



GUEST EDITORIAL

Mad Studies: The Basics

Merrick Daniel Pilling

School of Disability Studies, Toronto Metropolitan University

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Earlier this year I published a book entitled, [Mad Studies: The Basics](#). This book introduces Mad Studies as a critical orientation akin to, and often intersecting with, crip theory, queer theory, critical race studies, feminism, decolonialism, and other critical studies. As this suggests, Mad Studies is not simply the study of mental health and illness. Rather, Mad Studies embraces “a liberationist desire to resist, transform, and abolish oppressive practices within the systems that create marginalization, and implement frameworks and responses to madness and distress that are grounded within the collective knowledge of those deemed Mad” (pp. 1-2). I wrote this book as a contribution to Mad Studies field-building; despite its growth, there are still many who have never heard of Mad Studies. The field is sometimes still referred to as ‘emerging,’ but with a robust body of literature, an international journal, and many post-secondary course offerings, it’s safe to say that Mad Studies is an established field in its own right. The book showcases some of the many contributions of Mad Studies and demonstrates that it is no longer emerging; it has arrived!

About a month after I finished writing the book, I wrote the following list of ten things you can learn more about in the book. My goal was to write something brief that is fairly easy to understand and captures some of what is found in the book, and thereby some of the ‘basics’ of Mad Studies. My motivation for doing so is the large Mad Studies course that I teach at Toronto Metropolitan University. The course draws students from across the university, and I wanted to create a piece that would convey to students from a very diverse range programs (e.g. Biomedical Sciences, English, Social Work, etc.) what they are signing up for in a Mad Studies course. That said, I hope it will also be useful to others who are interested in Mad Studies. While writing the book, I thought a lot about common, reoccurring misconceptions regarding Mad Studies. The following addresses some of those misconceptions, as well as some hot topics and points of contention in Mad academic discourse and community conversations. Whether you are signing up for a course, or you’re looking for an entry point into Mad Studies, the following is a list of ten things you can read more about in *Mad Studies: The Basics*.

Mad Studies is hard to define, and maybe that's a good thing. Mad Studies scholars come from all over the academy and combine ideas from different academic disciplines in interesting ways; that's why you might hear it said that Mad Studies is multi-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary. We don't all self-identify in the same way and we don't all agree with one another about what madness is, and what the responses to it should be. Mad Studies scholars and activists critique the biomedical model of mental illness in many different ways and take up all kinds of positions towards mental health systems such as transformation, reformation, and abolition. This allows for a multiplicity of voices and perspectives that can lead to generative, creative, and coalitional theory and action.

Mad Studies is grounded in the lived experience and activism of people who are Mad, psychiatrized, and/or criminalized. Mad Studies is based on vibrant, multi-vocal, and non-centralized activist movements that go by many names including the mad movement, psychiatric survivor movement, and the consumer/survivor/ex-patient movement. Rachel Gorman and Bren LeFrançois (2017) put it this way: "mad studies takes place in a variety of spaces within or without academia, but never without community" (p. 108).

The origins of Mad Studies are multiple, intersecting, and diverse. One of the more obvious places to look for the roots of Mad Studies is in the mad movement; but the origins of Mad Studies can be found in many places. For example, Sami Schalk (2022) shows us that the Black Panther Party resisted psychiatric oppression. Gay Liberation and trans activism of the 1960s and 70s are also important places to look for some of the origins of Mad Studies.

The activist and scholarly contributions of Indigenous, racialized, and Mad people of colour and 2SLGBTQI+ people are fundamental to Mad Studies. And yet, they aren't always seen as such. Like other critical studies and movements, Mad Studies struggles with the forces of white supremacy that puts whiteness at the centre and lifts white people to the top. Likewise, queer and trans voices and Mad analyses that look at 2SLGBTQI experiences and the intersections of sanism and transphobia need to be more prominent in Mad Studies.

Mad Studies and anti-psychiatry are not the same thing. The anti-psychiatry movement of the 1960s was mainly led by white men who were mental health professionals and has been critiqued for not engaging with Mad communities. Funnily enough, most of the well-known theorists of the 1960s and 70s who are commonly described as 'anti-psychiatry' did not self-identify in this way. The term 'anti-psychiatry' often gets thrown around in an ill-defined way by those who want to put down, dismiss, or simplify nuanced critiques of mental health systems. That said, there is space within Mad Studies for those who identify with anti-psychiatry; but it is important to remember that Mad Studies and anti-psychiatry are not one and the same. Mad Studies is also not the same thing as critical mental health, critical psychiatry, or neurodiversity approaches. If you want to learn more about the differences between Mad Studies and some of these other frameworks, Geoffrey Reaume (2022) and Brigit McWade et al. (2015) have written about this in more detail.

Mad Studies is a structural and systemic critique. Mad Studies is *not* a critique of an individual's choice to take psychiatric drugs or use medical services. But there *are* Mad critiques of forced drugging, and of the fact that no one can make a fully informed choice about drugs without high quality studies on long-term outcomes performed independently (i.e. not paid for by drug companies).

You don't have to identify as Mad to participate in Mad Studies and activism. Some people have reclaimed the word 'Mad' and find it empowering as an identity label and as a politic. But for many good reasons that are discussed in more detail in the book, not everyone wants to do that. Mad is a term that doesn't fit well for everyone, including some (not all) Indigenous, Black, racialized, queer, and trans people. Ameil Joseph (2019) reminds us that Indigenous and racialized people are often victimized and maddened by immigration systems and criminal justice systems rather than, or in addition to, mental health systems. For these reasons (among others) it would not be helpful to try and limit participation in Mad Studies to people who like to use the word 'Mad' to describe themselves. Another thing to remember is that it's important to respect how people self-identify, and it's equally important not to impose identities and labels on people.

Mad Studies and movements have (re)developed many important concepts and practices to fight psychiatric oppression. Mad Studies and movements fight psychiatric oppression that treats people as incapable of knowing what is best for themselves, and the imposition of forced institutionalization, drugging, restraints, and electroconvulsive therapy. Some key concepts and practices in Mad Studies include (but are not limited to) epistemic injustice, sanism, bodymind, the psy complex, madness, recovery, and peer support. Mad activists create ways of responding to distress and madness that value the knowledge, experience, and perspectives of people who have been psychiatrized, criminalized, and dehumanized.

Mad Pride is a thing. Beginning in the 1990s, Mad activists created Psychiatric Survivor Pride Day, which was later renamed Mad Pride. In Toronto, Ontario, these events included opportunities to come together for entertainment as well as workshops about tenants' rights, social assistance, policing, and forced psychiatric treatment. Mad Pride events have taken place all over the world, and some have also included marches featuring a 'bed push,' where participants wear hospital gowns and restraints and push a hospital bed down the street. Check out the work of Chava Finkler (1997, 2009), Leah Lakshmi Piepzna Samarasinha (2018), and Geoffrey Reaume (2008) for more details about Mad Pride in Canada.

We need coalitional movements. Now more than ever we need social justice movements and scholarly work that is coalitional, centres the most marginalized, and combines forces to fight oppression and create social change. As Indigenous, racialized, and activists of colour have long said, our struggles are connected and intersecting, and our resistance needs to be too.

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- *For definitions of terms such as ‘psychiatrized,’ see *Madness Network News’* definitions: <https://madnessnetworknews.com/definitions/>