A role for lived experience leadership in Australian homelessness research.

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The issue of homelessness has recently witnessed increased national attention, driven largely by the short-term intervention of Australian governments in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite this, homelessness and the experience of homeless persons in many ways remains hidden. This has arguably not been helped by the shortage of lived experience leadership in the field. While the authors of this piece (both of whom have lived experience of homelessness) advocate for the critical role of co-design models, peer workers, and lived experience advisory groups, to name some popular participatory approaches, we suggest that the active involvement of researchers with lived experience in leading research projects, teams, and initiatives is equally important. Peer-led research has received little attention in homelessness scholarship to date. In what follows, we draw upon a wide body of cross-disciplinary lived experience literature to highlight the need for building peer-led homelessness research capacity.

The importance of drawing on lived experience

Scholarship in various fields within the social sciences, particularly mental health, is highlighting the importance and benefits – to the research and the research team – of involving people who bring a lived experience perspective to research processes. These benefits, some of which have been noted by Australian health research funding bodies, can include: a) increasing the relevance, appropriateness, and sensitivity of investigative efforts, language, and knowledge produced; b) increasing the richness of understanding gleaned from firsthand insights; c) identifying emerging and previously unidentified issues of importance, knowledge gaps and misconceptions; and e) and strengthening connections between marginalised communities and stakeholders that increase the reach and impact of recruitment, dissemination, and knowledge translation.

The benefits of peer research and peer-led (or “lived experience-led”) research, however, extend beyond academic research processes, to encompass addressing issues of inequality and unconscious bias; increasing diversity and representation; and enabling more meaningful opportunities for those who have experienced, or are experiencing, marginalisation to advocate for structural and social change. In a previous edition of Parity, Oliver & Cataldo raised the importance of recognising and supporting people with lived experience in shaping homelessness research. Drawing on Black feminist literature, they called attention to the social justice implications (creating space for people with lived experience to be the authors of their own stories and “narratives for change”), and epistemological significance (challenging traditional paradigms whereby people with lived experience of oppression are often presented as “subjects of study rather than theorists themselves”), of supporting those with lived experience to be actively engaged in homelessness research.
Building safe, supportive, and inclusive research environments

Creating environments in which peer research and peer-led research are able to flourish requires identifying and acknowledging the obstacles – at all levels – within academic settings\(^13\), and devising strategies to reduce or ameliorate these. Individuals with lived experience of homelessness, and other experiences of marginalisation, may have encountered considerable trauma or other adverse incidents that have lasting impacts. The impact of such traumas and incidents can be inadvertently triggered through various aspects of the research process; for instance, through the disclosure of lived experience, emotional engagement relating to the subject matter and representing a diverse range of lived experiences, and advocating for others experiencing marginalisation\(^14\)\(^15\). There is a real need to ensure that an affirming, culturally appropriate, trauma-informed environment is maintained\(^16\) where the sharing of lived experience is safely facilitated and respected at all times; and where appropriate support mechanisms are built into the research process, prior to a study commencing, and upheld throughout the project. Ongoing monitoring and adaptation of these strategies by necessity requires flexibility, and this should occur throughout the research process. Such emphasis on reshaping the professional academic environment challenges efforts aimed simply at upskilling researchers with lived experience\(^17\) and “on people with a lived experience being and doing more”\(^18\).

Individuals with lived experience of homelessness, furthermore, are likely to face a range of barriers in academic settings which must be acknowledged and addressed in building peer-led research capacity. Peer researchers may not hold the research and training qualifications generally required for academic positions\(^19\) (such as completion of a PhD or equivalent qualification; experience in conducting recruitment, data collection, analysis and publication of research, and track record of publications), or other common elements of key selection criteria (evidence of collaborative working relationships in industry or research; research funding success; and capacity to travel locally or nationally, for instance). Other barriers must also be considered such as recurring or ongoing homelessness and/or housing instability; difficulty in producing required documentation due to periods of transience (previous employment details, and verification of qualifications where they are held – specifically, academic transcripts – being examples); the ongoing physical and psychological impacts of lived experience, and intersections with other marginalised experiences or identities and sources of minority stress. Critically, support for peer-led research is limited without attention to a diverse range of perspectives, and an appreciation of intersectional experiences and compounding sources of stigma and oppression\(^20\).

Recognition of these often complex circumstances is critical to both building peer-led research capacity and supporting peer researchers to build their personal capacity to maintain and progress their career. Ultimately, as conveyed by Jones et al., strategically addressing the range of barriers in professional settings and replacing these with a sustainable “pipeline” of lived experience researchers necessitates “serious investment” among research communities, educational institutions, and funding bodies\(^21\).

Concluding observations

Peer-led research has received limited attention in homelessness literature. As can be seen across various disciplines, nevertheless, there are a range of benefits stemming from the involvement and leadership of people with lived experience in research processes. What we are calling for is the increased capacity for peer-led research in Australian homelessness research. To do this, we must ensure there is appropriate support that reduces barriers in professional academic settings. The homelessness sector has seen the benefits of establishing,
nurturing, and sustaining a diverse lived experience network of co-design models, peer workers, and lived experience advisory groups. Now is the time to take another step forward and compliment this capability by increasing opportunities to expand peer-led homelessness research capacity.

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7. Banfield et al., op cit.
10. Banfield et al., op cit.
11. Banfield et al., op cit.
16. Ibid.
18. Oliver & Cataldo, op cit., p.11.
19. Greene et al., op cit.
21. Ibid.