



Mad knowledge: a critical appraisal

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Introduction

Mad knowledge is a topic of central importance to the field of Mad Studies. The introduction of Mad Studies into the academy is itself a project entirely devoted to the creation and legitimisation of mad knowledge through research.

However, the Mad Studies literature remains largely oriented to the subject of psychiatric survivors in relation to their treatment by services and by society. Mad knowledge is explored as psychiatric- survivor expertise and how the psychiatric-survivor experience may inform mental health policy and service design. In this essay I will argue that a substantial literature has been overlooked: that which explores the experience of madness in and of its own right.

I will explore this topic in two parts: firstly I will review a selection of core texts in the Mad Studies literature; secondly I will suggest some key items which offer an alternative literature. Finally I will conclude that inclusion of the alternative literature into the Mad Studies canon would benefit the Mad Studies project.

Part one: the Mad Studies canon

Three eminent texts currently referenced in the Mad Studies classroom are:

- *Mad Matters: A Critical Reader in Canadian Mad Studies* (LeFrancois, Menzies and Reaume, eds, 2013)
- *The Routledge International Handbook of Mad Studies* (Beresford and Russo, eds, 2022)
- *Searching for a Rose Garden* (Russo and Sweeney, eds, 2016)

These collections offer a wide array of essays relevant to the field of Mad Studies, and offer a snapshot of what issues are of most concern to scholars.

The Mad Studies canon also includes items that shape the field of inquiry, when considering mad research. In this essay I will focus on the following:

- *Epistemic Injustice: Power & the Ethics of Knowing* (Fricker, 2007)
- *Mad Knowledges and User-Led Research* (Rose, 2022)

So, to begin: the three collections of essays that form the spine of Mad Studies scholarship are *Mad Matters*, *The Routledge International Handbook of Mad Studies*, and *Searching for a Rose Garden*. These collections are for the most part about Mad Studies, rather than about the experience of madness itself. Madness forms a constant backdrop but is rarely examined as a central topic or for its own sake.

Mad Matters, for example, introduced Mad Studies to the world in 2013 with essays from Canadian scholars. “The book has 23 chapters and is divided into five parts. Part I: Mad people’s history, evolving culture and language; Part II: Mad engagements; Part III: Critiques of psychiatry: practice and pedagogy; Part IV: Law, public policy and media madness; and Part V: Social justice, madness and identity politics.” (Castrodale, 2015, p.284) Only Part I of the collection touches on madness as a culture of its own; the remaining parts explore madness in relation to society and as an activist movement. As a whole, the book's aspiration is to “transform ways of thinking about clinical and pathologizing practices and the violence of psychiatry embedded within educational institutions, systems and regimes of practices.”

Similarly, the *Routledge International Handbook of Mad Studies* “is organised into five parts which explore the past, present and future of Mad Studies; and analyse its personal, political, cultural, social, academic and geographic relations.” (Beresford, 2022, p.10) By focusing its attention on *relations*, the collection neglects studying the subject of madness itself. Indeed, the editor writing the introduction suggests that

“Mad Studies can be seen to herald a new direction of travel for survivor self-organisation and involvement.” (Beresford, 2022, p.6) and refers to it explicitly as the “Mad Studies movement.” (Beresford, 2022, p.6) Mad Studies is thus positioned as first and foremost a project of activism, in which psychiatric survivors engage with the rational world to influence their treatment in society.

Finally, *Searching for a Rose Garden* summarises its focus within the title's strapline: “challenging psychiatry, fostering Mad Studies.” In its foreword, this position is made explicit: “We might refer to this as mad activist scholarship, a form of knowledge production or collective intellectual contribution that is embedded in Mad community interventions and actions.” (LeFrancois, 2022, p. v)

It is a subtle difference, but a crucial one: these three scholarly collections offer essays and explorations on behalf of psychiatric-survivors engaged in an activist movement – not essays and explorations on behalf of the mad engaged in madness.

The same can be argued about the next two books under consideration, which look more carefully at the subject of mad knowledge. The first of these is *Epistemic Injustice* by Miranda Fricker, published in 2007:

[Epistemic injustice is] a wrong done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower... [Two forms of epistemic injustice are] *testimonial injustice* and *hermeneutical injustice*.

Testimonial injustice occurs when prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker's word; hermeneutical injustice occurs... when a gap in collective interpretive resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage ... (Fricker, p.1)

While these concepts are extremely relevant to the matter of mad knowledge, and how mad testimony is received by others, the text itself is theoretical; it is *about* mad knowledge and our relationship with it. It is not offered as mad testimony itself.

We could draw the same conclusion of *Mad Knowledge and User Studies*, by Diana Rose: a comprehensive review of the ways in which mad research is conducted and received. Building on her earlier research – see Rose (2017a, 2017b, 2018, 2019) – she examines the research landscape and the various issues at stake for those engaged in gathering mad knowledge. She goes into great depth about the relationship of the service-user to the researchers and research bodies, the limitations imposed by and difficulties arising from this type of relationship, and comes to the conclusion that in the research process, mad knowledge is

compromised, in fact silenced. (Rose, 2022, p.283-287)

Interestingly, Rose comes close to offering a genuinely mad perspective when she says

I wrote this piece and Chap. 9 as one entire document when, as someone put it, I “was away with the fairies” ... Someone else read it and said it was “nonsense, all over the place, unreadable”. I did not throw it away but changed it, 'logicified' it, made it as appropriate as I could for a book like this... I erased my own madness, its expression, to make what I was saying intelligible. I am the author of my own erasure. (Rose, 2022, p.31)

Rose brings our dilemma out into the open: first-hand mad testimony is most likely unintelligible to rational receivers. So we settle for the testimony of psychiatric-survivors, and theorists, about the subject of madness, the study of madness and the relationship of madness to the world around it. We neglect mad knowledge in and of its own right, because of the difficulties it presents. Within a few paragraphs Rose dismisses the dilemma as an aside, but its presence in the text points to an extremely pertinent issue.

As long as Mad Studies focuses its scholarship upon itself, its own identity as a movement and its own purposes in addressing the social reception of mad experience, it will only be offering a part of a tremendously rich and varied mad knowledge base. I would argue that a more pressing concern for Mad Studies might be to address the dilemma of how we introduce mad knowledge to the rationally-minded, and to do what it can to make inroads upon this challenge.

Part two: alternative literature

So far I have explored the limitations of the Mad Studies canon. Next I will propose some suggestions of alternative literature that I believe would take us further along those inroads, or at the very least would benefit the Mad Studies project.

First-hand accounts

There are countless memoirs about madness – including famous books like *Darkness Visible* (Styron, 1992), *An Unquiet Mind* (Jamison, 1996) and *Girl, Interrupted* (Kaysen, 1993); celebrity autobiographies (Duke, 1988; Fisher, 2008; Wax, 2002) and newer titles such as Horatio Clare's *Heavy Light* (Clare, 2022.) These offer

insider perspectives about what it feels like to struggle with madness or depression. Having said that, these examples tend to follow a mainstream understanding of madness as a mental illness requiring a cure. I would offer instead the following items as first-hand accounts which challenge assumptions about mental illness and which fit well into the Mad Studies arena:

- *Madness Made Me* (O'Hagan, 2014)
- *Mad Pride: a celebration of mad culture* (Curtis, Dellar, Leslie and Watson, eds, 2000)
- *A Philosophy of Madness: The Experience of Psychotic Thinking* (Kusters, 2020)

We still face the difficulties that Rose identified above: these texts are rational or at least semi-rational accounts, made readable to the rationally-minded. But they do take us a step closer into madness as first-hand knowledge.

Mary O'Hagan is a leading mad activist in New Zealand who currently works in Australia as the Executive Director of Lived Experience in the Victoria Department of Health. Her memoir, *Madness Made Me* chronicles her journey from mental health patient to mad activist, and explores many themes of relevance to Mad Studies, such as those highlighted in the excerpt below:

They all had similar stories to tell. Many had never talked about their experience in one sitting before, to someone who took them at their word. Some cried as they talked about all the pain they had endured. So much of it was not due to the experience of madness itself but about their experiences in hospital, their lost opportunities, about once promising young lives that had fallen into unemployment, poverty and loneliness. So much of their suffering could have been avoided if the mental health system and the rest of society had genuinely responded to them.

Once again we are up against the dilemma of Mad Studies as a field which positions the mad in relation to their psychiatric treatment. We are also up against the dilemma of describing madness through the employment of rational language. However, O'Hagan's memoir addresses the paradox of mad knowledge when she writes

Most mad people who tell or write their stories say much more about their madness than their return from it.... But sanity, madness, and return to sanity all deserve the same amount of attention because they cannot exist without each other.... Madness and sanity are not two different garments; they are the warp and weft of the same fabric. (O'Hagan, 2014, p15-16)

Here O'Hagan is getting closer to what Mad Studies might contemplate more extensively in its core literature. Why do most mad people dwell on their madness? What does this tell us about their experience, their values? And what exactly are madness and sanity themselves? What *is* madness, and *why* is madness?

Mad Pride: a celebration of mad culture is another source of first-hand accounts of madness. It consists of 24 personal essays “boasting about the wild things the authors have done when they've been losing it; accounts of personal empowerment and liberation through madness; a few pertinent 'political' pieces; and a great number of gratuitous gestures of defiance.” (Curtis et al, eds. 2000, p.8) The book “celebrates madness [and] asserts the rights of 'mad' people without pleading for them” (Curtis et al, eds, 2000, p.8) This stance reflects another exploration of madness for its own sake, and lends itself to Mad Studies accordingly.

A third text that would serve well within the Mad Studies canon is *A Philosophy of Madness: The Experience of Psychotic Thinking* by Wouter Kusters, who shares his own story of madness as a backdrop to his position as a mad philosopher. This tome of a volume would challenge any scholar, as its 16 chapters run to over 700 pages of densely intellectual reflection – yet it celebrates madness on its own terms, as explained here:

Madness is kept out of bounds as a nadir of meaninglessness, a breeding ground for unreal apparitions, chimeras, and sham. It is usually ascribed to the mentally defective, to the neurologically impaired, and to those believed to be suffering from a brain disease. In this state, on the other side of an abstract barrier—which sometimes turns into a very concrete barrier—between the normal and the deviant, the healthy and the ill, madness is neutralized, anesthetized, and ultimately “fragmented” or “annihilated.” That is exactly what this book is about: the loss of the richness of the world of madness — it is a philosophical reflection on what madness actually is... [but] Philosophers are not the only voices to be heard in this book. Madness also has its say.... When we listen carefully to expressions of madness, we hear a philosophical sound, a sense of having been seized by themes of vital importance that we know from the traditions of philosophy. (Kusters, 2020, p.2)

In other words: madness itself has something to offer to humanity, and exists not merely in relation to the psychiatric system. All three of these first-person texts come to this conclusion and would be of benefit to the Mad Studies project.

Madness as spiritual crisis

There is a substantial literature in the field of Transpersonal Studies which explores experiences similar to and overlapping with madness, and which describe this type of experience as a spiritual crisis or emergency, rather than a mental illness. I propose that the following items of scholarship would introduce such an argument to and thus enhance the Mad Studies canon considerably:

- *Spiritual Emergency: when personal transformation becomes a crisis* (Grof and Grof, eds, 1989)
- *Psychosis and Spirituality: consolidating the new paradigm* (Clarke, ed, 2010)

Edited by Stanislav and Christina Grof, the essay collection *Spiritual Emergency: when personal transformation becomes a crisis* gets right to the point in Part One: Divine Madness: Psychology, Spirituality and Psychosis. (Grof and Grof, eds, 1989, pp. 1-60) And while later sections acknowledge the difficulties and demands of this type of experience - with chapters such as 'The challenges of psychic opening' (Armstrong, 1989) and 'Promises and pitfalls of the spiritual path' (Dass, 1989) for example - it also offers a positive perspective: 'When insanity is a blessing: the message of shamanism.' (Kalweit, 1989) In other words, a spiritual interpretation in all its facets is offered as a possible way of understanding unusual states of consciousness.

Published in 1989, this text draws a distinction between madness as a spiritual experience and madness as pathology, warning readers to take caution:

Episodes of nonordinary states of consciousness cover a very wide spectrum, from purely spiritual states without any pathological features to conditions that are clearly biological in nature and require medical treatment. It is extremely important to take a balanced approach and to be able to differentiate spiritual emergencies from genuine psychoses. (Grof and Grof, eds, 1989, p. xiii)

By the 21st century, however, this distinction was becoming less obvious or necessary. Isabel Clarke, who founded the Spiritual Crisis Network (not to be confused with the Spiritual Emergence Network founded by Christina Grof) edited another classic collection of Transpersonal Studies, *Psychosis and Spirituality: Consolidating the New Paradigm*. In the opening chapter, Clarke suggests that we are “breaking through into an area beyond the efforts to draw distinction between psychosis and spirituality, and an exploration of the creative possibilities that this vista reveal[s].” (Clarke, ed, 2010, p.1) She also draws attention to “the psychological research, accounts from marginalised areas of discourse (such as the cross-cultural

and anthropological perspectives) and data from personal experience ... demand[s] that this challenging new perspective be taken seriously.” (Clarke, ed, 2010, p.1)

This assertion is born out with chapters such as 'Spiritual Experience: Healthy Psychoticism?' (Claridge, 2010) 'Are Delusions on a Continuum? The Case of Religious and Delusional Beliefs' (Peters, 2010) and 'Mapping Our Madness: the Hero's Journey as a Therapeutic Approach.' (Hartley, 2010) I would argue that these matters are very relevant to Mad Studies and should be considered in depth within the Mad Studies context.

Madness as play

I couldn't resist: our own QMU colleague Jesse Bailey has been developing a thesis predicated on the proposition of madness as play. A dissertation is in progress which will investigate this theory comprehensively. In the meantime I can only refer to the following essays submitted to various course modules:

- *Madness as play* (Bailey, 2023a)
- *Sociology of madness-as-play* (Bailey, 2023b)
- *Mad Studies: playing in the Borderlands* (Bailey, 2023c)

Bailey's proposition begins with the observation that “play has become the type of activity that ends up being defined as deviance, pathologized and prohibited by the psy-disciplines as ‘madness’.” (Bailey, 2023a) He goes on to propose a

project of reframing madness-as-play, emerging from the belief that if Mad Studies is to prove “part of a wider revolutionary project” (Menzies and LeFrançois, 2013, p.17) then it must also give emancipatory new ways of approaching madness. The lens of play provides one such approach... (Bailey, 2023b)

Bailey again makes a direct appeal to Mad Studies to reconsider its framing, when suggesting that Mad Studies scholars perceive of themselves not as psychiatric-survivors in relationship to the mental health system, but rather as social disruptors and borderland-explorers:

... this deterritorializing force of becoming is central to the experience of madness (and play) because it breaks apart the dualistic thinking of identitarian binary oppositions that forms the very basis of consensus reality. Mad Studies students must work to draw on this to open up this borderland as beyond the

academy/community and the rational/irrational. That is to say rather than bridging it should be a movement that resists/desists both the academy and the community by disrupting both. (Bailey, 2023c)

Like first-person accounts of madness, and the framing of madness as spiritual crisis, the madness-as-play theory offers yet another example of an alternative literature for the Mad Studies canon.

These are all ways that mad knowledge arises from madness on its own terms, rather than through its relationship to the psychiatric system.

Conclusion

In this essay I have examined some of the items of scholarship used in the field of Mad Studies (what I refer to as its canon.) They seem to rely heavily on a construction of the mad as related to the psychiatric system and society at large.

Yet mad knowledge encompasses more than the experiences of the mad in relation to their treatment as service-users. I have also explored how we might expand the Mad Studies canon to include the experience of madness itself, in forms such as first-hand accounts, inquiries into madness as spiritual crisis, and the theory of madness as play. Inclusion of these alternative literatures to the Mad Studies canon would strengthen and legitimise the unique contributions of knowledge and expertise which the mad have to offer.

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