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EUROPEAN FRAMEWORK FOR COMPETENCIES AND ROLES OF PEER WORKERS IN SOCIAL WORK



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INTRODUCTION TO THE PROJECT PARTNERS



Project Coordinator (France)

The Higher School of Social Work and Social Intervention (HETIS) is an institution of higher education that has been offering programs preparing students for careers in social work and social intervention since 1937. HETIS conducts interdisciplinary research and studies in the field of social intervention, as well as innovative training programs tailored to the needs of professionals, such as the one developed here for peer workers in social services.

Project partner (Belgium)

Since its creation in 2001, the Réseau Nomade (administered by the non-profit organization Dune) has positioned itself as an information center and a promotional tool dedicated to fostering a culture of participation and empowerment. It brings together and supports stakeholders involved in this initiative within the Brussels social and health sector, particularly peer mediators and peer support workers. It has been officially recognized by the Brussels administration (French Community Commission – COCOF) as a health network since 2009.



Project partner (the Netherlands)

Nidos is the certified youth protection organization responsible for guardianship and part of the care provided to all unaccompanied and separated minors in the Netherlands. Nidos's Intercultural Mediation Department deploys intercultural mediators with experience in migration to support unaccompanied minors



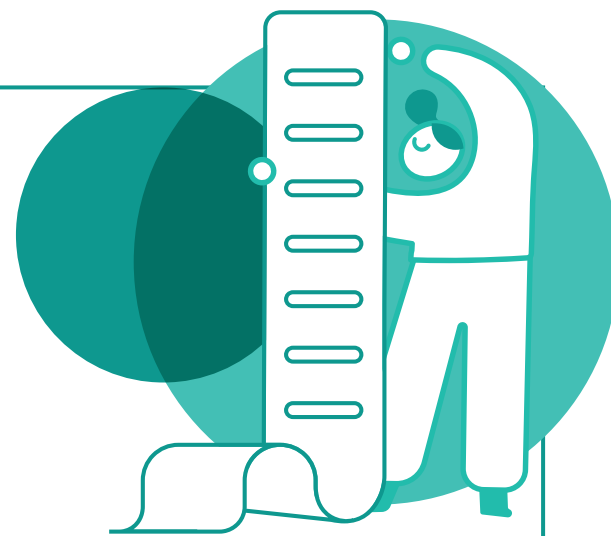
Project Partner (France)

For over a century, the Fondation de Nice (FdN), a recognized public-interest organization, has been supporting the most vulnerable populations to change perceptions of poverty, test innovative social practices and initiatives, and empower individuals to freely choose their own life path. It has been employing and engaging peer workers since 2020, who are involved in various social services



SUMMARY

TABLE OF CONTENTS



DIMENSION 1 - Developing and mastering experiential knowledge from oneself to others	8
From the self to others, from self-narratives to knowledge	9
JOB DESCRIPTION 1 / Experiential Knowledge (From Self to Others)	11
DIMENSION 2 - Peer relationships (peeriness), recognition and trust	12
Knowing how to navigate a relationship based on shared experiences	12
Relational stance of peeriness	13
Accessing the meaning-making world of the supported person	13
Regulating relational proximity and self-disclosure	13
Supporting agency and facilitating relationships	14
JOB DESCRIPTION 2 / Peer Relationship	14
DIMENSION 3 - Mediation, translation and exchange between worlds	15
To serve as a bridge between worlds	15
Epistemic mediation	16
Linguistic and symbolic mediation	16
Political and collective mediation	17
JOB DESCRIPTION 3 / Bridging the Gap	17
DIMENSION 4 - Institutional embedding and professional cooperation	18
Being inside without losing the distance	18
Understanding and inhabiting an organizational framework without integrating with it	19
Ability to cooperate with professionals in a complementary manner	19
Translating and circulating information within the organization	20
Supporting collective reflexivity within teams	20
Preventing the instrumentalisation of peer work	20
Contributing to organizational and policy transformation	20
JOB DESCRIPTION 4 / Institutional Registration	21
DIMENSION 5 - Regulation of distance, ethics and sustainability	22
Using distance as a tool, not a barrier	22
Regulating relational proximity	23
JOB DESCRIPTION 5 / Ethics, Professional Boundaries and Sustainability	24
SIDEBAR 1	25
Professionalizing a logic of reciprocity	
SIDEBAR 2	26
Professionalizing a logic of reciprocity: a constitutive paradox ?	28
SIDEBAR 3	28
Allowing peer work to influence institutional frameworks	
References	29

INTRODUCTION



In the following pages, we propose to build on the analysis of best practices summarised in the report «Peer work in France, the Netherlands and Belgium: A «new» profession in the process of becoming institutionalized». Drawing on this report, and on all the situations we have been able to observe or which have been shared with us, we propose a set of capabilities and skills associated with peer support in social work.

It is, however, important first to contextualise this endeavour and to specify what its place as a continuation of the previous document implies in terms of originality. Let us therefore begin by recalling what peer support is and what legitimises it. Peer work in social action is, above all, the professional recognition of experiential knowledge – knowledge derived from the interpretation and meaning-making of life experiences specific to social issues – such as social isolation, precariousness, homelessness, addiction, migration, mental health issues, and so on.

It is in this context that the concepts of knowledge and experiential expertise in health – derived from the work of T. Borkman (1976) – are drawn upon; these were first used in France in the 1990s (Jouet et al., 2010: 65). They aim to conceptualise the entirety of experiences associated with being a patient (perception, journey undertaken, knowledge of the environment) as elements contributing to the creation of a form of expertise specific to the person affected by an illness (Jouet, Flora, Las Vergnas, 2010). For example, Emmanuelle Jouet posits that:

‘Experiential learning consists in the fact that “adults also learn outside established training venues and systems, through lived experiences, and it is thus the product of experiences whose primary purpose is not learning” (Bonvalot, 1991, p.321) and, as R. Massé points out, ‘illness can therefore be seen as a syndrome of typical experiences’, that is, a set of units of meaning rooted in one’s life history and attributed to critical events (personal trauma, history of illness, unemployment, marital crises), to therapeutic experiences, to the reactions of those around the individual, and to emotions (fears, expectations, anxiety)” (Raymond Massé in the Dictionnaire du corps, “Maladie” (pp. 539–542) in Jouet, 2013: 46 - translated).

Vololona Rabearisoa and Madeleine Akrich (2012, both sociologists) distinguish between experiential expertise and a body of medical knowledge linked to experience or to documentation arising from the experience of illness, which they associate with lay expertise. Drawing on the work of T. Borkman, they also highlight the distinction between experiential expertise – the use of experiential knowledge – experiential knowledge – which is removed from experience and often constructed collectively – and lived experience (ibid.).

By adopting a perspective that focuses more on social action than on mental health, we can consider that the experience of specific situations such as living in precarious circumstances, experiences of migration, homelessness, refugee lived experience, issues of addiction, debt or social isolation, as well as all life situations likely to be at the heart of social work, constitute lived experiences that can be transformed into experiential knowledge and expertise to be taken into account.

As noted by Eve Gardien (2025) and Baptiste Godrie (2016), lived experience is not in itself sufficient as knowledge or expertise; a process of reflection and collective development is usually associated with the translation of life experiences into a set of skills that can be applied in social work. Once applied in the professional context, these skills are linked to refined relational work, solutions that are true to the realities of the people concerned, and a broadening of perspectives that we readily associate with democratic added value, in that it recognises as legitimate experiences that were previously dismissed, transforming experiences of marginalisation into resources of knowledge capable of informing and renewing political and social responses.

But how? What exactly do these skills entail? What constitutes the depth of peer support practice? This is what we shall attempt to summarise in the following paragraphs.

However, as we mentioned, we are building on a previous report, one of the key findings of which was that the integration of a peer worker into a team depends on the interplay of three dimensions: individual, team and structural.



This finding leads us to clarify that the skills identified in our report concern not only the individual engaged in peer social work, but also the teams and institutions that host them. Based on our findings, we will therefore break down the skills of peer social work into different dimensions, ranging from the transformation of experience into knowledge (dimension 1), to its application in the form of personal relational and communicative skills (dimension 2), their role as mediators between institutions and the people concerned (dimension 3), their integration into a team, an institution and civil society (dimension 4) and the cross-cutting ethical and reflective dimensions (dimension 5). These dimensions enable us to encompass the diversity of roles encountered (first, second and third-line social work) whilst also identifying the capacities and skills required of the individual engaged in peer work, the team that supports them, and the institution within which they operate. It should not be assumed that everyone involved in peer support needs to be fully proficient in all these areas. The elements outlined in this document should be understood as the various components of peer support, which are implemented in a way that strikes a balance appropriate to each specific context.

The analysis summarized in this document is based on a categorical analysis (Maroy, 1995) drawn from study visits and interviews conducted during earlier phases of the RES PEER project. These data therefore include a study visit to the Fondation de Nice and its various departments; a study visit focusing on the intercultural mediation work of NIDOS; a study visit with partners of the Réseau Nomade ⁽⁷⁾. It should be noted that this report could not be as collaborative as desired due to the writing deadline and workload, but it was discussed collectively in an open peer-review meeting and was sent for feedback and comments, which were incorporated into the final versions of the document.

¹ - Regarding the Nomade Network, we would like to highlight the presentations by France Dujardin on the training programs offered by the Academy of Recovery and Personal Experience (Brussels Platform for Mental Health ; Université de Mons), Stéphane Waha for his work on the SMES's PAT (Peer and Team Support) project, and his involvement in the European TUTO3-PAT report (a similar project focused on mental health: <https://mentalnet.eu/european-projects/26/en/true/TuTo3---PAT.html>), Marco Willems for the position of peer expertise liaison at the Belgian federal level; Frédéric Lemaire, Johnny Kean, and Dries Verbist for seconding lived experience expertise to the Federal Public Service for Social Integration and the CAAMI; Aurélien Vitiello for the Lived Experience Network of the Brussels Forum on Inequalities; Pierre Faignot for his presentation of the PAT service and his presentation of DUNE; Julien Jardon for his presentation on peer support within DUNE's Housing First service, Jonathan de Vylder for his hosting of the Open Peer Support Meetings at the Brussels Platform for Mental Health. Participants in the open meeting on May 19 2026 about the European frame also contributed to the document (from SMES, the Brussels Mental Health Platform, the LAMA project, the SPP IS, the FPS Public Health, the Nice Foundation, etc.). We should also mention the entire cultural mediation service of NIDOS and the activities of the Fondation de Nice, as detailed in the report analyzing best practices.

One final methodological point before we get to the heart of the matter. The aim of this document is to propose a set of capabilities and skills related to peer support within the field of social work. These have been derived from the interviews and study visits carried out as part of WP 1 and WP 2, as well as from the transnational analysis of good practices. They are not intended to constitute a single or only prescriptive model for a European framework of peer support capabilities. Rather, this is a proposal aimed at extending and informing the discussions already underway, with the aim of contributing to the development of peer support in social work. Some of these abilities and skills may overlap with general social work competencies. It is therefore worth noting that peer social work is also a form of social work, and it makes sense that certain competencies are shared. However, what differs is not always the skill itself, but what generates it: peer experience, as opposed to non-experiential training in social work.

This distinct origin of the skill results in a unique appropriation of the skill. Having made these points, let us move on to the presentation of the identified areas of competence.

DIMENSION 1 DEVELOPING AND MASTERING EXPERIENTIAL KNOWLEDGE: FROM ONESELF TO OTHERS



Telling one's story

« Living is not always knowing »

Baptiste Godrie reminds us in an article published in 2015. In the field of mental health, he defines “lived experience” as a complex whole comprising several dimensions: the experience of disorders and symptoms, the journey through the psychiatric system, the use of community services, related experiences (substance abuse, poverty, precarious living conditions, homelessness), social consequences (stigmatisation, discrimination, isolation) and the path to recovery. By shifting the focus towards social issues, the aim is therefore, in order to move from lived experience to knowledge, to identify what constitutes the complex web of lived experience of precariousness, homelessness, substance abuse, etc. Such work requires, first and foremost, the ability to identify the stages of one's own journey, as well as the ability to tell one's own story, drawing on reflective skills of self-analysis.

As one peer support worker in Brussels puts it:

Mastering the art of sharing one's story thus requires, first and foremost, the very ability to tell one's own story.

« You have to know how to tell your story when the time is right. »

This is precisely what is practised in the self-narrative and recovery narrative exercises developed as part of peer support training and the Academy of Recovery and lived experience expertise (AREV) (see interviews with France Dujardin). Each person enrolled on the training course is asked to produce a narrative in various forms: written text, audio or video recording, or drawing. **Whatever expressive medium is used, the aim is to be able to reflect on one's own journey without being overwhelmed by emotions (emotional capacity), to know how to organise its elements (expressive and self-analytical capacities), and to be able to share it with others (capacity for disclosure).** The aim of this sharing, however, is not therapeutic — even if it may fulfil a similar function — but is intended to draw lessons from the narrative. **It is therefore necessary to identify an additional capacity: that of being able to extract lessons from one's own narrative (capacity for self-analysis).** This step is essential for moving beyond the role of testimony and towards using the narrative as a medium for transmission (Brégain, 2025) and as a resource for support. This sharing depends heavily on the context in which it takes place—a context that must be safe for the person sharing their own story—and on how at ease the person feels with their situation.

LET US SUMMARISE THIS FIRST POINT AS A SERIES OF ABILITIES.

The development of experiential knowledge relies initially on a set of abilities centred on the ability to reflect on one's own experiences:

- the ability to identify and structure one's own journey,
- the ability to reflect on and analyse one's own journey,
- the ability to regulate one's emotions,
- the ability to express oneself and tell a story (2),
- the ability to open up and communicate with others,
- the ability to learn from one's own story.
- the ability to turn negative experiences into something positive
- understanding the effects of revealing aspects of one's life story
- ability to select which aspects of one's life story to share



Far from being innate, these abilities are supported by specific mechanisms, such as those developed at AREV, and determine the transition from individual testimony to the use of narrative as a resource for transmission and support. It is also worth noting, following an author such as Clive Baldwin (2007) and his concept of narrative citizenship, that these abilities rest on the possibility for individuals to express themselves in a form recognised as a narrative (hence the importance of a variety of modes of expression), and to have the space and time to do so (3).

From the self to others, from self-narratives to knowledge :

Mirror work :

« It may affect you, but it shouldn't upset you »

(Cécile Histas, SMES)

IT IS WORTH EMPHASISING THAT TELLING ONE'S STORY INVOLVES KNOWING HOW TO TALK ABOUT ONESELF TO OTHERS. For Baptiste Godrie (2017), experiential knowledge is knowledge that has been assimilated, reflected upon and consolidated through the repetition of lived experiences, and which enables the identification of rules of action combining technical skills and interpersonal skills. Narratives contain knowledge that is initially valid for the 'I', but experiential knowledge is intended to develop a collective scope. Experiences of precariousness, mental health, exclusion, migration, etc. are associated respectively with common social mechanisms. It is this similarity in the narratives which, through accumulation, also constitutes knowledge and enables the development of a community of shared experience (ibid.).

It is for this reason that AREV encourages everyone not only to formulate a narrative, but above all to share it with the rest of the group. The aim of this sharing is to draw out insights, both from the narrative itself and from the reactions it elicits within the group. The aim, therefore, at a basic collective level, is to create the conditions for sharing similar stories and to devise spaces for expression suited to these shared experiences. Examples include the peer supervision processes offered by the partners of the Réseau Nomade and by NIDOS, or the practice analysis frameworks developed by the Fondation de Nice. The open meetings that form the backbone of a peer support network in Brussels also contribute to this pooling of experiences.

2 - There are several possible forms of expression, ranging from the written word to a performed narrative story or «gesticulated anecdote» (in french, a «gesticulated anecdote» is a short autobiographical performance)

3 - Taking this a step further, this allows us to link the question of how marginalised experiences can be expressed to the field of epistemic injustices (Godrie, Dos Santos, 2017), and thus to the political dimension inherent in peer support work.

This observation calls for a range of skills that complement the ability to tell one's own story. **It is not merely a question of being able to summarise one's life journey and construct a narrative, but also of knowing how to share it with others and being able to respond to the reactions it elicits.** More broadly, it is also important to be able to **listen to others' stories**, as well as to **recognise the resonances they evoke within oneself when one encounters similar experiences.** This emotional capacity is essential to avoid causing oneself harm in peer support work; it also constitutes one of the central drivers of peer relationships, which we shall describe later. It presupposes the ability to recognise oneself in others' stories and, conversely, to recognise the other person in one's own story. In other words, it is about being able to link the different stories together. Finally, it involves the ability to compile the lessons learned from each story: identifying the insights they contain and bringing them into dialogue with those drawn from other experiences. A fundamental point, often implicit, is that the deployment of these capacities requires time to establish the conditions for such exchanges and sufficient continuity to ensure their iterative nature. Finally, one must also be able to accept the possibility that others may be indifferent to one's story, as not everyone can be moved in the same way.

To recap: the development of collective experiential knowledge relies on a range of relational and collective skills, namely the ability to:

- share one's own story with others,
- listen to and receive others' stories (without oversimplifying them),
- manage the emotions involved in these exchanges (or their absence)
- recognise oneself in similar experiences and recognise others within their own stories.



It also involves the ability to

- make connections between stories,
- collectively extract and compile lessons learnt

As well as organisational skills ensuring the time, continuity and iteration necessary for the development of communities of shared experience.

These two sets of skills form the core of the first dimension of peer support work, based on the transition from lived experience to experiential knowledge (4), which in turn forms the basis of the professional practice of peer support work.

4 - For further reading on the political and epistemic role of narratives, see: Baldwin, C., & Group, B. D. (2008). Narrative (,) citizenship and dementia: The personal and the political. *Journal of Aging Studies*, 22(3), 222-228; Burchardt, Marian. 2016. "The self as capital in the narrative economy: how biographical testimonies drive activism in the Global South." *Sociology of Health & Illness* 38(4):592-609; or the philosophical works of Iris Marion Young, Judith Butler, and, more broadly, on epistemic injustices. For the capability philosophy behind telling one's own story—as oneself and as another—see Paul Ricoeur

JOB DESCRIPTION 1: Experiential Knowledge (From Self to Others)



OBJECTIVE:

To transform one's lived experience into a useful resource for oneself, others, and the collective.

KEY CAPACITIES:

- Structured and contextualised self-narration.
- Analysing one's journey (reflexivity).
- Regulation of emotions
- Extract learning from one's experience.
- Listening to and welcoming the stories of others;
- Linking experiences to each other;
- Producing collective knowledge from stories.

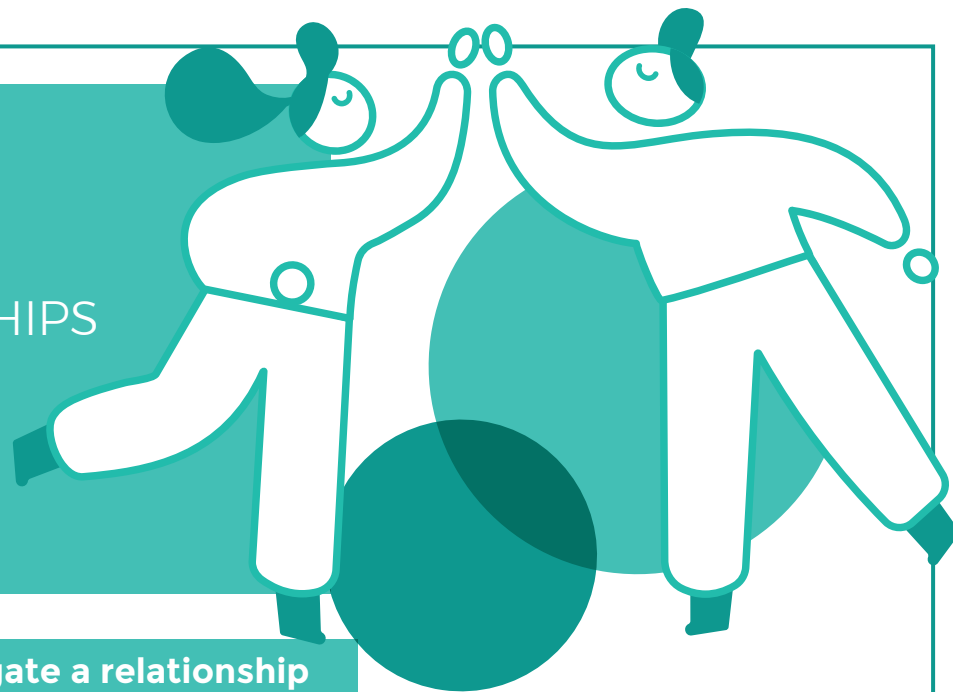
FRAMEWORK OF THE FUNCTION:

- Storytelling spaces (groups, interviews, training).
- Training programmes for peer support
- Time dedicated to analysing practices.
- Recognition of experiential knowledge by institutions.

TYPES OF MISSIONS:

- Sharing life stories for professional purposes;
- Animation or participation in peer groups;
- Contributing to the production of knowledge (reports, training).
- Supporting the meaning-making of users' experiences.

DIMENSION 2 PEER RELATIONSHIPS (PEERNESS)⁽⁵⁾, RECOGNITION AND TRUST



Knowing how to navigate a relationship based on shared experiences.

This second set of skills and abilities refers to a specific relational stance, which Ève Gardien describes as 'peeriness': a relationship based on the sharing of a unique experience, rarely accessible to the public, and likely to produce a sense of loneliness when it is not shared (Gardien, 2020). This notion of a rare experience can be extended to encompass all the lived experiences that shape the field of social work. **This approach is thus based on a shared understanding of the situations encountered and the meanings attributed to them** – or even the knowledge derived from them, as mentioned in the previous section – **as well as on a shared recognition of what sometimes remains unspeakable.** This shared understanding fosters the establishment of a greater degree of trust **(6)**.

This is particularly true of the role of intercultural mediator within the NIDOS organization: their shared lived experience with migrant minors makes them a key point of contact and a vital source of support in establishing a relationship of trust between the minor and their guardian. Similarly, in the therapeutic apartments run by the Nice Foundation, this approach is associated with what is described as 'enhanced trust', constituting a genuine 'asset of closeness' in the provision of support. **It is linked to a non-judgemental approach, made possible by having gone through similar experiences, and to a nuanced understanding of what the other person is going through, fostering empathy, the ability to step back from one's own perspective, and a sense of discretion when situations require it.**

This approach also allows interactions to be understood from a less rigid perspective. Thus, Johnny, an expert by experience in Brussels, emphasises that it is precisely his technical 'non-skills' that underpin his specific interpersonal skills. This approach is evident even in the practical management of space and encounters: sitting beside rather than opposite a desk (SPP IS), favouring the informal 'tu' form (Isabelle – Fondation de Nice), approaching people more readily (Quentin), or being recognised as credible by migrant minors thanks to a mastery of shared cultural codes.

This unique relationship thus makes it possible to move beyond certain superficial narratives, based on normative expectations or preconceived notions, in order to get closer to the reality of the situations as they are experienced. As such, it can help to resolve complex situations, as illustrated by the role-play exercise conducted during the study visit to NIDOS. However, peer support is not limited to simply establishing or strengthening a bond of trust. It also enables the peer worker to put their ability to identify the unspoken at the service of the institution: needs expressed non-verbally, partially articulated, or even kept silent, as evidenced by the example of Francine described in the previous report, illustrating the peer worker's keen insight. When dealing with people in distress or in a highly vulnerable situation, this approach is also accompanied by the ability to adapt, seek compromise, exercise diplomacy and practise active listening, whilst maintaining a focus on people's potential rather than their shortcomings.

NIDOS
guardianship for refugees

⁵ - The term 'peeriness' is the translation of the French neologism 'pairité'

⁶ - It should be noted, however, that this experiential closeness does not automatically lead to trust, nor does it systematically result in better mutual understanding. Rather, it constitutes a potential relational resource, the effects of which depend on the situations, the individuals, and the institutional contexts in which it

At the heart of this peer-to-peer relationship lies the lived experience of the person engaged in peer support work, which gives them access to the world of the person they are supporting. This lived experience, as mentioned in the previous section, constitutes a genuine professional tool in this sense. It can be drawn upon and sometimes articulated, though in varying ways. Most often, this disclosure takes place gradually and judiciously, to avoid any form of intrusion. It occurs when the relationship has developed sufficiently for this sharing to 'legitimise the presence' of the peer, as an act of trust likely to elicit a reciprocal response of trust. **The context-specific management of one's life story thus emerges as a professional skill.**

Finally, peer support is frequently associated with a form of humanisation of administrative processes. Whilst this capacity for humanisation deserves recognition, it nevertheless calls for reservations, which we shall leave aside for the moment and which will be the subject of a later discussion.

SUMMARY OF CAPABILITIES

Relational stance of peeriness

Ability to build a relationship based on lived experience recognized as legitimate, by adopting a horizontal, non-judgmental and situated posture that breaks with traditional symbolic hierarchies of support.

- A relational stance grounded in shared lived experience
- Ability to establish trust-based relationship
- Ability to adopt a horizontal and situated presence
- Ability to make one's role explicit without positioning oneself as an expert
- Ability to foster expression within a safe relational space
- Ability to adjust one's presence to the pace and situation of the other person
- Develop active listening skills that involve empathy and adaptability
- Ability to listen without judgment
- Adopt a proactive (and non assertive) approach
- Use of accessible language and shared frames of reference

Accessing the meaning-making world of the supported person

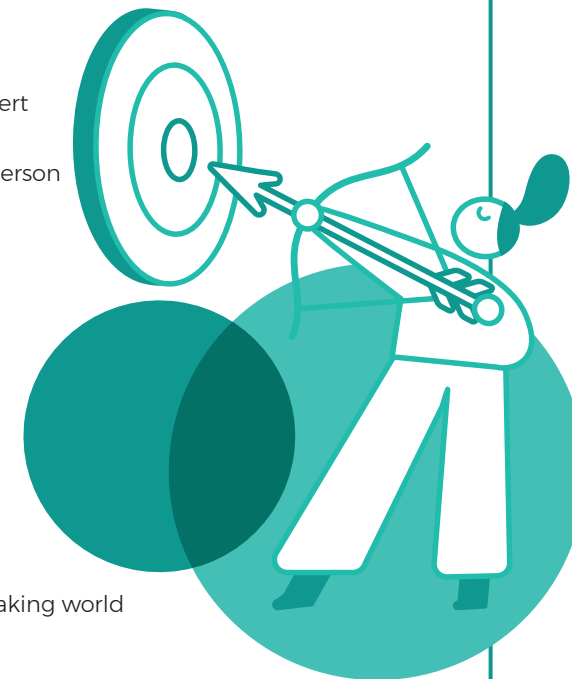
Ability to understand the situation from the inside, drawing on lived experience as an interpretative resource, while remaining attentive to unspoken needs, silences and subtle signals.

- Ability to use lived experience to access the other person's meaning-making world
- Ability to detect unspoken or non-verbalized needs
- Adaptability
- Identification of implicit or emerging needs
- Careful and respectful reformulation
- Continuous adjustment to situations and individuals
- Avoidance of projection or overgeneralization of one's own experience

Regulating relational proximity and self-disclosure

Ability to adjust relational distance and the use of one's own life story so that it supports the relationship without dominating it or shifting the focus toward oneself.

- Ability to step back and give space to others' narratives
- Ability to calibrate self-disclosure in relation to specific objectives
- Lived experience is shared in a way that serves the other
- Ability to withdraw when needed and to delegate
- Maintenance of clear relational boundaries
- Prevention of emotional dependency dynamics



Supporting agency and facilitating ⁽⁷⁾ relationships

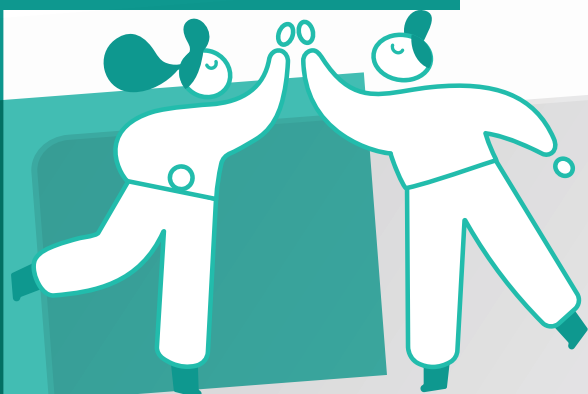
Ability to recognize and strengthen the resources, capacities and scope for action of the supported person, while making interactions with institutions more accessible, understandable and less disqualifying.

- Ability to identify and nurture potential in others
- Ability to facilitate administrative and institutional interactions
- Use of shared relational codes and references
- A focus on capacities rather than deficits
- Active support for autonomy and agency
- Rejecting a results-oriented approach in favor of a process-oriented one
- Being able to accept delays and uncertainty in the support process

Peerness is grounded in a specific relational stance based on the recognition of shared lived experience, mobilized through a horizontal, non-judgmental and situated relationship. It enables access to the meaning-making world of the supported person, the fine regulation of relational proximity, and the strengthening of individual capacities, while contributing to the facilitation of support relationships and institutional interactions. It involves being flexible, not setting too many expectations, and going at the person's pace, while acknowledging their small victories.

While these capacities emerge from lived experience, they may be more or less supported by organizational frameworks, reflective spaces and professionalization processes.

JOB DESCRIPTION 2: Peer Relationship



OBJECTIVE:

Establish trusting relationships based on shared experience.

KEY CAPABILITIES:

- Adopting a non-judgmental and horizontal stance.
- Establish a relationship of trust.
- Accessing the lived experience and world of meaning of others.
- Identify unspoken needs.
- Adjust the distance in the relationship.
- Use your own experience without overwhelming the relationship.

- Recognise the strengths and potential of individuals.
- Don't set unrealistic expectations (recognize small wins and the process itself)

FRAMEWORK OF THE FUNCTION :

- One-to-one or group support relationship.
- Work in close proximity with the relevant public.
- Supervision and intervention.

TYPES OF MISSIONS:

- Supporting individuals (listening, providing support).
- Create links with people who are distanced from institutions
- Supporting self-expression

⁷ - The term "to humanize" was used in the field, but we rephrased it to emphasize that any relationship between individuals is, by definition, human—without, however, dismissing the implicit criticism of the dehumanization of social services and government agencies

DIMENSION 3 MEDIATION, TRANSLATION AND EXCHANGE BETWEEN WORLDS



To serve as a bridge between worlds

Building on lived experience and a peer-based relational stance, people engaged in peer work mobilize a third set of competencies, which can be grouped under the notion of mediation capacities. The terms spontaneously used during our exchanges—bridge, mediator, facilitator—clearly reflect this dimension: they all refer to the ability to connect worlds that do not easily communicate with one another, particularly the world of service users and that of institutions.

While the previous sections focused on capacities related to self-awareness and interpersonal relationships, the type of “encounter” involved here is of a different nature. It concerns the interaction between an institution and a beneficiary, or more broadly between the institutional world and the individual's lived environment. This encounter cannot be taken for granted and requires specific conditions to take place.

Mediation in peer work therefore goes beyond relational proximity. Its primary function is to make interaction between individuals and institutions possible. In this sense, peer workers adopt a third-party position, which can be understood as a form of translation, in line with actor-network theory and the sociology of translation (Latour, Akrich, Callon, 2008). They act as connectors, linking heterogeneous elements and articulating sometimes diverging interests within a network. This role can also be interpreted through the concept of “marginal secant” (Crozier & Friedberg, 1977): an actor positioned at the intersection of multiple systems, sufficiently familiar with each to understand their logics and facilitate their coordination.

This function is particularly visible in the case of intercultural mediators at NIDOS, who operate at the crossroads of the cultural backgrounds of migrants, Dutch migration frameworks, and the broader host society. It is also evident at the Fondation de Nice, where peer workers contribute to reorientation practices and translate technical or professional language into accessible terms. In Brussels, experts by experience perform a similar role: they contribute to adapting institutional documents and procedures to better reflect users' realities, while also supporting individuals by translating and clarifying administrative requirements. **Mediation here becomes bidirectional, fostering mutual intelligibility between institutions and individuals.**

More broadly, mediation can extend to a collective and political level, linking marginalized groups to the organization of support systems and even to public policy processes. This is particularly visible in the work of experts by experience connected to the Réseau Nomade, who engage in advocacy and lobbying grounded in experiential knowledge.



SUMMARY OF CAPABILITIES

Epistemic mediation

Ability to use lived experience as a cognitive bridge between individuals, services and public policies.

- Translating lived experience into actionable knowledge for social work
- Making visible realities often overlooked by professional frameworks
- Producing situated knowledge without reducing it to abstract norms

Linguistic and symbolic mediation

Ability to translate between languages, meanings and institutional frameworks.

- Translating institutional terminology, roles and procedures
- Adapting language without oversimplification
- Addressing symbolic and normative misunderstandings

Relational mediation

Ability to restore and sustain trust between actors, building on peer relationships.

- Creating trust in fragile or co-dependent relationships,
- Supporting the relationship between user and professional without replacing it
- Acknowledging emotions, fears and resistance

Institutional mediation

Ability to make systems accessible and usable.

- Making institutions more “inhabitable” for service users
- Facilitating access to rights and services
- Be able to provide in-person support (such as accompanying individuals to institutions, etc.)
- Identifying systemic barriers and contributing to adjustments

Political and collective mediation

Ability to move from individual experience to structural change.

- Collective articulation of individual experiences
- Bringing collective voices into dialogue with institutions and policymakers
- Contributing to advocacy and policy transformation

Mediation appears as a key competency of peer work: the ability to bridge lived experience and institutional frameworks, languages, cultures and norms, as well as individual relationships and broader processes of collective transformation. It operates simultaneously at epistemic, relational, institutional and political levels, and constitutes the core added value of peer work in social action. Finally, when this mediation takes place in a group setting, it requires skills in facilitating and mediating group discussions.

However, these capacities can only reach their full potential if the hosting environment is able not only to receive these contributions, but also to be transformed by them. This shifts the focus from the competencies of peer workers alone to the ability of organizations to recognize, integrate and make use of experiential knowledge. This perspective leads to the identification of a fourth domain of competencies, related to the institutional embedding of peer work within professional organizations.

JOB DESCRIPTION 3 Bridging the Gap



OBJECTIVE

To act as a link between those affected, professionals and institutions.

KEY SKILLS

- Transforming experiences into useful knowledge
- Making institutions understandable
- Communicating institutions' expectations to service users
- Building or restoring trust between stakeholders in the social work (institution, people affected by situations, social workers)
- Facilitate access to rights and services
- Identify institutional barriers

- Act as a collective spokesperson
- Sharing/teaching knowledge

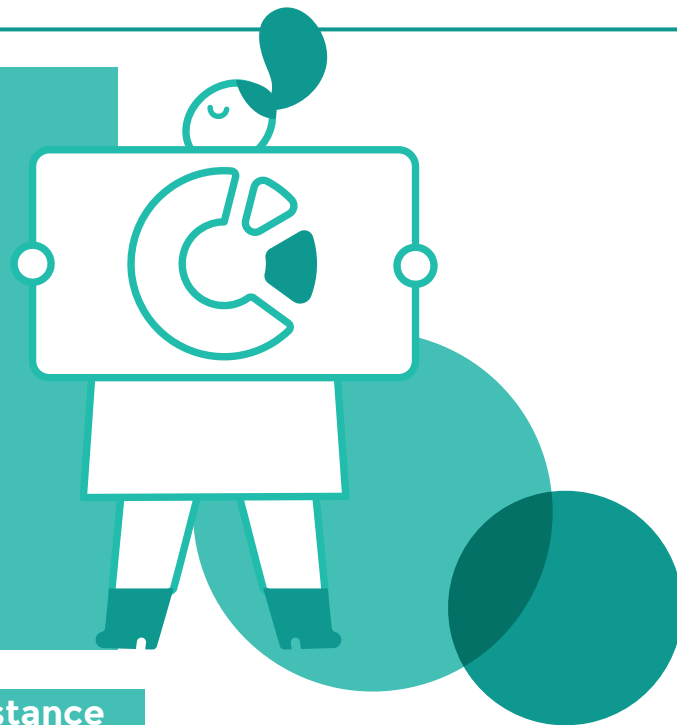
ROLE FRAMEWORK

- Act as a ‘third party’ between service users and institutions
- Work in collaboration with teams, services and networks
- Recognition of the mediation role

TYPES OF TASKS

- Training sessions or awareness-raising workshops
- Animation and group mediation
- Assistance with administrative procedures
- Translation of documents or diagrams
- Mediation between service users and professionals
- Participation in advocacy work
- Contributing to service improvement

DIMENSION 4 INSTITUTIONAL EMBEDDING AND PROFESSIONAL COOPERATION



Being inside without losing the distance

In the previous sections, we have analysed the competencies associated with peer work in relation to the self, experiential narratives, relationships with other people with lived experience, and mediation between peers, service users and institutions. These relational and epistemic competencies form the foundation of peer work. However, they can only fully unfold if the person engaged in peer work is able to establish a sustainable position within a given institutional and professional framework. This is a key condition for experiential knowledge to circulate, be recognized, and contribute to transforming practices.

This fourth domain therefore focuses on competencies related to the institutional embedding of peer work: understanding how organizations operate, navigating professional fields, cooperating with colleagues and teams, using professional tools, and accessing spaces for support and regulation. Observations from the RES PEER project highlight that such integration is never automatic and requires specific arrangements, including training, supervision and structured cooperation.

At NIDOS (Utrecht), this institutional embedding is highly structured. Intercultural mediators are trained in youth protection systems, legal frameworks related to asylum and guardianship, roles and responsibilities of different actors, and professional positioning. This knowledge is considered essential for effective mediation and for avoiding role confusion. Regular intervision sessions allow mediators to collectively analyze complex cases, while access to a contact person ensures ongoing support, making peer work part of a learning organization. Intercultural mediation may draw on experiential knowledge, but not exclusively: cultural, linguistic, relational and systemic expertise are equally essential.

In the Brussels context, the Réseau Nomade illustrates a different model, operating at network level rather than within a single organization. The PAT (Peer Field Worker) project provides training not only for peer workers but also for professional teams, focusing on expectations, role boundaries and working conditions. Open meetings function as third spaces, where peers, professionals and researchers exchange practices, supporting a collective embedding of peer work in the social and health sectors.



Similar dynamics can be observed in intervision structures such as the Brussels Mental Health Platform and SMES (Mental Health and Social Exclusion), where peers and professionals share experiences, analyze institutional effects and strengthen cross-sector cooperation.

At the **FONDATION DE NICE**, emphasis is placed on equal access to professional tools (IT systems, databases, monitoring tools). Specific training ensures that peer workers can fully participate in daily activities. Working in pairs also supports institutional integration and inclusion.



Across these examples, institutional embedding relies on a dual requirement:

- the ability of peer workers to understand and inhabit professional frameworks,
- and the ability of organizations to adapt their practices, tools and cultures to accommodate this role.

These competencies emerge at the intersection between individuals and institutions, and their responsibility is therefore shared.

SUMMARY OF CAPABILITIES

Understanding and inhabiting an organizational framework without becoming fully assimilated to it

Ability to understand organizational rules, constraints and logics, and to act within them while maintaining the specificity of the peer role.

- Understanding the institutional and legal context
- Respecting collective rules without taking on a subordinate role
- Being able to clearly explain one's role and boundaries
- Being able to ask for help to other colleagues when needed

Ability to cooperate with professionals in a complementary manner

Working alongside different professions (social workers, healthcare staff, administrators) : interdisciplinarity and teamworking.

- Cooperating without replacing others
- Supporting existing relationships
- Participating in shared decision-making
- Understand the institutional context in which the mission operates
- Promote synergy
- Network

Translating and circulating information within the organization

Ability to facilitate the circulation of relevant information between teams, services or hierarchical levels, while preserving the integrity of lived experience.

- Supporting mutual understanding
- Raising awareness of concrete dysfunctions
- Contributing to internal adjustments
- Being able to report on the support provided,
- Being able to convey information while adapting to the audience (peers/professionals)

Supporting collective reflexivity within teams

Ability to actively contribute to collective reflective spaces by bringing an experiential perspective.

- Participating in reflective spaces (meetings, supervision)
- Expressing one's perspective without imposing it
- Contributing to the analysis of complex situations

Preventing the instrumentalisation of peer work

Ability to identify and address risks of instrumentalisation (tokenism, relational labour exploitation, depoliticisation).

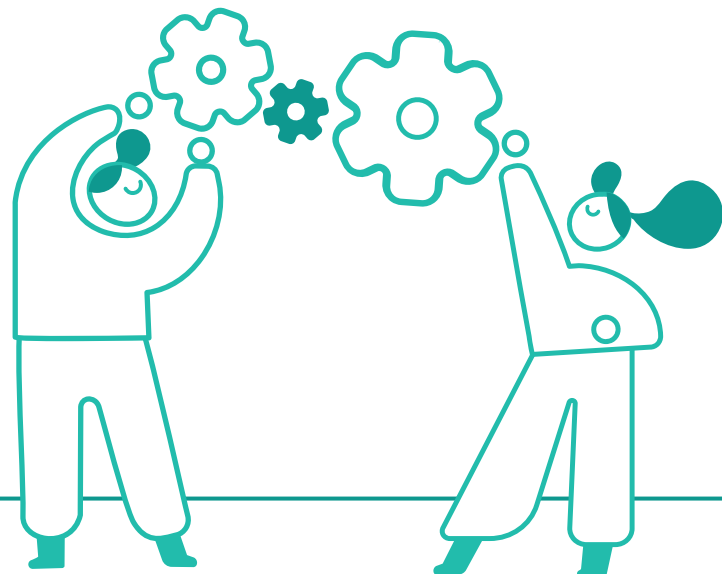
- Naming tensions
- Mobilising regulatory or support mechanisms
- Defending the specificity of the peer role

Contributing to organizational and policy transformation

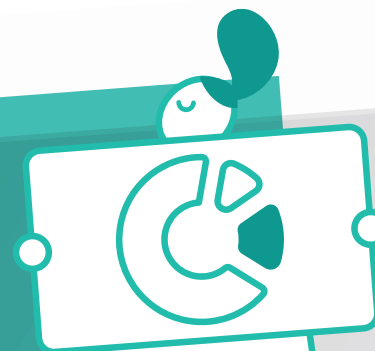
Ability to use experiential knowledge to support the evolution of institutional practices and public policies.

- Contributing to the adaptation of tools and procedures
- Participating in institutional working groups
- Supporting or initiating advocacy processes

Institutional embedding emerges as a core competency of peer work. It involves the ability to cooperate professionally, to inhabit organizational frameworks without losing critical distance, to sustain collective reflexivity and to contribute to institutional transformation based on experiential knowledge. It is a key condition for effective and sustainable mediation in social action and enables peer work to develop its full transformative potential.



JOB DESCRIPTION 4 Institutional Registration



PURPOSE

To work within an organisation whilst maintaining the specific nature of the peer support role.

KEY SKILLS

- Understanding how an organisation works
- Clarifying one's role and boundaries
- Working in collaboration with other professionals
- Sharing information
- Contributing to collective decision-making

- Identify the risks of exploitation
- Contribute to the development of practices

WORKING ENVIRONMENT

- Integration into a team or network
- Access to professional tools (software, meetings, etc.)
- Training and support mechanisms
- Forums for coordination and discussion

TYPES OF TASKS

- Working in pairs with professionals
- Attending team meetings
- Supporting the analysis of complex situations
- Contributing to projects and working groups
- Improving institutional practices

DIMENSION 5 REGULATION OF DISTANCE, ETHICS AND SUSTAINABILITY



Using distance as a tool, not a barrier

The previous dimensions highlighted the competencies of peer work related to lived experience, peer relationships, mediation between individuals and institutions, and professional integration within organizations. However, the analysis of practices observed during the field visits shows **that these competencies cannot be sustained over time without a transversal capacity for regulation – at the relational, ethical and organizational levels.** This fifth dimension therefore focuses on the regulation of distance, the ethics of peer work, and the sustainability of practices.

In practice, this regulation takes place through a series of ordinary but critical situations: the use of private or professional phones, the management of working time and availability beyond formal schedules, the choice between informal or formal modes of address, and the continuous adjustment of relational proximity and distance. These seemingly minor choices directly shape the professional stance of the peer worker and influence both the quality and durability of relationships. They also raise the risk of dependency, particularly when support relies primarily on a personal relationship rather than on a broader collective framework.

Peer work engages the whole person – their biography, emotions, vulnerabilities and resources. This is both its strength and its vulnerability. While it creates strong relational value, it also exposes peer workers to specific risks: blurred boundaries between personal and professional life, implicit expectations of constant availability, excessive demands from users or teams, and potential instrumentalization of lived experience. **Ensuring sustainability therefore requires clear reference points, opportunities for distance, and support mechanisms capable of regulating these tensions in everyday practice.**

This dimension is therefore not an abstract ethical addition, but a practical condition for sustaining peer work over time. It invites us to consider, together, individual postures, organizational arrangements and collective spaces of reflection, in order to prevent isolation, support peer workers in complex situations, and ensure a viable long-term engagement.

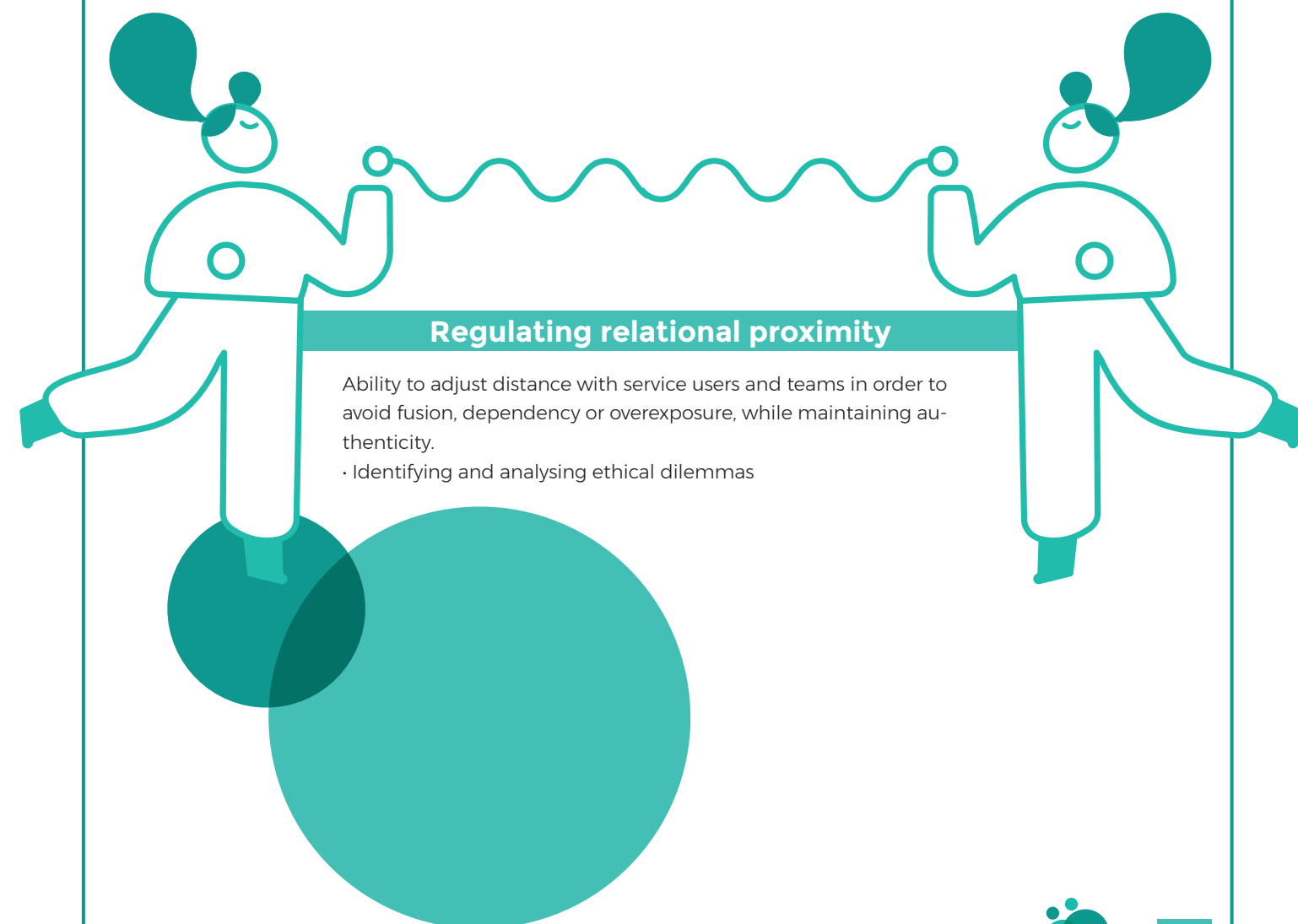
In the Brussels context, this dimension appears particularly structured. Open peer-support meetings, intervention sessions, and the Réseau Expertise de Vécu provide collective spaces where peer workers can share dilemmas, tensions and limits. These are not merely informal exchanges, but key spaces of reflexive distance, enabling participants to reflect on self-disclosure, relational boundaries, and sometimes conflicting expectations from institutions, teams and service users. They help prevent isolation and transform individual challenges into shared concerns.

By supporting collective reflection and experience-sharing across sectors, these spaces allow difficult experiences to become collective resources for understanding and action. Ethical regulation thus emerges as an ongoing process of discussion, adjustment and mutual recognition, directly contributing to sustainability.

At the Fondation de Nice, this dimension is less formalized but embedded in the professional framework: shared tools, equal access to systems, and full participation in team activities. This contributes indirectly to the regulation of distance, by avoiding marginalization and providing clear role boundaries. Working in pairs also offers opportunities for dialogue and ethical reflection.

At NIDOS (Utrecht), a different model is observed. Regulation does not rely solely on collective peer spaces, but also on clearly identified institutional roles. A designated professional is responsible for supervising and supporting intercultural mediators, and an additional contact person is available in case of ethical concerns. This structured support plays a key role in addressing complex situations, preventing over-involvement and clarifying dilemmas. Here, regulation is largely institutionalized rather than exclusively peer-based.

These different configurations illustrate that the regulation of distance, ethics and sustainability cannot be reduced to either individual competencies or organizational arrangements alone. Instead, they emerge from a combination of professional posture, institutional frameworks and collective reflexive spaces. This makes them a transversal and essential dimension of peer work.



Regulating relational proximity

Ability to adjust distance with service users and teams in order to avoid fusion, dependency or overexposure, while maintaining authenticity.

- Identifying and analysing ethical dilemmas

SUMMARY OF CAPABILITIES

Ability to recognize tensions related to self-disclosure, institutional expectations, role ambiguity, and the use of experiential knowledge.

- Engaging in individual and collective reflexivity

Ability to participate in reflective spaces such as peer meetings, networks or supervision, in order to analyse practices and prevent isolation.

- Preserving emotional and professional sustainability

Ability to recognize one's limits, seek support, and adjust practices to maintain long-term engagement.

- Co-constructing ethical frameworks within organizations

Ability to contribute to the definition and adaptation of rules, guidelines and support mechanisms that ensure recognition and protection of peer work.

This aspect is also linked to the development of lifelong learning.

- Commitment to continuing education
- Development of individual and team skills
- Contribution to the enrichment of professional practices and environments

This dimension highlights that the sustainability of peer work relies on ethical and relational regulation capacities, supported by appropriate organizational frameworks. These capacities enable peer workers to manage relational distance, prevent forms of instrumentalisation, and maintain a sustainable professional engagement – both for the individuals involved and for the institutions that host them.

JOB DESCRIPTION 5

Ethics, Professional Boundaries and Sustainability



OBJECTIVE

To ensure a sustainable, appropriate and ethical professional commitment.

KEY SKILLS

- Adjusting professional boundaries
- Identifying ethical dilemmas
- Setting clear limits
- Preventing the risks of over-involvement
- Seeking support
- Participating in reflection forums
- Contributing to collective ethical frameworks

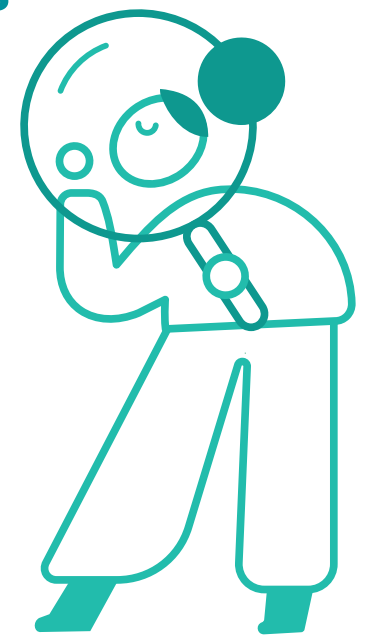
WORKING ENVIRONMENT

- Availability of supervision/intervision forums
- Support from line management or a designated mentor
- Clear rules regarding the scope of intervention
- An organisational culture focused on sustainability

TYPES OF TASKS

- Participation in ethical review forums
- Joint development of professional rules and practices
- Monitoring of boundaries and working conditions
- Support for other colleagues / teamwork

Further questions



The present competency framework aims to recognize and support peer social work practices without fully standardizing them. It is based on the assumption that some essential dimensions of peer work — relational, affective and experiential — cannot be fully codified without risking a loss of their effectiveness.

This framework should therefore be understood as a tool for recognition and support, rather than an instrument of normative alignment.

To illustrate this position, we propose three sets of points of attention alongside the competencies presented above. These do not constitute definitive findings or prescriptive recommendations, as no fixed answers are available. Rather, they reflect ongoing questions that have accompanied the RES-PEER project throughout.

SIDEBAR 1

« Non-competencies » ⁽⁸⁾
as professional resources

What helped me are my
non-competencies

(peer worker)

Producing a competency framework relies on a widely shared implicit assumption: acting effectively would require “knowing how to do” something that is mastered, stabilised and transferable. In other words, professional effectiveness would be linked to the possession of formalised competencies, to the ability to provide appropriate responses, and to mobilise language recognised as legitimate. The aim of such a framework would therefore be to formalise the skills necessary for peer work.

However, the statement from a peer worker that “what helps me are my non-competencies” — in relation to administrative, institutional or technical domains — partially challenges this assumption. It allows us to formulate another hypothesis: it is precisely the lack of mastery of institutional language, the absence of acculturation to administrative services and their modes of interaction, that has equipped this peer worker to be effective in their role as mediator, supporter, institutional observer and peer.

These “non-competencies” can be understood as a temporary suspension of expert power, a form of relational availability, and an implicit authorisation for the other not to conform to institutional or normative expectations. **At times, peer work is precisely situated in this distance from the institutional framework.** As one member of the Réseau Nomade involved in social work indicates, adopting a posture of non-competence also means allowing oneself to “inquire with” rather than “learn to do”.

This raises several recurring questions within peer work: by working as a peer over time, does one move away from what initially gave legitimacy? How can the original distance be maintained while adjusting to institutional practices? And is this hybrid posture not put at risk precisely through the identification and formalisation of competencies lin-

⁸ - We kept the expression as it is was expressed that way. Perhaps, «productive forms of institutional distance» would be more accurate to describe the idea of «non competencies».

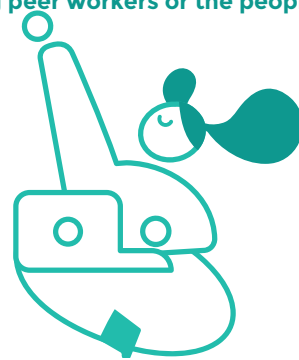
ked to the professionalisation of peer work? “Training... or deformation?” ask some volunteer peers who refuse strong institutional integration.

One of the main challenges in developing a competency framework lies in the risk of normalising what constitutes the richness of what could be marginalized experiences. As these experiences are translated into expected, assessable and institutionally compatible competencies, there is a danger of reducing them to adjusted versions of dominant norms. Yet the value of peer work lies not only in its capacity to adapt to institutions, but also in the relevance of its distance, in its ability to introduce alternative perspectives and question professional assumptions.

A competency framework that takes this dimension into account must therefore not aim for the systematic alignment of real-life experiences with institutional standards. It must recognise that their value also lies in their ability to resist forms of standardisation and to keep open interpretations as well as practices that fall outside established categories. This does not preclude the need to master certain skills linked to the institutional framework, which are essential to avoid putting peer workers or the people they support in a difficult position.

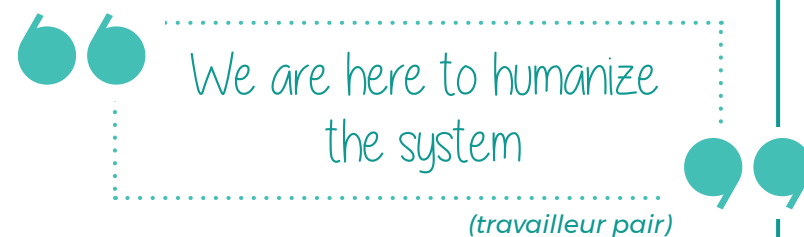
Further reading :

Emilie Rey, « Le travail pair, ce nouveau métier destiné à révolutionner le travail social : vecteur d’une autonomie normative ou émancipatrice ? », *Sciences et actions sociales* [En ligne], 24 | 2025, mis en ligne le 09 avril 2025, consulté le 04 mai 2026. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/sas/5556>



SIDEBAR 2

Professionalizing a logic of reciprocity: a constitutive paradox ?



Peer work mobilises a relational logic that cannot be reduced to a service provision or to a set of objectifiable techniques. It is grounded in a logic of reciprocity, as developed by Jacques T. Godbout: a logic based on engagement, self-exposure, symbolic reciprocity and mutual recognition, in contrast to state or market logics characterised by professionalisation and impersonal relations.

Baptiste Brossard’s analyses, building on Goffman’s sociology, deepen this tension. By examining contemporary attempts at “humanising” social and health services, he shows that interactions involve a form of deference work, that is, a situated and fragile form of recognition that only makes sense as long as it is not fully prescribed. When such recognition becomes expected, standardised or evaluated, it risks becoming an interactional façade, producing a paradoxical form of dehumanisation in the name of humanisation.

The professionalisation of peer work thus entails a double risk. First, the risk of instrumentalising the logic of reciprocity, by making it expected, measurable or obligatory. Second, the risk of symbolically pricing relationships, by transforming trust, availability or engagement into objectifiable “relational competencies”. This dynamic is not specific to peer work: it reflects broader transformations in social work, where increasing procedures, indicators and accountability requirements contribute to the bureaucratisation of relational practices.

As illustrated in the documentary «Au suivant: le travail social sous haute tension» (Pierre Schonbrodt) such bureaucratisation is a major factor in professional fatigue, loss of meaning and emotional exhaustion among workers, as well as disengagement and frustration among service users faced with rigid and impersonal systems. Peer work historically developed precisely as a counterpoint to these dynamics, as an attempt to reintroduce time, recognition and reciprocity.

This observation also applies to participatory and community-based practices. Here too, approaches initially conceived as alternatives — based on autonomy, conflict, collectivity and self-organisation — may lose their transformative potential when integrated uncritically into institutional frameworks. The risk is that of normalising reintegration, where participation becomes a procedure or obligation, and community work becomes a tool for implementing predefined policies (9).

Another important point concerns the risk of establishing a rigid opposition between a “relational” register, often associated with peer work, and a “technical” or “procedural” register, associated with traditional social work. Such an opposition may reinforce clichés, generate resistance among professionals, and ultimately contribute to the very dehumanisation it seeks to counter. **Peer workers do not aim to oppose social work, but rather to engage in critical collaboration, enriching existing practices.**

A European competency framework should therefore explicitly recognise its limits: **not all dimensions of peer work can be fully professionalised or evaluated without loss of meaning.** These dimensions do not belong to the informal, but rather to a distinct regime of action, different from purely bureaucratic or market logics.

Otherwise, the framework of competences risks reproducing the forms of bureaucratisation responsible for the burnout of professionals and service users, and, in both peer support and participation, neutralising the very dynamics it claims to recognise and support

Further readings :

Numéro 92 (2024) de la revue *Lien Social et Politiques*, dirigé par Yan Sénéchal, Jacques Commaille et Pierre Noreau

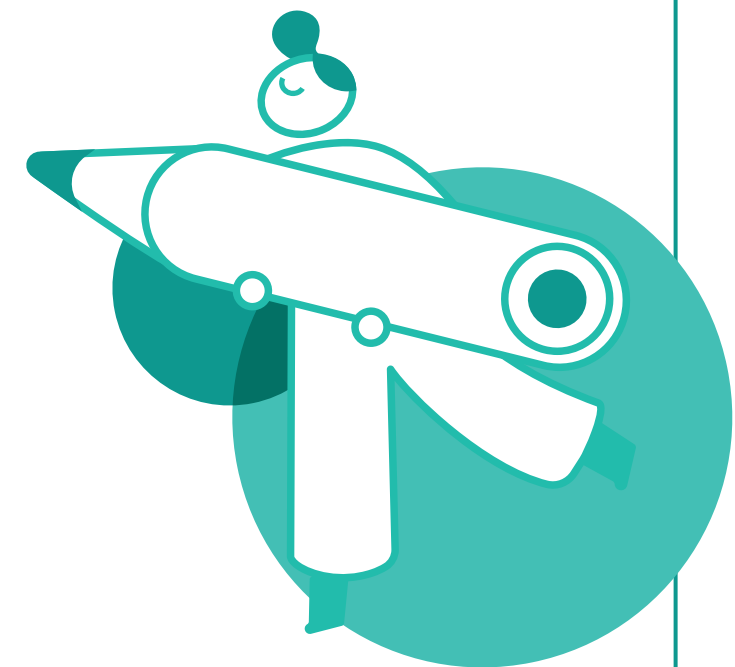
<https://www.erudit.org/fr/revues/lsp/2024-n92-lsp09486/>

Godbout, J., Caillé, A., & Winkler, D. (1992). *L'esprit du don*. Montréal: Boréal.

Brossard B. (2017) : *Le travail de déférence. Une perspective goffmanienne sur l'« humanisation » des services dans le secteur sanitaire et social* in Carneau, S., & Namian, D. (Eds.). (2017). *Erving Goffman et le travail social*. University of Ottawa Press.

Film : « Au Suivant : le travail social sous haute tension » (Pierre Schnonbrodt)

9 - See the short feature on Arnstein's Ladder in issue 92 (2024) of the journal *"Lien Social et Politiques"*, edited by Yan Sénéchal, Jacques Commaille and Pierre Noreau: <https://www.erudit.org/fr/revues/lsp/2024-n92-lsp09486/>



SIDEBAR 3

Allowing peer work to influence institutional frameworks

The analysis suggests that the issue is not that peer work is insufficiently professionalised, but that it risks being professionalised without the capacity to influence the institutional framework within which it operates.

When professionalisation results only in the functional integration of the role, without transforming practices, peer work may stabilise without producing significant change (10). Proximity to service users may then be subtly instrumentalised, serving to facilitate existing systems without questioning their underlying assumptions.

However, fieldwork shows that peer work fully unfolds its potential when it is allowed to exert influence on its professional environment – when it can slightly shift frameworks, introduce new forms of relationships, question taken-for-granted practices, and humanise services without replacing them.

This implies a clear responsibility for institutional frameworks. They should not only ensure regulation and sustainability, but also remain open to being transformed by peer work. **Otherwise, peer work risks being reduced to a compensatory function, addressing symptoms without modifying underlying systems.**

A competency framework should therefore not only describe intervention skills, but also recognise capacities to influence frameworks, reshape norms, and critically translate between lived experiences and institutional expectations.

Without this transformative capacity, peer work risks becoming a relational patch within an unchanged system, reinforcing dynamics of bureaucratisation and exhaustion (see for instance the movement Recovery in the Bin).

Finally, a further risk concerns forms of peer work that only value marginal experiences when they are framed as trajectories of recovery or reintegration. In such cases, marginality is not recognised for its intrinsic value and critical potential, but is reinterpreted as a resource for integration – thereby displacing rather than dismantling stigma.

This contributes to a depoliticization of marginalised experiences, reducing them to individual adaptation pathways rather than recognising the structural issues they reveal. It also risks missing the opportunity to consider vulnerability itself as a competence for non-peer professionals.

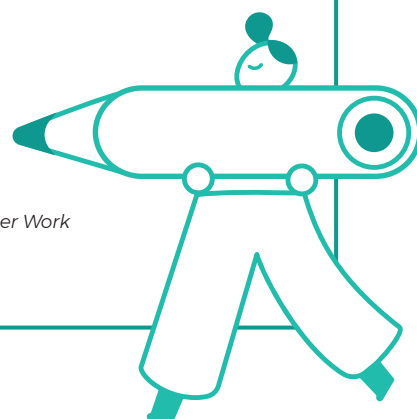
If institutional frameworks do not allow themselves to be transformed by what marginal perspectives make visible, peer work risks becoming another tool of normalisation, rather than a driver of meaningful change.

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9 - See : Sinclair, Aimee, Christina Fernandes, Sue Gillieatt, Lyn Mahboub, et Simon Katterl. 2025. « Peer Work and Stigma Reduction in Australian Mental Health Policy: Tackling Sanism or Reinforcing the Status Quo? » *Studies in Social Justice* 19 (2): 321-35. <https://doi.org/10.26522/ssj.v19i2.4877>.



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