Epistemic Counter-Narratives and Explanatory Pluralism in Consumer Mental Health Activism

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This paper examines how spiritual frameworks within consumer mental health activism constitute epistemically significant counter-narratives that challenge the explanatory authority of biomedicine. Drawing on qualitative interviews and historical documents from Australian consumer-led initiatives, I argue that these frameworks do not merely supplement psychiatric accounts of distress but enact a form of explanatory pluralism from below. This is one grounded in experiential expertise rather than clinical authority. I present three case studies in which spiritual meaning-making operated as a competing explanatory resource: a mutual aid organisation integrating spiritual traditions with recovery principles; a consumer-researcher whose lived experience of suicidality grounded a substantive philosophical challenge to reductive psychiatric explanation; and a peer advocate whose spiritual frameworks reframed schizophrenia beyond diagnostic categories. These cases illuminate how epistemic negotiations between lived experience and clinical knowledge are not merely practical but philosophically substantive - involving competing ontologies of distress, rival accounts of what counts as expertise, and contested boundaries of legitimate explanation. I argue that consumer movements have historically enacted explanatory pluralism in practice, with implications for how epistemic authority is distributed in contemporary mental health care design and practice.