member of the team or the “lowest person on the totem-pole?” Am I compensated fairly for my work? Am I heard or treated the same way as my non-peer staff colleagues? Do I feel pigeonholed into being just a “peer” or “person with lived experience” and not seen in my full humanity?
- **Do I (or peer staff) have opinions, ideas or beliefs that are silenced?** Do I worry about speaking out for fear of getting in trouble or losing my job? Am I told “this is just the way it is” when challenging the status quo? Am I able to truly advocate for myself and those I serve? Do I feel like I have to stay quiet at times when I want to speak out?

If you find yourself answering these questions and realizing that you do not have true power, that you are not equally valued and that instead you are often silenced, this is the first step to awakening to your own oppression...and it is only through awakening to our own oppression that we can ever begin to take the first steps toward reclaiming our power and our co-opted social justice movement.

At the end of the day, institutionalized peer support services originated out of a social justice movement comprised of people with lived mental health or substance use challenges who recognized the brokenness of the system, understood the need to demand better and held an intimate understanding of the idea that those closest to the problem are closest to the solutions. It will not be until those of us with lived experience in professionalized peer support roles wake up to our own oppression and the co-option of our quest for social justice that we will ever see real change in our broken systems. Waking up is the first step...it is time for us to wake up again and take our power back.

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