

Lived experience evaluation

3. Interviewing with a lived experience

I acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land on which I live and work, the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation. I pay my respects to Elders past and present.

Sovereignty was never ceded.

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Farmer (2023)

Why use a lived experience interviewer?



One of the great privileges of the work I do is getting to listen to others who share their experiences to help improve the mental health system. I've been on the other side of the table and know that it's not always an easy thing to do, so I think my lived experience helps me recognise the ways in which I can make participating an enjoyable, rewarding and emotionally safe thing to do.

Safety and comfort for participants

Many consumers and carers I speak with begin guardedly. Consumers will often speak with remarkable openness about some of the hardest times in their lives – of trauma, suicide attempts and hospitalisations – but tinged with a shame that is almost inevitable in a society that tacitly encourages them to view these experiences as shameful.

The interviewer is a stranger to the interviewee. What's more, they're a stranger in some way tied to 'the system'. There is no reason for them to assume that I am any different from some of the people they've encountered in a mental health system that can make life really hard.

My own lived experience tells me that the hesitation I hear in the participant's voice, is the same hesitation I have when I speak to a new clinician and try to work out if they really understand what I'm saying, or listen for signs that they are judging me for my experiences.

It doesn't take much for me to reassure an interview participant that I know what they mean. Sometimes that's as little as me simply reassuring them that I understand, I hear what they're saying. Less frequently, I share an insight into my own lived experience to help the participant know that I've been in the same situation as them. I never presume to know how they feel or their emotional response to that situation because everyone's lived experience is different. But, by positioning myself as someone who also has lived experience of trauma, of suicidality, of mental illness, I help to make the gulf between us seem a bit smaller.

Why use a lived experience interviewer?

Understanding the participant experience

As a researcher, it's easy to forget that participating in interviews isn't an every day event for most people. Participants often don't know what to expect. Sometimes that translates to a high degree of anxiety about taking part in an interview. That's why it's important to set those expectations clearly – Who am I? What are we going to be talking about? How long are we going to be talking? What, if anything, do you need to prepare in advance?

I'm an experienced and trained interviewer, but I'm also someone that finds talking to strangers incredibly anxiety-triggering (which makes me question why I've made this such a huge part of my job...!). But having that experience gives me an understanding and empathy, which I hope leads to me creating an interview environment where people feel safe to talk.

Translating lived experience

Having lived experience also helps me identify conversation clues. Talking about emotions and mental health is an inherently challenging thing to do – they are highly personalised and fundamentally invisible. But my own lived experience (and considerable therapy!) has helped me to develop an emotional dictionary that I can draw on to find words that help people describe their experiences. Again, this is not about me speaking for a consumer or carer – this is not about me – but about using language in a way that helps draw out and interpret what can be difficult concepts.

About Jo Farmer Consulting

I focus on building the capability and capacity of organisations to put the person back into the system, and restore individuals' and communities' autonomy and empowerment. My work prioritises those who have been marginalized.

Through my approach to evaluation, I aim to ensure people are heard, have power, and can find and build community. I strive for excellence in everything that I do, contributing to just systems that value the inherent strengths of people and communities.

I work in a way that aligns with my values:

Curiosity

Integrity

Vulnerability

Non-conformity

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