



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Mad Studies Genealogy and Praxis

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Abstract

The opinions, writings, artwork, and cultural production of academics and non-academic mental health service users/survivors form the basis of what we have come to understand as Mad Studies. In this essay, we introduce what we mean by Mad Studies “praxis” (i.e., theory-informed action) in the hopes of clarifying the distinction between other similar frameworks doing social justice/anti-oppression work. Our argument is that Mad Studies praxis gives us a specific multi-vocal vocabulary for advancing our understanding, critical analyses, and emancipatory projects which build on the interdependence between academic and community activism. Mad Studies has a rich theoretical praxis based on its enduring historical, intellectual, and community-centered mobilisation despite criticisms and challenges.

Keywords

Mad Studies
Praxis
Genealogy
Social justice
User/Survivor
Movements

History

Received 14 May 2022
Revised 20 July 2022
Accepted 04 Aug 2022

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Mad Studies is an area of study informed by the experiences, activism and advocacy of people who have been on the receiving end of services and/or incarcerated in a psychiatric facility. Mad Studies is born from the perspectives, writings, art and cultural work of academics and non-academic service user/survivors. In this article we discuss what we mean by Mad Studies **praxis**. We briefly touch on some critiques and challenges and conclude by arguing that Mad Studies has a rich theoretical praxis built from its historical, intellectual, emancipatory, and community mobilization. As a discipline, Mad Studies is not solely about academically “interpreting” the world or facets of psychiatric oppression, but it works to validate the experiences of all Mad people, expand praxis through reflexivity and produce material change, rejecting research and systems that exclude and denigrate the epistemologies of Mad people.

Critiques of Mad Studies

As we are committed to the emancipatory potential of Mad Studies praxis, we would like to start by acknowledging familiar critiques. Since its inception, Mad Studies has been criticized for being too radical or anti-psychiatry or, alternately, not radical or anti-psychiatry enough. There are also criticisms - which we consider to be entirely warranted - about the over-reliance on voices and works of white service users, particularly in Euro-American-Canadian contexts to the exclusion of other perspectives and jurisdictions. This includes the exclusion of scholarship that meaningfully attends to the inherent historical and contemporary interconnections between psychiatry and colonization, slavery, criminalization and white supremacy (Jayasree & Jones, 2016; Gorman & LeFrancois 2018). One of the more difficult criticisms centers on the complaint that Mad Studies is elitist, insular, dominated by academics and that it doesn't reach or represent people who struggle with complex mental health challenges and/or disabilities. There are concerns about the ways in which those who have institutional power to participate in Mad Studies praxis do so because they have (in spite of personal experiences of madness or distress), gained enough skills, access and cultural capital to participate in knowledge production and as such, may paradoxically reinforce hierarchies, class divisions or worse, leverage Mad people for their own personal research endeavours, academic promotions, or self-interested advocacy.

While we agree with, and acknowledge many of these valid critiques of Mad Studies we're very aware that critiques are also routinely aimed at curricula that take up and teach Mad Studies and "difficult knowledge" (James, 2017) that unsettles the status quo. We have seen similar critiques leveraged at fields such as Disability and Queer Studies. There is ongoing opposition to pedagogical approaches that teach about colonisation and/or are grounded in Indigenous knowledge as well as calls to action (Leddy & O'Neill 2021). A compelling contemporary example of the suppression of difficult curricula are the attacks on critical race theory, where in the USA 41 states have taken steps or introduced legislation to restrict teaching critical race theory or discussions about race and sexism (Schwartz, 2021). As a relatively new academic discipline, Mad Studies has had less time to engage with critiques, in comparison to Queer or Disability Studies, which emerged as academic disciplines more than three decades ago (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2017; Grogan, 2020). While there is increasing scholarship and response to the limitations and exclusions within Mad Studies discourse (Faulkner, 2018; Joseph, 2019; Spandler & Konstantina, 2019) there is still more work needed to advance the field even further.

Staying committed to this work and "coming out of the closet" to identify as a researcher, scholar or teacher specifically committed to "Mad" Studies can, however, leave you professionally discredited and experiencing prejudicial attacks – attacks similar in vein to the ways in which queer, disability and/or feminist academics were denigrated, had books

banned/erased or were deemed too radical, biased or non-existent¹. Professional turf wars with disciplines that share overlapping madness-related curriculum (e.g. social work, psychology, law) also play a role in supporting or disempowering opportunities for growth, shared resources, funding and autonomy of Mad Studies. *Who* is critiquing and *what* standpoints are held by those who criticise Mad Studies merits consideration. As these criticisms are worked through, it is important to parse out what is justified critique from prejudice and aversion to Mad people taking up space in contested sites and organising themselves in the first place. Like other fields, Mad Studies is not impervious to attacks, hate, or micro-aggressions and these will continue to rise as pedagogy and praxis matures and deepens.

Mad Studies: master or meta discipline?

As mentioned, Mad Studies is tied to a history and discourse that examines not only service user/survivor identity, but the very real consequences of stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination based on that identity. This is, of course, experienced differently in nationalist and transnationalist contexts. But irrespective of jurisdiction, Mad Studies' genealogy lies in its early epistemological transformation from "patient" under carceral, colonial, and medical authority towards one of consciousness-raising, patient liberation and focused goals towards conceptual and practical alternatives to psychiatry (Rose, 2017). The break from dominant medical discourse towards conscientization informed by social movement and human rights mobilization was and is itself a challenge to the praxis of psychiatry. There were, and some would argue continue to be powerful messages that conscientization of the patient is not possible, making psychiatric praxis indispensable precisely because "patients" cannot think for themselves in rational ways. The very notion that patients might think for themselves, let alone develop their own quality indicators, theoretical models and survival strategies runs counter to this assumption. Looking closer at the theory and praxis on which psychiatry is founded, we see that psychiatric theory is maintained by practices that routinely compromise rights, fail to be transparent about its own shortcomings and failures (Scull, 2022) but also seek to ensure domination over patient narratives and counter narratives and history (Reaume, 2007). Even today, as psychiatry continues to vie for domination over patient narratives/counter narratives (Million, 2013; Daley & Pilling 2021, Pilling, 2022) Mad Studies praxis pushes back against this supremacy.² In our view, Mad Studies has a right to preserve its scholarship and claim space in arenas that hold structural power (such as medicine, psychology, law). This in turn will allow for what Foisy says is a new way of listening and for "ethical engagement, commitment to

¹ Please also see: Pető, Andrea, Attack on Freedom of Education in Hungary. The Case of Gender Studies (2018). Engenderings LSE Blog, 22 Sept 2018, Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3898856>

² Please also see page 15-7 on Centring Madness Curriculum taught Lucy Costa and by Lauren Munro in Knaak, S., & Sukhera, J. (2021). *Real-world examples of approaches that address mental illness- and substance use-related structural stigma in Canada's health-care system*. Ottawa, Canada: Mental Health Commission of Canada.

critique as an act of love, to listening to madness speak truth-to-power, and learning from these discomforts” (Foisy, 2020).

As we build from the teachings of so very many others (Snyder et al. 2019; Joseph, 2019; Russo, 2022, Davar, 2022) and refine what is meant by “Mad praxis,” its significance and the need to address important critiques which foster new possibilities, we must resist positioning Mad Studies as *the* alternative master narrative, or as a metanarrative of interacting texts establishing assumptions or essentialising Mad people’s experience. Having said this, Mad Studies is not simply a vessel for *everything* and *anything* related to projects initiated by Mad people. If we contend that part of Mad Studies praxis is to deconstruct and address prejudice and violence (Daley et.al 2019), then it is incumbent on us to sharpen analysis and identify the rigorous methods required to dismantle injustice (LeFrancois & Voronka 2022). The choices made along the way matter, and it is necessary that Mad Studies not lose sight of the academic *and* intellectual work at hand in order to deepen those methods and their outcomes.

What is Mad Studies Praxis?

In essence, “praxis” refers to what theory (ideas) does in practice, or stated another way, the translation of theory into real-world impact. To our knowledge, Mad Studies praxis has never been explicitly defined, but Mad Studies scholarship has been advancing our understanding. For example, in their Introduction to the Canadian text *Mad Matters*, Menzies and colleagues describe Mad Studies as “an interdisciplinary and multi-vocal praxis” (p. 13). In later writing, Gorman & LeFrancois (2017) explore the relationships between Mad Studies scholarship and the Mad movement, noting, “Given its emergence within the mad movement, crucially, we see that Mad studies takes place in a variety of spaces within or without academia, but never without community...[Mad Studies] has been envisioned as a collective project that has begun and will evolve primarily out of the political discussions and theorising taking place among members of the mad community.” Hannah Morgan (2021) also reminds us in the recent *Handbook of Mad Studies*, “As praxis disciplines which are defined by their commitment to practical action through and alongside more theoretical thinking, our work needs to speak to and be accessible to a variety of audiences.”

Extending from this thinking, we would argue that Mad Studies, then, is itself praxis. That is, Mad Studies is a vehicle through which Mad theorising operates to achieve the political goals of the Mad movement, and an intention to address these goals is inherently embedded in this “collective project.” From this position, we consider it to be entirely fair to critique Mad Studies scholarship on the extent to which it can be seen to achieve (or serve to move Mad community towards achieving) these goals in several sites and jurisdictions. One challenge to leveraging this critique, however, is that Mad Studies is “multi-vocal,” which we take to mean that it is heterogenous in the epistemologies and ideologies of those who participate in it. This includes, as others have noted (e.g., Diamond, 2013), diversity in

understandings of the nature and meanings of madness, and in turn, relationships to psychiatry and other psy-disciplines. In this context, is it possible to articulate shared political goals that Mad Studies ought to be working in support of?

Mad Studies praxis as political action

We know neoliberal academic or psy-institutions incentivize knowledge production at a cost of detachment from larger movements that seek to articulate shared goals and real socio-political change. We also know that attempts to bridge theory to practice, or scrutinise the dualism inherent in notions of “theory and practice” within community work and with Mad/survivor researchers has presented challenges. There is a need to examine how power is replicated within our collective activism, organisations and scholarship work given there are many ethical and personal obstacles for all of us committed to social justice. But, despite these complexities and critiques, Mad Studies is leading to dialogue and growth in our collective understanding of prejudice, violence and sanism (Poole, & LeBlanc-Omstead, forthcoming). To contribute to our efforts, we highlight some suggestions that may assist in addressing what we see as the waning of a social movement activism towards increasingly “professionalized” or co-opted practices. As we are both engaged in the effort to politically challenge anti-sanist agendas, albeit from different positionalities, we would like to offer some (preliminary) facets that we argue distinguish Mad Studies praxis from a variety of other service user/patient, peer, academic or, mental health led projects:

1. Mad Studies praxis builds from its historicity. Perhaps the most important piece that often gets overlooked in patient/peer projects is attention to the history that informs the foundations on which these projects stand. Understanding the wide-ranging history of the Mad community and its fight for liberation is core to the Mad Studies genealogy. In turn, Mad Studies praxis centers Mad peoples’ voices and knowledge(s), including historical knowledge and the socio-political contexts in which this knowledge emerged. This does not mean that those who don’t identify as Mad can’t do Mad Studies, but rather that the canon of knowledge that defines the field has been (and should continue to be) generated by Mad people, and should build upon this genealogy.
2. Mad Studies praxis differentiates academic work from intellectual work, and values intellectual work that happens in community and other non-academic spaces. The reading, researching and other routines of an academic (Mad scholar) are not preeminent forms of knowledge and are not in and of themselves the same as intellectual work. What we mean by intellectual work includes the work that is about the collective labour of naming, theorizing (generation of ideas and making connections between ideas), teaching and continuous reflexivity about one’s position in relation to sanism and other forms of structural injustice. Through this lens, intellectual work happens in academia, or in community activism, art, care and in cultural work (among other spaces).

3. Mad Studies praxis is emancipatory. That is, it takes up as its explicit aim the dismantling of systems of structural power, and while it may center sanism, it is attentive to its inherent intersections with racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, transphobia and ableism. Thus, our Mad Studies praxis seeks to make transparent with some precision how dominant medical, legal and academic paradigms lead and re-perpetuate injustice, carcerality, inequity and marginalization. It addresses and unpacks dominant claims, evidence and the existing hegemonic order. It also analyses the ways in which service users/survivors have at times been made complicit in psychiatric logics, and in so doing, have erased or compromised history and human rights.
4. Mad Studies praxis is critical. It doesn't hesitate and is unequivocal about its right to exist. While various systems or institutions may claim sincerity in respect to inclusion and engagement, Mad Studies theory is habitually resisted and alienated from these same projects claiming to be about inclusion or engagement. When professionals, particularly in clinical contexts, speak about "teamwork" or "interdisciplinary" work, they often mean any discipline except Mad Studies. As such, Mad Studies praxis works to make these systems of power visible and works on steps that specifically lead to a revolution and change in the conditions that generate suppression, exploitation and exclusion of Mad Studies theory itself. Our goal is not to be favourable to, or convince prejudicial systems, psychiatrists, or paraprofessionals to accept all our terms but to make the conditions of aversion, erasure, hatred and violence less viable.

Conclusion

If we accept that Mad Studies, as praxis, takes up these goals (or others, as we hope continued discussion and debate will extend and refine these ideas), then we are able to evaluate work purporting to "be" or "do" Mad Studies on the basis of this praxis. Does it centre Mad voices? Does it disrupt sanism in ways that destabilize - rather than reinforce - interlocking forms of structural oppression? Does it engage the intellectual work of Mad people within and outside of the academy, and attend to the relevant histories? Does it reject research and regimes that exclude the epistemologies of Mad people? If we start there, then perhaps there is hope to combat the unabashedly discriminatory practices everywhere that seek to coopt and assimilate as opposed to offer autonomy and space for the credibility of Mad praxis to thrive.

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