

COMMENTARY

Commentary on: Happell, B. & Scholz, B (2018). Doing what we can, but knowing our place: Being an ally to promote consumer leadership in mental health. *International Journal of Mental Health Nursing*, 27, 440–447

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Reading Happell's and Scholz's paper (2018) reminded us on how rarely we learn about the perspectives of people who are known to be our supporters in academic and other mental health related contexts. Even though the authors solely focus on joint work with *consumers* – a label that none of us three personally identifies with – the issues they address resonate with us and make us want to enter the debate this paper will hopefully open up. What we particularly appreciate are Happell's and Scholz's efforts to work against co-option and tokenism and promote consumer leadership. In our experience, the psychiatric and mental health world – be it research, service provision, or making of related laws and policies – still rests on a sharp division between 'them' and 'us'. The core questions that this paper engages with are usually raised by 'us' – people with psychiatric experience, working to *transform* rather than reform those systems and disrupt our designated roles within them. However when thinking in terms of the achievements of this uphill task, we share the impression expressed by German psychiatric

survivor Matthias Seibt (2018). Looking back at 40 years of his activism, he summarizes:

Everything has to improve. But nothing is allowed to change.

These words signify the position from which we reflect on Happell's and Scholz's proposals on how to be an effective ally. There is no doubt that their suggested approach can strengthen individual 'consumer' positions within current mental health hierarchies. However, we doubt that bringing in what they term a 'consumer agenda' can ultimately lead to the long overdue fundamental changes that so many of us want to see. Leaving aside the issues of difference and these authors' problematic assumption of a unifying 'consumer' agenda – what we wish to challenge is the idea that any substantial change can happen by virtue of one (more powerful) group supporting the other group to conceptualize and bring about change within the boundaries of profoundly unequal structures. If we are ever to join forces to extend those boundaries, we will have to cocreate and co-own a much broader agenda for change. For that reason, we strongly suggest shifting the focus of interest from a notion of 'effective ally' to thinking about what could constitute effective alliances capable to grow big enough and ultimately transcend rather than always perpetuate the traditional role division into allies on one side and those in need of allies on the other. This would require a thorough exploration of what actually could amount to our

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common ground. For those who consider themselves ‘allies’, this would mean doing away with their role as it is enacted by the very conceptualization of ‘consumers’ and articulating their own motives, needs, and visions.

Being fully aware that the following statement emerged in a different context and with due respect for that context, we cannot think of anything that is more to the point than these words attributed to artist, activist, and academic Lilla Watson in her response to the missionaries:

If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.

Enough is known about why current mental health systems around the globe are defective for those that end up in them as consumers, service users, patients, detainees, research subjects, etc. But far less is known about why those systems are wrong for those who want to be our allies. There are some unique sources though that demonstrate how the debate on alliances can be politicized and include historical analyses (Joseph 2013) or comprise honest accounts of personal journeys to becoming an ally (Chapman 2014; Church 1995). So rather than just accepting Happel’s and Scholz’s implication that there is such a thing as their (and our) given place and the resulting limits of what ‘they’ can do for

‘us’ – we would like to see more efforts directed towards challenging structures that define all our places. We would like to learn more about our allies’ own agendas rather than them validating how it is for ‘consumers’. This could perhaps extend the limits of what we all can do together. We thank the authors for inspiring us to further think in this direction.

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