

Peer Chat *With* – Callum Ross An International Perspective

Podcast transcript for film

Lesley:

So just to give a brief introduction, I'm Lesley Smith. I'm a Network Officer with the Scottish Recovery Network and I'm really pleased today to be having a conversation as part of our peer chat series with Callum Ross from Habitus Collective. So Callum - welcome.

Callum:

Thanks Lesley, it's great to talk with you in this medium today. I always like chatting with you.

Lesley:

Yes we have a capacity to talk forever so let's see how focused we'll keep.

Callum:

We'll keep it under three or four hours, you know people have dinners to get to.

Lesley:

Yeah well we'll try. I think it's because we have lots to share and it's exciting, this topic. Anyway we'll aim to be focused so let's find out a little bit about you. I first met you a couple of years ago, it was the

launch of the International Peer Learning Network and I decided at the last minute that I was going to come along but I also was going to meet a friend so I found myself in North Queensferry sitting between a phone and a tablet connecting to your online event and then I met you and your fellow facilitators Lisa and Debbie and an amazing wide variety group of people from different places around the world. It's quite amazing. So tell us about you. That's a big one I suppose.

Callum:

Yeah I can start on I suppose I was trying to consider should I tell a little bit about my work but I think we're pretty guilty about talking about her work first sometimes so I suppose I'll; start off with who I properly am. I'm Callum, I think I'm a little bit basic. I really enjoy podcasts like most guys my age. I probably play too many commuter games. I love going out for meals. I love that part of going out for your dinner after you've eaten and you're all around the table chatting.

I've got really good pals and I suppose the professional side of things is as I said in my introduction, I'm a partner in an organisation called Habitus Collective and we are a group of people who are really passionate about making health interventions better. I'm personally very passionate about leadership and peer support but I've got colleagues in Habitus who are PHD researchers, social scientists, anti-racism activists and we work in offices in Canada and the UK and deliver services for the NHS or charities.

And then one of our projects is the International Peer Leadership Network and like you said Lesley it's leaders from all over the place so I

suppose that's about me today. The story could change a little bit tomorrow.

Lesley:

For sure. One thing that I was quite intrigued by was that you're actually from Scotland so you're born in Scotland?

Callum:

People say I've got a Brigadoon accent because it's not placeable in any way shape or form. My mum's Canadian and my dad is from Aberdeen but I lived in Arbroath till I was 16 and then I was in Canada to finish high school and then back to Scotland, Aberdeen to go to university. I was back in Scotland for a couple of years.

I've lived in London, Aberdeen and then Calgary in Canada for on and off about 10 years. So I still can't make up my mind whether I'll stay in Scotland whether I'll stay in Canada or whether it'll be England but it's kind of fun to be from all over the place.

Lesley:

Well I'm glad that we get the opportunity to be part of your worldwide connections. But the Irn Bru and Oor Wullie is not going to bring you back?

Callum:

Scottish people abroad are just the worst, we are the worst immigrants. My folks now live in Nova Scotia and for anyone who's ever been on their holidays in Nova Scotia it's just Scottish people being the most

Scottish they could possibly be abroad. Tartan and Burns and like you said Oor Wullie from every single wall. They love it.

Lesley:

Brilliant . So can you tell us a little bit about, how did you come to peer support?

Callum:

I suppose, starting in the beginning is really important, but yeah to be as brief as possible really I think I was always the listening kid in school. I had a tendency to like - I like talking with people and most of my pals.. in the nicest possible way we're like the weirdos, the different people. I like being different to other people in the group and so I was always interested in listening and just being a part of the community.

I went to university and I studied a social sciences degree and I just really wanted to go to university really. I studied therapy, I trained as a therapist but I found I wasn't getting a lot from therapy and I wanted to kind of rebel against who I was at the time because everyone kind of struggles with their identity I think around those years. So I ended up actually joining the police .

And it is a joke, but it's real- I don't know if you've ever seen the film Hot Fuzz, but I watched that in university and the main character had exactly the same degree as me and I was like 'wow some way you can actually use this degree in the community'. So to be a bit rebellious I joined the police and I was a police officer in South London so it brought me down to England. I was like if I'm going to join a police force I want

to join the most exciting one. But I'll be honest it was during that time that, it was just at the beginning of the financial downturn and really quickly I got a bit disenchanted and I'm sure that it's not for every police officer but it was the story for me. I just kept seeing mental health issues, poverty issues, disconnection issues happen over and over again and the most bizarre things are happening and I didn't have any of the tools to actually help the people that I was connecting with kind of day-to-day.

So after a couple of years I just gravitated back to mental health and my parents were in Canada at the time and because of the financial downturn they're like 'come back to Canada use your dual citizenship, work here there's jobs there's jobs everywhere' and so I joined the Canadian Mental Health Association which is the equivalent of I would say Mind in Scotland or Penumbra, it's quite like those organisations.

I was there for a long time and that's where I met amazing people in the community and one of the facilitators you mentioned in the peer leadership network. Her name was Debbie and she introduced me to this world of peer support where all of the values that I held about the community knowing the answers, discrimination and disconnection, making mental health worse. All of a sudden we had something like peer support which was just a bit of an antidote to a lot of these problems and I didn't see a lot of other mental health interventions working very well. I was working in advocacy and policy at the time.

And I definitely felt like I was talking on behalf of other people rather than letting them have a position in the platform to talk. And then, yeah

things snowballed and we built a large recovery college and was able to hire loads of peer support workers because it was timing and the relationships we built and the kind of the positive movement. So that's kind of that's the story I suppose from birth to where I am today.

Lesley:

Interesting how it wasn't a straight path into peer support. If I think about myself, I was involved in collective advocacy and you know we were good at supporting each other in the work that we were involved in. But also at some point I was spending quite a lot of my time in in and out of services, so the peer support that I was experiencing was what we were offering and receiving to each other when we were going through difficult times. What's quite interesting was rather than getting excited about peer support I was actually quite cynical when I first heard about peer support. Because I heard it was going to be offered as a course, that jobs were going to be created and part of me was intrigued but there's also that part of me like 'what are they going to do to us next?'

I thought actually if I'm involved in collective advocacy I need to find out about this so I got myself onto the course and, boy was I converted. I was just like oh wow this is amazing this is what I've been looking for this feels like it's the answer, or definitely part of it. It just felt so empowering and hearing people talk about how turning the difficult times into strengths and using that as a way to help other people here this thing called recovery. I was just like this was new to me because I felt there was no future and here was some, here was people thinking

differently and doing things differently and it was just this is exciting it opened the door that I just ran through and I've just kept going.

Callum:

It's addictive, peer support is addictive. It's the most addictive drug I've ever tried. It's like it's that smile I get just watching someone, like you said just building their own self-worth and for me like I always make the joke I'm terrible at interviewing people for jobs. I've been a manager for a long time because it's just I really kind of like everyone. That's just who I am as a person, probably doesn't do me the biggest amount of favours.

But it's amazing to watch people I think are brilliant, realise that they're brilliant and that's why I get hooked on peer support.

Lesley:

It's certainly worth being hooked on - and certainly better than lots of other things. So anyway, you made a reference there to Canada and developing materials. Can you just tell us a little bit for people here who may be thinking getting involved in developing those? What did you find that works and what did you find helped, then what were some of your challenges?

Callum:

I first heard about Scottish Recovery Network not when I was living in Scotland, not when I was in London but in Canada. Scottish Recovery Network's a bit famous in other places, or at least we definitely use your materials and to kind of implement activities in other countries -

especially English-speaking countries outside of the uk . I think we saw all this great material, all this great knowledge and we had a lot of local knowledge but it was hidden. I always think that really great peer support programs are already operating but the leaders they know their community well and my colleague in Canada, she had been operating this great peer support program for 20 years but she didn't want to tell too many people because she was frightened that if too many people knew about it it'd either get closed down or it would be absorbed in the next funding cycle.

So I think the biggest thing that started working for us is we had opportunity. The city I lived in Calgary; it was a rapidly growing city at the time. A little bit of philanthropic money beyond the government and kind of providing the money for services and so we just took the opportunity and we told the story of peer support over and over and over and over again.

And we only wanted to work with people who wanted to work with us. I've definitely found over time that it's so difficult to convince people that are cynical or don't want to work with you and, fortunately for us, and it doesn't work in every community but fortunately for us that community was big enough that we connected with our fans, our cheerleaders. And sometimes that was just having a chit chat around and formulating ideas but we built ridiculously strong relationships with key people to think about how we kind of unfold things.

And just ignored a lot of the detractors. I did want to talk about that a little bit because I do want to talk about sustainability but for the

moment for those number of years we did some really cool things. I think in the end I had 34 peer support workers reporting to our team in Canadian Mental Health Association and that started from one. And in some ways it maybe grew too fast but it was kind of focusing on those fundamentals. It's about relationships, it's about telling a really great story. Then kind of measuring and not in an overly formal way but measuring. Like there really was impact here and I think we're still not there with a story with peer support but it truly is as valid as those formal interventions.

I think the best relationships I made with the formal system and hospitals and clinicians, it was to talk about how this is not replacing anything, it's enhancing your work. One of the big stories I used to tell all the time is - you used to call it an active community treatment team - so these were people who were on community treatment orders. Peer Support Workers were so successful in those teams in Canada because the manager was really on board and you can't underestimate that.

But also we told the story of how having a Peer Support Worker on that team enhanced the trust so much faster so all the other clinicians can gain trust faster than they might on their own because everyone in health has to focus on trust. The Peer Support Workers are able to do it instantly because of their experience. Because they're being open, because it's equal.

They were some of the winning things for us and we just kept pushing and building on success. But you know once I left and the pandemic

came I don't know if we had the most solid foundation so you know not all positive. But that was the beginning anyway.

Lesley:

Yeah. To hear you speak so passionately about that change within services especially our own peer workers being able to build trust and that having an effect for the rest of the team. But I think in Scotland predominantly at the moment peer workers who are in Peer roles, a majority within third sector organisations but those that are in National Health Services again and again that's the feedback that we hear- is that maybe the clinicians were a wee bit sceptical or a lot sceptical at the beginning they weren't sure but having the peer worker in this team and seeing the difference it was making and contributing sold them. But we also have a good, a rich, diverse wide variety within our communities and third sector organisations here in Scotland which sounds maybe a bit different to Canada.

Callum:

No, I would say it's actually really similar in some ways. Like I'm so glad that the peer support movement is moving ahead in kind of the third sector in Scotland because that is similar to Canada. I would say actually in that way Canada and Scotland have more in common than Canada and England. Whereas England it's the NHS that's really pushing forward in peer support and you know I don't really have a favourite system but I like the idea that because the tenets the foundations of peer support are so community-led, it would make sense that it's third sector organisations that are leading that. I've talked with, it's probably thousands by now, people with lived experience, I think the

majority would tell you that peer support in the community is really where it has the most impact for them because realistically when you're in crisis I still think there's an argument about 'are peer support workers best placed you know in the emergency department or not?'

I don't know. I used to feel very passionate about it. I'm kind of in the middle now. So no, I don't think there is a best way to do it or not. What I think is really important is peer support is a big movement and lived experience is a really big movement and there's lots of different approaches and I really want us to approach this as a broad tent. I think that's the expression. You know we have all the way from kind of the you know anti-psychiatry to survivor movement, to kind of pseudo clinical types of roles, to just friendship and the social determinants of health. We can easily start to disagree with one another but if we're actually taking a peer support kind of perspective of things we should really be strength based here.

Everyone gets power to platform themselves and to have choice and to look at things the way they want to look at it so, so I think it's really important we don't say there's a right way of doing things or a wrong way it's just these are some places that have worked. My biggest thing is to take action. Let's just take some actions, get things wrong. There are sustainable ways of doing that. I think I've just learned with experience of trying out and feeling a lot of things too that I can definitely explore.

Lesley:

When we've talked in the past you've talked about something called peer drift. Can you tell us a little bit about what you were thinking there?

Callum:

Yeah, this is a term I've started using because I'm trying to think about the future now. Because we are making in-roads there are peer support positions so I think there are new challenges that are coming up. I would definitely argue peer drift is one of the issues. There's lots of research done in Canada a few years ago by an organisation called the mental health commission, so feel free to give it a Google, and what they have proven is a peer support worker on their own who doesn't connect with other peer support workers, who's in a maybe a clinical team or a community team they're on their own. Quite quickly literally within a period of months, even if they've been trained, quickly they will stop demonstrating their peer support skills and connecting with people from a peer support lens because of the peer pressure that naturally happens in their team. So they start to kind of interpret peer support in a very different type of way. Especially if we have this kind of sprinkling approach of peer supporters across everywhere you know - one here, two here, another one here, quite quickly we can start to kind of drift away from the all the things we just said earlier today with our activities around what makes peer support unique. Quickly you just start to replicate people that are like you.

And I think that that is absolutely one of the sustainability challenges of the future. How do we keep peers being peers and not drifting away from those original tenets? There are proven ways to do that and so we just want to kind of integrate that into how people get mentorship as a

peer supporter, how they actually have the opportunity to lead. Because peers are absolutely fantastic, so where is the continuous development that anyone in any position kind of deserves to keep interested and to keep pushing the movement forward?

Lesley:

Yeah, I think that's one thing that we're learning a lot about as well from experience of peers and their roles. How do we ensure together that we understand what peer support is and what the values are? And a really helpful way I suppose is events like today, thinking about what is it that makes peer support, peer support and ensuring that that's what people then bring into if they're in a work role into their practice.

So I'm aware the time moves really quickly when we're chatting and almost have to bring this to an end, but I would like to pick up in this peer leadership because especially Scotland as well we talk a lot about peer support and peer support roles but what's this thing about peer leadership? Tell us a bit more.

Callum:

We have this International Peer Leadership Network and anyone's invited to consider themselves a leader wants to kind of push forward their leadership skills. For me it's like an acknowledgement that I have never met a peer support worker that comes straight out of high school to want this as their career. No peer support worker is a blank slate, they've got all these amazing things from past experiences professional and personal and I want to kind of push things forward.

I think so many of us in the peer movement thought, why can't the peer supporters themselves become the managers, become the community leaders and demonstrate the skills that we need?

There's so many different things that you've got to be conscious of when you're a peer supporter that I don't think necessarily applies to every other job because you're trying to wear your lived experience hat at the same time as leading a team and leading a movement. So for me peer leadership is just about how do we go beyond push the role of peer support, beyond that one-to-one or group facilitation to all the other parts of the system?

Like for me why couldn't a peer supporter to manage a hospital? There are many hospital managers who started off as an OT or a nurse. Why couldn't the career trajectory for a peer supporter be like that? I don't want us to be boxed in because it's now like a bit like you just said Lesley you were a bit sceptical right at the beginning of peer support and I'm starting to get a little bit sceptical now.

It's like well, here you go here's your peer role, now this far and no further. I hope you're happy now you've got your lived experience and that's it. How do we keep moving forward and pushing up saying 'no no I've got lived experience and I've got a master's degree and I was in a bank before and I can use all of this combined experience to help you really understand the people that are accessing our services'.

Lesley:

That's brilliant, I think that's something that many peer supporters of Scotland would agree with. They want more opportunities; they've got something to offer and they want to be part of the change and it's something in Scottish Recovery Network that we want to be building on and developing. People are awesome and there's so much that we could be part of and we could be involved with and hopefully that's what we're all going to be working towards.

So I'm afraid we're going to have to bring this to a close, I wish I didn't. We'll just have to bring you back at another point. But in closing, is there anything that you find, a final word or anything you'd like to share with people before going?

Callum:

I'm all about networking so I'd love to connect with anyone in the space today or when you share the podcast, the video. I work for an organisation called Habitus Collective you can just Google that and also come along to our leadership network if you're really interested in pushing that forward. I think everyone here is a peer leader today if they want to be. Leader doesn't mean manager; it can mean lots of different things. I think that that's a really important thing to be aware of. A leader is when we get involved and we take people with us. It isn't about a defined role as a manager or whatever.

Lesley:

So on that note, thank you for today . You've given us lots to think about and lots to explore as part of our future as well and hopefully you could

be part of that. But also for those who would like to there's the International Peer Leadership Network we'll put the link into the chat and as part of the follow up from today. On behalf of all of us, Callum - thank you very much.

Get in touch

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