Jijian Voronka: Examining the inclusion of lived experience “peers” in mental health research

What you need to know

Little is known about how peers – people with lived experience of mental health issues and/or homelessness – feel about taking part in the research process. Through in-depth interviews and ethnographic methods, Jijian Voronka is examining the experiences of peers who were hired into various roles during the At Home/Chez Soi research project. Her dissertation will provide a critical analysis of how inclusionary practices can impact individual, community, and organizational change.

About Jijian

Jijian graduated with a double major in Sociology and Equity Studies at the University of Toronto and completed her MA at OISE in the Department of Sociology and Equity Studies, specializing in Disability Studies. Her studies helped her to think differently about psychiatric disability and the social causes underlying its etiology. Five years of post-graduate work as a research assistant at Ryerson in the School of Disability Studies reinforced her interest in the social causes of psychiatric disability. Supported by a Canadian Graduate Scholarship from SSHRC, she is currently completing her PhD program in the Department of Humanities, Social Science and Social Justice Education at OISE/U of T, under the supervision of Dr. Sherene Razack.

What is Jijian’s Research About?

In 2008, the Government of Canada allocated $110 million to the Mental Health Commission of Canada to undertake a research project on mental health and homelessness. At Home/Chez Soi, a four-year project, studied a Housing First intervention in five cities. The project looked at how to best provide practical, meaningful support to Canadians experiencing homelessness and mental health issues. Hired onto the project as a Consumer...
Research Consultant and working closely with Dr. Paula Goering, Jijian advocated for the greater involvement of "peers"—that is, persons with lived experience of homelessness and/or mental health issues. In response, over 100 peer roles were created. Jijian also helped support the involvement of peer support workers, peer researchers, peer organizers, and peers on advisory groups. One of these groups, The National Consumer Panel, helped to develop some of At Home/Chez Soi’s documents and procedures. The group also provided guidance to optimize the use of peer knowledge within the project.

Peer researchers hired by the project worked in a variety of capacities and were integrated into local research teams made up of psychiatrists and other researchers. While these peer researchers provided valuable work, Jijian also saw the value in providing a unique opportunity for them to work together outside the integrated teams to create their own peer-driven research. Jijian supported the development of the Peer Qualitative Research Group (PQRG), a group of seven peer researchers from five sites across Canada: Toronto, Montreal, Moncton, Vancouver, and Winnipeg. Harnessing their collective energies and expertise, the group produced a research paper, “Un/helpful help and its Discontents: Peer researchers paying attention to street life narratives to inform social work policy and practice,” which will be published in Social Work in Mental Health this year. The article draws from At Home/Chez Soi participant interviews and explores what they articulate as helpful and unhelpful service provision. It also highlights the disconnect between what participants ask for and what provisions they receive.

Peer involvement in research has increased over the last 20 years, reflecting the potential it has to transform mental health research and delivery. Much has been written on the value of including lived experience in the process. Very little, however, has been written about the experience of inclusion from a peer’s perspective.

"‘Nothing about us without us’ is the mantra of the disability movement," says Jijian. “But now that it is happening, what does that inclusion mean? What happens to a person who takes on the role of a peer; what possibilities does it create and what are the limitations? This is what my work explores.”

Four years on, the At Home/Chez Soi project has provided Jijian with the relevant data to explore these questions, which draws on ethnographic methods as well as in-depth interviews with other peers involved in the project. Beyond the PhD dissertation she plans to complete in the coming year she sees her research leading to the development of a practical tool for peers participating in mental health research.

“What do peers need to know when they undertake the responsibility of speaking through the lens of someone with lived experience?” asks Jijian. "How can they be better prepared to take on the role? How does the role impact a person’s identity? How can peers help each other maximize their effectiveness, knowing where they can affect change and where it is not possible? What should peers be asking for? What problems can arise
when a person is working through a peer lens? My research will inform guidance around these issues.”

**What’s next for Jijian?**

In the future, Jijian hopes to continue to collaborate with academic and community members who are committed to improving systems care. She aims to provide training and education on research for peers in the community.

In the meantime she continues to author and co-author articles, conference papers and book chapters, deliver keynote and opening plenaries on various topics, and teach. On staff at Ryerson University in the School of Disability Studies since 2011, she co-teaches a course called, “A History of Madness.” The course provides a social history of madness, including information on the emergence of the consumer/survivor social movement, and encourages students to think about mental illness as more than a medical problem.

With an enrolment of 165 students per semester she is as busy marking papers as she is writing them.

**Project Title:** "Peer involvement in the At Home/Chez Soi project: Mapping the possibilities, limits, and conditions of participation in mental health practice."

**Project Supervisors:** Dr. Sherene Razack

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