



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Recognizing lived experience

A galaxy of considerations

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Abstract

Within Australia, it is increasingly common for a 'recognition of lived experience' to occur at the start of meetings and formal events within mental health spaces. Whilst such acknowledgements signal a move towards valuing lived experience, there is potential for these practices to be harnessed in ways that assimilate lived experience into existing systems, rather than valuing survivor and Mad knowledges and practices. In this article, we present a framework for individuals to consider when crafting one's own recognition of lived experience, stemming from our Mad desires for recognitions that align with a social justice agenda in a meaningful and connected way. Alongside the framework, we share a discussion between the authors, drawing on our experiences to explore the tensions that emerge as recognitions become formalized within mental health systems.

Keywords

Lived experience, recognition, mad activism, peer work

History

Received 1 Sept 2024
Revised 3 Jan 2026
Accepted 3 Feb 2026

Introduction

Within Australia, it is increasingly common for an acknowledgement or 'recognition of lived experience' to occur at the start of formal events or meetings within mental health spaces. A scripted recognition of lived experience is common at the start of presentations, on agendas, organizational websites and within email signatures. Recognitions of lived experience provide an opportunity to connect oneself and others with the centrality of lived experience, celebrate progress to date, identify the work still to do, and to connect with the wisdom and practices of intersecting social justice movements. However, as recognitions become entangled with formal mental health systems, such recognitions have potential to mask systemic issues, erase diversity, and reinforce problematic power imbalances, enabling organisations to appear benevolent whilst doing little to disrupt the status quo.

Such effects are documented for other emancipatory practices emerging from the consumer/survivor movement, whereby practices are re-shaped in ways that are potentially problematic¹. Outside of the consumer/survivor movement, there are also well documented critiques of the ways in which seemingly progressive acts fail to unsettle the status quo. For example, in Australia, a common practice at the start of a formal gathering or event is to make a statement called an 'Acknowledgment of Country' to acknowledge, and pay respects to, the traditional custodians (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders) of the land where the event takes place. This practice has been critiqued for the way it is often performed in a tokenistic way, removed from political defiance and calls for action regarding colonization, dispossession and genocide.² In this article, we set out to explore the possibilities and limits of recognitions of lived experience and consider how, as lived experience (peer) workers and/or Mad activists, we might continue to use recognitions in transformative ways, despite, or in resistance to, psychiatric, neoliberal, colonial and capitalist forces.

We start with sharing a framework (or 'galaxy') for thinking about potential components of a recognition of lived experience. We (Renai and Julian) developed this galaxy to support us in crafting our own recognitions in ways that are authentic, purposeful, centre lived experience and linked to social justice outcomes. It is the result of hours of conversations, voice memos, scrawled notes, diagrams of planets, and dreamings shared between us; for Renai between Lego coordination, lullabies and laundry, and for Julian between the birds, trees and guitar playing.

We firmly believe there is no such thing as a perfect recognition. To fix a recognition in place or suggest a 'right' and 'wrong' way to deliver a recognition would be the antithesis of what we hope to achieve. Rather, we aim to provide a structure and prompts to critically consider when, how and if, recognitions move us closer to social justice, and away from simply justifying the status quo. Whilst we originally presented this work at the Western Australian Peer Support Network (WAPSN) conference, 2024, on Whadjuk Noongar Boodja (colonially known as Perth, Western Australia), our thinking and feeling continues to grow as we learn and share within community.

In the second part of the article, Aimee joins us. We share a discussion between the three of us where we explore the dimensions of the galaxy together. The discussion is a mishmash of what was shared in the original presentation of this work, transcripts from verbal discussions between the three of us, and our written reflections. We discuss the purpose of recognizing lived experience, its potential as an activist tool, and some of the potential troublesome effects as recognitions become mainstream (sane-stream³). We have edited

¹ See for example, McWade (2016) Harper & Speed (2012), Voronka & Costa (2019), Sinclair et al. (2023)

² For discussion on some of these tensions, see: Watego (2021), Heba (2025), Ahmed (2006)

³ We use sane-stream here as a term to highlight and critique the way in which 'sane' or 'rational' ways of thinking, being and doing are the norm and dominate (often adhering uncritically to biomedical/psy framings), to the exclusion of Mad ways of thinking and being. Fabris (2016, p.101) for example, uses sanestream to

but not always censored our language because, as Renai articulated in one of our discussions; “big feels and chaos human should be okay to be documented because that’s the reality of peer work”.

We draw on Mad theorising throughout the discussion to support the thinking-feeling through of our experiences working within mental health systems (where we are both asked to perform recognitions within institutional settings, *and* desire to radically centre lived experience)⁴. However, we are also conscious of the limitations within Mad studies⁵, including, but certainly not limited to the ways in which Mad studies can be experienced as elitist and removed from everyday practices and struggles. We know that many folks who share or draw upon their lived experience within mental health spaces or contexts do not align with the politics of Mad studies, and that by engaging with Mad studies we potentially isolate or exclude some folk. We have tried to tread care-fully in this regard and invite critique of our practices. To centre our lived experiences and thinking together, and to keep our discussion as accessible as possible, we have used Mad academic references in the footnotes, as an adjunct to our discussion.

Between the galaxy of considerations, and the messy, mad chaos in which we discuss navigating activist work within oppressive systems, we hope our work prompts further thinking and discussion on the practices and nuanced effects of recognitions.

The ‘galaxy’ of recognition considerations

In this first section, we introduce the galaxy (figure one and two below). The galaxy invites four main considerations when developing and delivering recognitions of lived experience:

- My connection: which invites a heart-felt and critically reflective consideration as to why and how we are recognising lived experience
- Connect and Reflect: which invites us to tune into our own personal strengths and limits when delivering a recognition, and provides practical prompts for how we might structure the recognition
- The Movement: which invites us to connect recognitions with social justice and political activism, recognising the ways in which folks with lived experience have been, and continue to be, excluded and harmed by systems, as well as celebrating

describe politics that differ from Mad politics, whilst Grey (2017, p. 1) uses the term to differentiate her “radical” and “establishment (sanestream) colleagues”.

⁴ Our discussions here predominantly relate to recognitions within mental health spaces because this is where most of our workplace experiences currently sit. We acknowledge there will be similar and yet different effects in spaces we have not discussed and look forward to engaging with such complexities in the future.

⁵ (Costa & Ross, 2022; Spandler & Poursanidou, 2019)

the strength, resiliency and joy that originates within movements that fight for justice.

- Our purpose: which ties a recognition into the event or purpose it is being used for.

Figure 1. 'The galaxy'

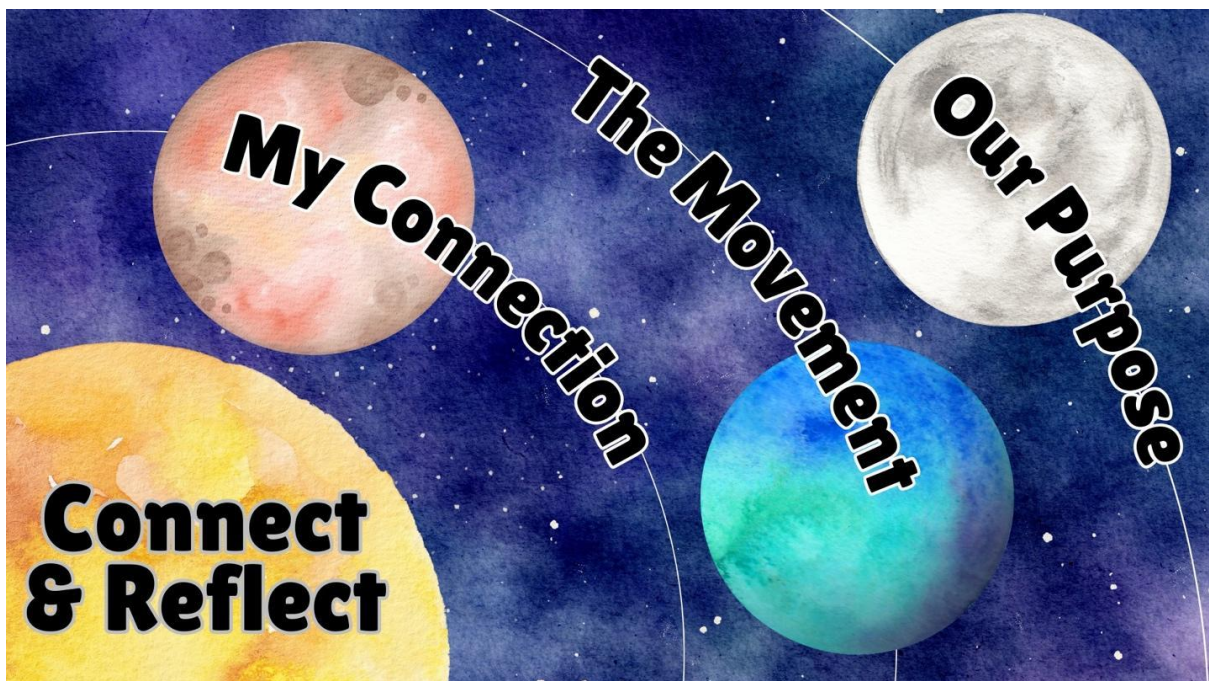


Image description: A watercolour space themed graphic with 3 planets on orbital curves demonstrating relationship to the sun in the bottom left. The sun is labelled "Connect and reflect", the planets are labelled "My Connection", "The Movement", and "Our Purpose."

Figure 2. Galaxy considerations

Image description: A dark blue and purple galaxy background with four white rounded corner boxes containing a heading and explanatory black text. The boxes are labelled “My Connection”, “Connect & Reflect”, “The Movement” and “Our Purpose”.

The text within “My Connection” reads: Consider why you want to recognise Lived Experience. Authentic and meaningful recognitions of lived experience requires some reflection. What is my connection to movement, to the space/purpose of the event, to Lived Experience. What values or principles of Lived Experience work are important to me? What is my positionality? What is my privilege and why am I in the room? Who are my leaders or giants?

The text within “Connect & Reflect” reads: Discovering your Recognition is a personal process. A Recognition is an opportunity to invite the room to reflect on the wisdom, work and power of Lived Experience. Things you may wish to consider: your personal style; what you find challenging; the practical elements (timing, delivery method etc); Structure such as a transition, an interactive element, a call to action or a statement.

The text within “The Movement” reads: Consider “We stand on the shoulders of giants”. Recognitions are a fantastic opportunity to connect to many social movements that Lived Experience draws from. It can be beneficial to consider: Who are our Leaders and inspirations? Any recent significant progress or setbacks to recognise? What movements or groups are important to recognise in the space? Any voices that are underrepresented that we would like to hold in mind? What do we hope for the movement moving forward?

The text within “Our Purpose” reads: Consider the purpose of the event/meeting. When developing a recognition, it is useful considering the purpose of the event/meeting/gathering... Some things you may wish to consider are: Why are we gathered? What is the purpose/agenda? How is the purpose connecting with Lived Experience? Who is in the room, what is the power at play? What is the connection of those in the room to Lived Experience? Who is not in the room? Why are they not in the room?

Exploring the galaxy together

In the discussion below, we explore this galaxy together.

Who we are (in this moment)

AS: Perhaps we can start by introducing ourselves and our relationships to Mad activism?

JR: My name is Julian or Jules. I have been in the (mental health) peer space for a while, in many capacities. You'll find me with my guitar, my partner and our growing family among the trees and my thoughts or my video games, my Birby and my bed. I have access to a community or a village, as I call them, that hopes to understand me. I have managed to exit the systems of care that were deemed required by others and have built enough to be able to flourish in this life.

I'm a cis-passing straight white male who currently has employment, access to housing, an income, and a voice. I can read, write, speak in a way that is understood by the dominant group, mask enough to not be questioned for my capacity, or be palatable enough for people to be able to be near my different ways. I can enjoy luxuries as well as necessities, and I currently have the right to my bodily autonomy and freedom. I don't have to fight for my survival anymore. I say this, because being able to speak these things comes from a great level of privilege and I do not want to hold that lightly.

RB: I always struggle with these questions, for I am Renai. I could slap many identifiers on me – queer, mad, neurodivergent, mother, wife, purple haired, feminist (intersectional⁶), sex worker, palatable activist, informal educator. White, lower middle class, with poverty roots, perceived as educated, chronically ill, friend. I am both too much and not enough all at once. I am a chaos human doing my best.

I am a passionate, professional grassroots Peer. I celebrate those able to navigate academia and thank them for the literature, the advocacy and the work. In 2024, I started my first Lived Experience role in a health service: my first lived experience role for an organisation that isn't Peer led. My knowledge, my practice and my passion for expertise within Mad studies and so many other social justice

⁶ Intersectionality is a framework, originating in Black feminist scholarship, for understanding how multiple, interlocking systems of power and oppression (such as racism, sexism, ableism, sanism, and classism) operate simultaneously to shape distinct lived experiences of marginalisation. It emphasises that these experiences cannot be understood in isolation and centres the lived expertise of those most impacted (Crenshaw, 1989; Taradalsky & Brown, 2026).

movements is informed by fierce, passionate and angry individuals seeking change. My Peer practice was built in the smokers' areas of psych wards, in the back rooms of brothels, around kitchen tables writing letters and planning protests, over social media sharing recovery capital and bearing witness to the big feels. I am passionate about this informal wisdom, this felt sense of injustice and this collective threat of power within community.

AS: I grew up on, and currently work, learn and play on Whadjuk Noongar land. I have worked in the mental health lived experience space for over ten years; enough to come to hate how doing so means constantly having my identity reduced to having 'lived experience' (for me, this is lived experience of navigating disabling distress and predominantly avoiding mental health systems), but also long enough to start embracing my madness as resistance. I have a bunch of middle-class, white privilege that has somewhat smoothed over the rough edges in life, and means I need to continue educating myself around particular experiences that I have not lived. This privilege has helped me navigate (and avoid) certain mental health services yet potentially aided in my pathologisation as a child and has not been enough to avoid experiences of institutional restraint, threats, and abandonment through my darkest times. I'm particularly conscious of my academic positioning as we craft this piece together, given I often perpetrate injustice through my use of academic language and practices. Mad studies provides me a way to think more creatively and radically about my experiences of madness, the language and community to grieve, be angry, find solace, and has connected me more broadly with other social justice work.

Reflecting on positionality and personal connection

AS: I really relate to struggling with positioning oneself, as you mention Renai, especially given that our identities are so often interpreted as fixed. For me, we are becoming anew every moment we interact with others and the world around us. I find myself becoming more radical, opinionated, queer and abolitionist (especially when thinking madly with you both!). And yet, I think perhaps one of the first things that spoke to me when I heard you both present was your recognition of positionality and privilege as an integral part of sharing a recognition of lived experience.

One of the audience members when you presented this work asked you to elaborate on what you mean by positionality. I think this is important to address, as many newcomers to lived experience work, who may be asked to deliver a recognition,

may not be familiar with the term. What does it mean for you, and why do you think it's important to reflect on, as part of sharing a recognition of lived experience⁷?

JR: For me, it's about addressing the socio-political factors that led to where I am, as well as my understanding and framework of the world. It's about recognizing the privilege I have in being in certain spaces and recognizing the privilege that has led to the moment where I am delivering a recognition of lived experience. It's a recognition of the voices that are absent from the room, which allows us to reflect on, and encourage others to reflect on, how this can change. It's about owning that I can perpetuate oppression too, and that I have bias and blind spots.

I consider not addressing my privilege or my positionality and framework as an unsafe act for myself, because the ethical toll that takes on me afterwards is much greater than the moment of saying "I didn't make it here by my merit alone. Any other intersection, and I would likely not have had the opportunity to speak to you."⁸

RB: If we do not consider power, privilege, and perspectives, how can we identify what the next steps towards meaningful change are? The fight for social justice is not over because the white, well-spoken, "seems-normal-enough-if-slightly-dramatic" individual has a seat at the table⁹. Delivering a recognition is an opportunity to remind others to consider who their work is supporting, harming and excluding. It is an opportunity to remember our history, to recognize current injustice and to invite the audience to reflect on the humans at the centre of the work being done and consider those the system is failing. Including my positionality ensures that I take a moment to remind the audience that I am presenting my views and that 'we, the mad people' are not a monolith.

⁷ In thinking about declarations of positionality and privilege, we are also mindful of the potential troubling effects that can come about when it becomes a performative, 'tick the box' approach, without a deep commitment to how our actions reinforce oppression. That is, considering how we are *complicit* in such systems that privilege us, and taking action to address such inequalities. For this thinking and call to action, we are indebted to Gani & Khan (2024). This is an endeavour we continue to pursue. Even for example, as we add references to these footnotes, and scramble around for references authored by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander folk, we are ashamed of how limited our pursuit of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledges and practices have been to date, and how we must heed this shame as a call to action.

⁸ We are reminded here, from the works of folks such as Redikopp (2021) and Voronka (2016), of the varied levels of risk involved with stepping into lived experience roles, depending on different intersections of experience and privilege/oppressions, and the ways in which the ethics of self-identification can be problematic in reinforcing white supremacy (Joseph, 2019).

⁹ Voronka's (2016) questioning of whose experience gets qualified as expertise supports us to think in this regard, as well as Daya et al.'s (2020) piece that encourages us to think about the political ideologies that are more likely to be invited to have a seat at the table.

Speaking about positionality is also an act of rebellion for me. My entry into peer work has come entirely from grassroots activism. I started in queer stuff, moved into sex work stuff, came into the Mad world. For me, it's always been about social justice. But as we move towards the professionalisation of peer work¹⁰, I see more people coming into peer work through pathways that don't necessarily involve grassroots activism. They might come to peer work through a particular recovery program, or from doing a certificate in peer work. These pathways are incredibly valid; however they don't necessarily lend themselves to a recognition that we are all whole chaotic humans, and our experiences aren't limited to a mental health identity¹¹. I worry that we are moving into a place with peer work where your 'mental-health self' is welcome, and your 'mental-health self as it interacts with this system' is welcome, and we present only our 'mental health selves'. For me that goes against the ethos of peer work. It loses its radicalness; it loses its focus on social justice and human rights because we are only talking about a one-dimensional identity and experience. Our fight for social justice should be broader than just the harms done within mental health systems.

Centring social justice & collective activism

AS: As part of the 'galaxy', you provide prompts for considering the collective work of social movements. I love the way you both talked to multiple social justice movements, recognising their entanglements, and prompting us to think about the importance of Mad activism and the C/S/X movement working in alliance with other movements. How might folks connect with this through a recognition of lived experience?

JR: Our perception is that we can't consider 'the' movement as the mental health movement or the Mad movement or anything in isolation. How could we possibly have Mad liberation without black liberation, prison abolition, housing as a right, disabled rights and so forth? If we approach it as 'THE movement' we will intrinsically be leaving so many behind. Our work must involve working together. We have spoken endlessly to each other about how we consider 'The Movement' as the overarching collection of all civil rights movements. A collective of collectives under the umbrella of social justice. We wanted a way to connect and reflect on these

¹⁰ Roennfeldt & Byrne (2021) have written about some of the potential effects of professionalisation within the Australian mental health system.

¹¹ It becomes tricky to think outside our 'mental health selves' when this is the way we are enacted within mental health systems. Voronka & Costa (2019) and Joseph (2019) invite us to consider how invitations (to do a recognition for example) are so often based on our individual identity markers and experiences of diagnosis and accessing services, and not on the ways we understand or move through the world. By inviting us to reflect on positionality and privilege, we can recognize some of these intersections, and what experiences and worldviews are not being invited in.

many social movements: What movements are relevant to the space when we are delivering a recognition? What movements or intersections have been forgotten about when creating the space?

RB: It also stems from my frustration when people say “we just need someone with lived experience”. Lived experience of what?! In my experience of early consumer representative work, people would say “we need someone for this... you are of that community”. My response would be; “awesome. You are talking about migrant sex workers access to health. I can’t speak for that community. I can speak on the sex work element, and if there are no other voices at the table, I will do what I can through my networks, but you need to recognize that I’m not the right person for this.”

JR: I’ve had pushback when I’ve said I can only speak to certain lived experiences. I had an experience recently where I was involved from a lived experience perspective on a project focusing on alcohol related harm. I said, “I think we need people at the table with Aboriginal lived experience”. The response was “well that’s a bold assumption that there will be Aboriginal people affected by this project”. The assumption was that I was being racist, rather than recognizing that this project could benefit from the expertise of Aboriginal Lived Experience given the potentially different experiences between communities and systems¹².

RB: It’s about recognizing we are intersectional beings. We need more nuance, more shades of grey, more ‘chaos human’¹³.

AS: Renai – you spoke in the presentation about how the phrasing of ‘standing on the shoulders of giants’ is common in Australia to signal collective work yet sits uncomfortably for you. For me, this phrase has never quite resonated either, despite many I admire using it. I think my discomfort is related to the potential for certain people to be glorified at the expense of others. Perhaps my feminist groundings have made me aware of all the grassroots caring and holding of communities often done by women, black and crip folk, that isn’t seen as ‘front line’ activism, and therefore often these folks go unacknowledged. It sounds like you have done much more work than me in figuring out why this sits uncomfortably - can you share a bit of this?

¹² My (Jules) experiences resonate with Slater’s (2020) descriptions of performing as ‘good white people’, and the white anxiety described by Williams-Tchen & Dale (2024) (although we problematise the association of such experiences with DSM diagnoses).

¹³ We are reminded of the ways in which white colonial systems define and categorise experiences, and how this sits in tension with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of thinking about social and emotional wellbeing and relationality (as highlighted, for example, in the Gayaa Dhuwi Declaration).

RB: I don't think it leaves room for the fact that 'giants' work builds on collective expertise. I find such power in recognition of the whispered secrets of survival shared in moments the oppressor missed. I think of the amount of informal wisdom not captured: the navigation, advocacy and support shared in hushed tones, coded language, underground media through cells, through shared cigarettes in psych wards, over kitchen tables. I think of my mum and her best friends. They shared childcare so the other could food shop, the shared knowledge of navigating various barriers and processes within the social security and child support systems, offered refuge, they traded expertise in navigating mental health systems as carers for little people with emotions bigger than the school and mental health system deemed "normal". Their wisdom was shared through whispered phone calls, on park benches and alongside many tears of frustration at an oppressive system that they were slightly too young, too poor, too female, too black, too human to navigate. Yet it is from this collective wisdom they survived. This to me is an example of why the quiet giants matter.

I value those names we know who recognized the wisdom of these communities and used their passion and privilege to fight for the expertise to be recognized. However, I don't want to create a hierarchy or create power within a movement that actively speaks to balance power. My recognition of collective wisdom and community work is recognizing the power in these quiet giants. Relationships, story and sharing of survival is not going to be well documented in systems of oppression, our survival strategies are not valued by the oppressor. However, this work, done in relationship, in community and it is the heart of this work for me. I think we risk forgetting these roots by only celebrating giants and leaders who have been palatable enough or articulate enough to challenge the system whilst being tolerated or included within the system.

Also, when we say shoulders of giants, it assumes the work that we are standing on is correct, because we are building on their work, and it implies a linear progression of knowledge¹⁴. Without thinking about these assumptions, we can perpetuate harm. We need to recognize that each person that has come before us and done this work has also held bias. So, for example, if we are celebrating research, we need to recognize that bias is rooted in psychiatric dominance and white supremacy a lot of the time.

¹⁴ A 'Black on White TV' blog post (Ryder, 2021) supported my (Renai) reflections on why this sits uncomfortably for me.

JR: For me it is disconnecting because it involves celebrating people that have been privileged enough to have their names repeated. We don't live in a meritocracy – you don't get to spaces like that and points of recognition based on merit alone.

AS: You have both articulated these limitations beautifully. I often think and feel about these limitations myself when I am writing up research. It feels uncomfortable to put my name on something that has come from collective thinking. In my own recognitions, I sometimes name particular people who have informed my thinking at any one time. I do so as a way of giving those listening a potential 'in' to social justice thinking – so they might, for example, go away and look that person up, and it might become a 'gateway' into the movement (for want of a better phrase!) I'm thinking about how I might be able to do so whilst also really embedding the idea that our thinking is always collective.

Reflecting on safety, risk and disrupting the status quo

JR: A lot of my work and thinking over the last few years have been around the politics of including lived experience within formal mental health systems, prompted by concerns around co-option. For me, I am coming to accept that concepts and practices will always be changing and becoming anew as they become entangled with new relations. For some of us, there are problematic effects associated with these changes. For example, as recognitions move into standard practice for government departments and mental health organisations, I worry they have potential to simply re-enforce Mad folk as 'other' and justify business as usual. How might we continue to craft and use recognitions in ways that resist such effects?

JR: I was in a working group where I was the token 'lived experience representative'. I wasn't there to bring lived expertise to the table, just to make them feel like they did the right thing. It was one of the most taxing work experiences I've had, because nothing within the conversations had anything of value to most people with lived experience. It felt like an opportunity for people in charge of systems to network and complain about the systems. I put my name forward to do the recognition in the next session. I utilised that time to ground the group "we're here to make effective systemic change for THIS group of people."

AS: Your comment, Julian, reminds me how the importance of safety was brought up through discussion with the audience. I know for me, I often need to consider who is

in the room, and how safe I feel to highlight or disrupt the status quo like you suggest, through a recognition¹⁵.

RB: We considered this within our 'galaxy'. One of the things that my friend told me when I was early in my activism journey is that I am palatable, so my disruption is usually well received. It's easier for me to get away with disrupting the status quo than it might be for others, and this is when safety becomes important.

We started thinking about safety in a conversation around; do we provide a recognition script? And you know when we're talking about this authentic approach to presenting, that feels like it goes against being authentic. But... also if we consider safety: some people need a script to feel safe. It doesn't make it less impactful if the script and the intention is genuine.

We also considered that sometimes people are providing a recognition of Lived experience in a space where they may not hold that lived experience. As a staff member in a youth clinical setting, I've reflected; if I speak explicitly to my sex work roots, distrust in systems and the harms of the biomedical setting, what risk am I opening myself up to? Also, how effective will I be at inviting those in the room to connect and reflect with the lived experience of young people in distress and those who love and support them? If I consider the audience, I can decide what is safer for me to share and consider how to frame an invitation. I can use relevant language, policies and principles to create an opportunity for everyone in the room to connect to the Mad movement, to humanity, to the wisdom held in community. This is safer for me and aligns with my personal "palatable" approach to advocacy. It also recognises that many in a room may be sitting with lived experience of big feels or having loved and supported someone through madness. How can I disrupt without isolating people? Because if I isolate, I'm not going to disrupt. I'm going to get people pushing back and going "well, fuck you"!

JR: When we were reflecting on the concept of safety, it was with regards to researchers and overpaid people within health systems, quite powerful people, and I'm like, how do I get across to these people that this system is inevitably harmful? We can spend as much time as we want talking about this, but until these serious things are addressed that the community has been screaming about for the longest time – we are just going to be doing the same old shit. The next time we come, it's going to be the exact same fucking conversation, but it's going to have led to no change. So how do I do that? (for me it was within the eating disorder space, so a highly medicalised space where lived experience is not taken seriously because 'a

¹⁵ This is not about those of us deemed 'mad' or 'mentally ill' being inherently weaker or vulnerable or having learnt less skills around resiliency (as we are so often enacted), but rather recognizing we are vulnerable because of the oppressive environments in which we find ourselves.

starved brain is incapable of making their own decisions' and all that). My way of going about that is also kind of why I take the positionality statement quite seriously. I take the approach rather than "I'm going to pull you all down to a peg to my level", it is "we're going to all pull ourselves down together to sit in this space". We need to recognise that this is going on. We are all potentially perpetrating and just encouraging this cycle of the same old shit that people are screaming about so rather than pulling you down, I will pull myself down as well. Because I am not without faults, and I will be perpetrating things that keep the system going.

RB: The other thing is the fact that the time allocated for recognitions are often two to five minutes. You can't necessarily put yourself in a ridiculously vulnerable space for two minutes and then go about your work as if nothing happened. Which is why the galaxy was around that 'connect and reflect' kind of approach because if you can connect to social justice, human rights grassroots movements that are relevant to the space, and invite reflection upon that, at least people will potentially hold that in mind.

AS: Which I think is really important point to get across when we are talking about something that may be interpreted as a 'model' of how to do a recognition. I really love your approach which has been "these are just some of the things you might want to consider or hold in mind – use, it adapt it, take what you want."

We often have sanist¹⁶, neurotypical ways in which we think something formal, like a recognition of lived experience, must be presented. I really like that you have both spoken here to some of the different ways in which you have delivered, or seen delivered, a recognition of lived experience. How might we disrupt some of these ideas that there is a 'right' way to recognise lived experience?

RB: Honestly, there is no right way in my opinion. Why do we do a recognition? The answer to that is personal and sometimes organizational. Some organizations do it to uphold certain healthcare standards, or sometimes to recognize that the people accessing the organization are at the heart of the work they do. Some, like me, utilize it as an advocacy tool. Disrupting the idea of a 'right way' is something I hope having the conversation about "what is the purpose" will assist. We can all have a different connection to the purpose of a recognition and that is part of the beauty. If we move away from the idea of a 'gold standard' script and move towards intentional

¹⁶ We use sanism to refer to the system of oppression that privileges 'sane' or neurotypical ways of thinking, feeling, communicating and behaving while marginalising and pathologizing Mad ways of knowing and being. Sanism operates across institutional, cultural and interpersonal contexts, shaping whose experience are considered appropriate, credible, worthy or legitimate. See for example: Lavalée & Gagné-Julien, 2024; Poole et al., 2012; Sinclair et al., 2025)

connection that encourages reflection we can showcase the diversity of our movement, we can learn more from our allies, we can celebrate the niche grassroots wisdom and the local legends.

A recognition might look like “can I share a poem?” It might look like “I want to recognise lived experience and there’s a piece of art behind me that really speaks to me on something I’ve been reflecting on”. It might look like, “I’m going to read this script and I’m just going to feel it as I read it. And I’m going to allow myself to have that level of vulnerability”. Because the way that we do advocacy, the way that we challenge systems, the way that we seek change, is different for all of us and for many in this space or for people who are peripheral to this space that may be taking on and doing a recognition, the only way that they could do it is by just taking a moment to sit in the feels while moving through and doing that meaningfully. We knew that having a ‘right’ way to do recognitions and giving ‘this is how it should look’ was never going to be what we were aiming for, and wouldn’t be safe, because you’re selling a standard and that goes against the humanness of what we do.

JR: When I was preparing to do a recognition for a staff meeting, I looked at the agenda of the common things that were occurring within that agenda, and then I’ve literally printed off a copy of our ‘galaxy’ and then went “okay – this is what my connection is, what the purpose of the meeting is, and what kind of purpose I hoped to bring to that meeting, and how we are all connected to the movement - again that broader concept of movement rather than the mental health or Mad movement”. I had the points written down and then when it came to speaking, I just knew what I wanted to touch on and was still able to adapt to who was in the room. I started with the connection, moving to the movement and moving into purpose which then brought us into the activity of: What is something you appreciate and admire about the person to your left?

RB: I am a huge fan of an interactive approach, particularly in peer only spaces because it can feel tokenistic because we often know these things that we would share in a recognition. I am prone to delivering mine at the end of a meeting. As part of the transition into a third space, I’ll ask people to reflect on values or a concept that they’ve been holding in mind or something that they are wanting to take away and hold as they move through their day. But in my spiel of that invitation to reflect, I acknowledge that lived experience and I acknowledge the expertise within the room. That approach may not be appropriate in multi-disciplinary settings and that’s okay. There are different ways to do that. It’s about - what are you doing the recognition for?

JR: The first recognition I remember was run by Renai and it was a transition out. It was an activity where you got us all to think of a word that keeps us tied to this work

because it is so isolating. I still remember mine, which was “burn it all down”. But it was such a meaningful moment to be able to be like “what is grounding me to this work”?

AS: I’m so socially anxious that I follow a script often, depending on who is in the room, otherwise I will potentially feel so exposed that I won’t be able to contribute for the rest of the meeting! I love the way you both talk about being adaptable, and I also recognise that I can only do this if I feel safe.

JR: Until we are in a revolution, I will always tell people that safety is integral. If everybody else in the room is allowed to feel safe, then we are too. We do not owe our story to those in power.

I do not consider safety to mean “easy to say” - I see it more as; will I feel safe in myself after I’ve spoken? Will I regret saying this? Or will I regret not saying this? It may be both, so what am I going to do to make it safe for me after. I am very happy to step into deep feelings when delivering a Recognition, because it goes beyond my needs, and I remember that I am speaking on behalf of so many silenced human beings. So, I can go into a state of panic “oh fuck, saying this is terrifying and I know I’m not doing what they want of me, I’m not making any friends here, so I’ll be ostracized in one way or another”. But I’m comfortable doing that, when I know I won’t be listened to, because I have people to connect with after, like Renai, to be able to process what I said, and to reflect on why it’s okay if I ever have bridges burnt over things that I’ve said. A good friend of ours once told me when discussing safe sharing: “Sit in this discomfort with me”.

Diluting Acknowledgments of Country

AS: As we described in the introduction, in Australia, it is common for a ‘recognition of lived experience’ to be listed as an agenda item directly after an ‘Acknowledgment of Country’. For me, this is a practice I participated in for a long time, until learning from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander folks about the limitations of doing so. You also raised this in your presentation. For those who might be unaware, could you describe your understanding of why it’s problematic, and how it might be addressed?

RB: Firstly, I wish to acknowledge that I am not an authority on the cultural practice of Acknowledgement of Country and would strongly encourage people to connect with local First Nations Elders to start this conversation. An acknowledgement of Country is one way we can respect and uphold cultural protocols¹⁷. To me, it is problematic to minimize the cultural significance of an Acknowledgement of Country

¹⁷ (Reconciliation Australia, 2024)

by moving from this practice into a recognition of lived experience. It is important we approach this work with humility, respect and a commitment to advancing justice and recognition. I have seen people use phrases such as “we extend this respect to all people with lived experience”. This risks appropriating Indigenous practice, diluting the significance of the acknowledgement and could unintentionally create a hierarchy of oppression (especially as we begin to see recognition of diversity being recognized). An Acknowledgement of Country connects us to the space we are privileged to live, learn, work, and play on while a recognition connects us to the meeting, to the people at the heart of the work being done. It is not appropriate to adapt a cultural practice for a recognition and, as far as I am aware, it is best practice to separate the two and ensure that appropriate steps are taken to minimize the risk of either practice becoming tokenistic.

AS: I have really enjoyed learning and sharing with you both. There is so much more to be said, but hopefully we have provided a starting point for folks who are engaging with recognitions. Perhaps to lead us out, one of you might want to share a recognition?

RB: The work I do is possible because of the lengthy, hard earned grassroots advocacy efforts of many social movements. I wish to recognize the value and power within the individual and collective efforts of those with lived and living experiences.

I recognize the individuals who are no longer with us, those lost, fighting to survive and demanding to be heard. I thank our supporters, loved ones, kin and allies who strengthen our voices, share our stories and name injustice.

I am privileged to stand here chaotically human and doing my best. I do not take this privilege lightly. I know my voice is but one and this work is the work of many. The work we do is nuanced, intersecting and beautifully diverse.

I extend my recognition and gratitude to all those with lived/living experience and their family, kin and supporters. May their stories, lessons and wisdom guide our work and inform meaningful systemic change.

“Nothing about us without us.”

Integrity Statement - The authors declare that the manuscript is original, and they sought to conduct the research responsibly and mindfully.

Conflict of Interests statement - The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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