

From Peer to Peer: Legitimizing Lived Experience in Mental Health through Peer Support and its Relation Stigma

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Background & Key Terms

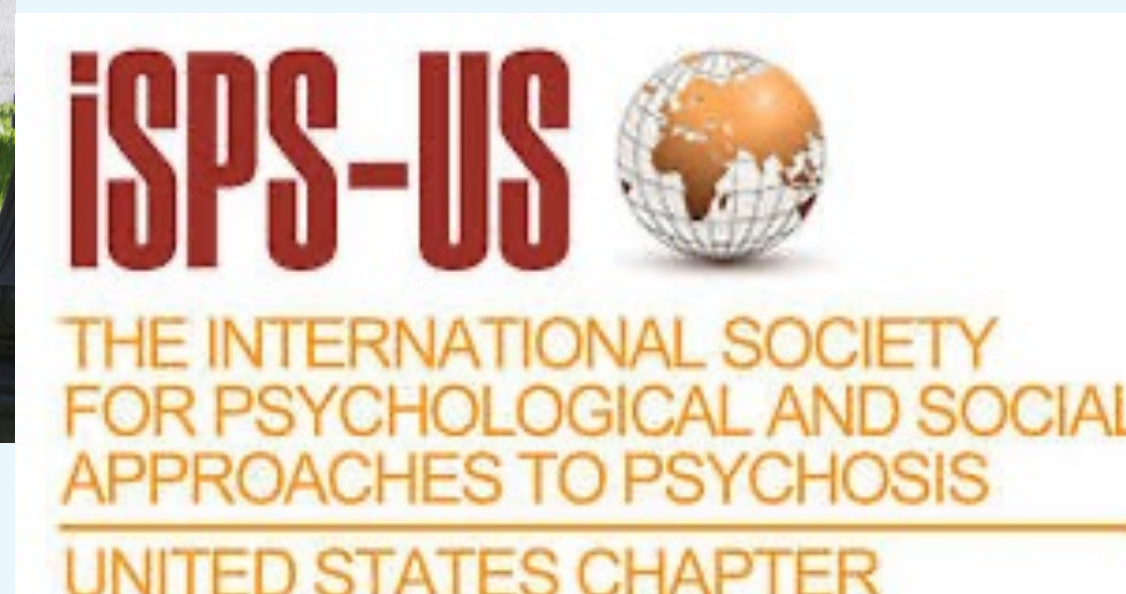
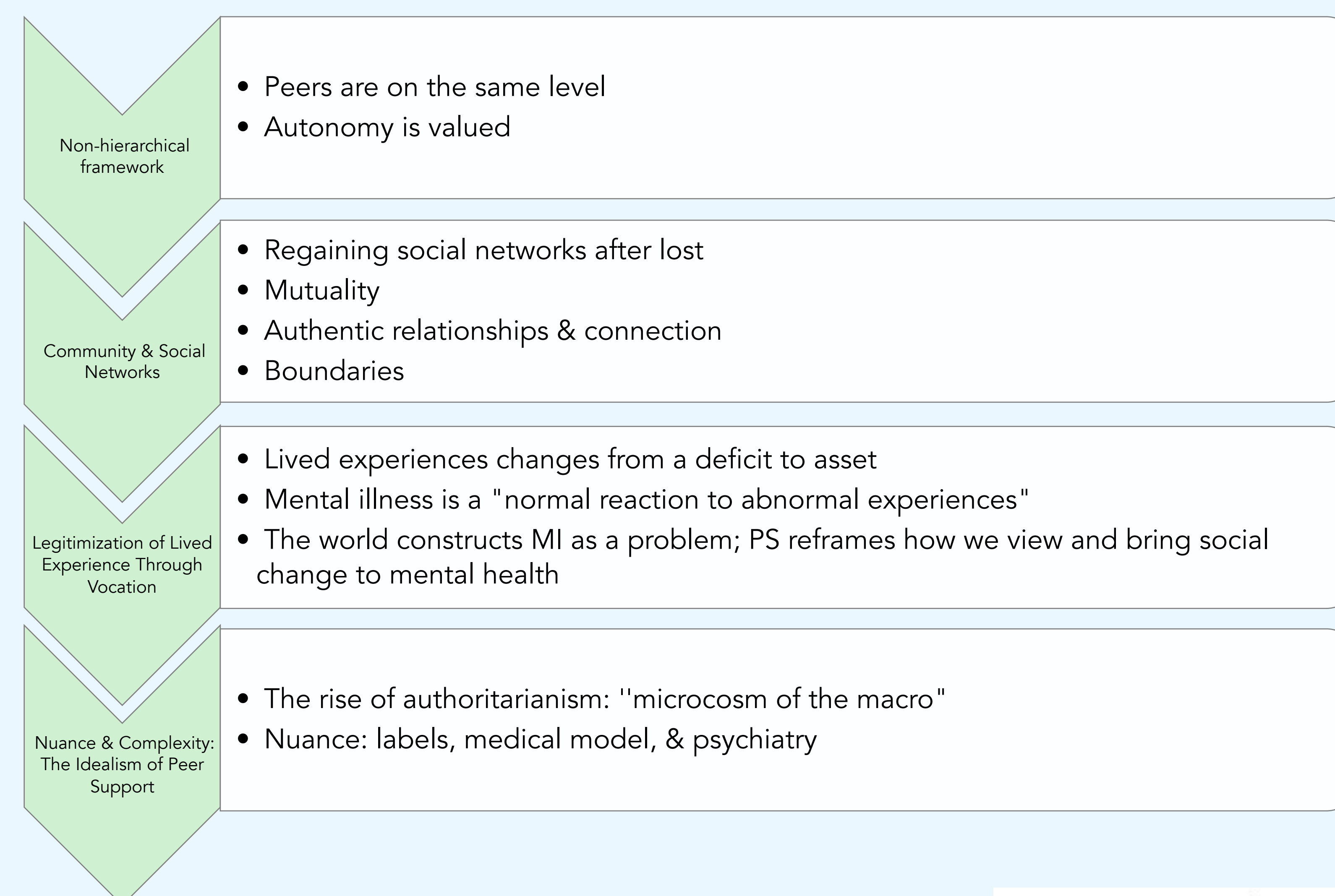
- Why is mental illness historically stigmatized?
- **Stigma** is a deeply discrediting attribute that reduces a person from a whole person, to be seen solely as their discredited characteristic (Goffman 1963)
- Social institutions impact the role of stigma through cultural norms
 - **Medicalization** occurs when "human problems or experiences becomes defined as medical problems, usually in terms of illness, disease or trauma" (Conrad & Baker 2010: S74)
 - **Criminalization & transinstitutionalization**
 - Involuntarily commitment increases risk of suicide (Grossmann et al. 2026)
- **Peer support** breaks away from current and past medical models by using a non-hierarchical model
 - A relationship and strengthens based approach & model used in non-clinical settings where individuals with lived experience in mental health draw upon their own experiences to engage with peers through validation, curiosity, & mutuality to support one another

Participants and Methods

- The goal was to gain a greater understanding of the impacts of peer support and its relation to stigma
 - The impact to self and social structures were examined
 - Lived experience was/is valued
- Seven **interviews** conducted from January – February 2026
- Participants were individuals with past / current psychiatric experiences who are now Peer Support Specialists
- Content analysis of peer support handbooks
- **Participant observation** at The International Society for Psychological and Social Approaches to Psychosis Annual Conference (November 2025)

Guiding Question / Results & Conclusion

What are the impacts of peer support on mental health and its structures?
What is the relation of peer support to stigma?

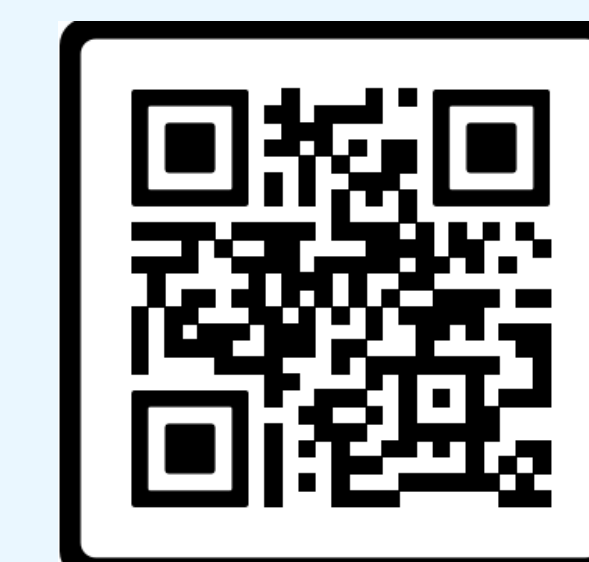


Theory

- Erving Goffman
 - Total Institution: all aspects of life are conducted under a single-authority, in large groups, and all activities are tightly scheduled. Personal identity is stripped away through rigid rules and re-socialization (ie prison, psychiatric hospital)
 - Stigma: stigmatized individuals use "impression management" to cope with social discrediting and othering through passing, covering, disclosing
- Howard Becker
 - Labeling Theory takes a symbolic interactionist approach by examining the reaction from the deviant behavior, not the behavior itself
- Pierre Bourdieu
 - Cultural Capital is one's cultural knowledge, background, tastes, skills, and dispositions that individuals accumulate, which one brings to navigate society successfully. It often reinforces class structures due to the dominate class setting the social norms.



Resources & References



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