



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Finding Meaning in the Madness: Conceptualising compassion as a unifying force for Mad Studies

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Abstract

What is compassion and how do we achieve it? Or more accurately what stops us from being able to engage in life compassionately? It is often suggested that madness involves a detachment from the world in which we inhabit, suggesting it is the antithesis to compassion. However, this is more down to a warped dominant understanding of how we connect with what is around us than the 'nature' of Mad experiences. This essay seeks to critique how Modern expectations surrounding the production of knowledge create conceptions of distress and the human condition which undermine a compassionate understanding of Madness. A process which cuts us off from the range of possibilities available to us. The essay therefore questions how we deem knowledge as proper and asks if there is not another, more collaborative, way in which we can make greater time and space for a wider diversity of living.

Keywords

Mad studies, epistemic justice, compassion, knowledge production, emancipation

History

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**Now begin to digest *the* meaning of the distressed,
We are the manic manikin sluggishly getting the world off their chest,
Whilst our bored judgement hangs around waging in jest,**

**Our experiences raging up to lay down the law,
Whilst the wind rises and whispers out the most beautiful storm,
So today we will not sit around feeling too forlorn,
Instead seeing an extravaganza that, cackling, begins to break our fall.**

Part I

“Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?”

“That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,” said the Cat.

Lewis Carroll, Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland (1865)

Where do we want to get to? Often an honest question but not one easily answered when we have a thousand voices coming together to make clear pangs of injustice. However, I believe we should aspire to find in the voices a harmony that can counter the wrongs committed by the biomedical regime’s dehumanising crusade to define distress (Fannen, 2021). This essay will piece together a route through which Mad Studies can undermine domineering expert observations over us and instead centre our Mad voices (Russo and Sweeney, 2016). It will emphasise how situating Mad voices relieves epistemic injustice (LeBlanc-Omstead and Kinsella, 2016), where epistemic injustice represents the ways in which our thoughts, feelings and potential actions are denounced as lacking credibility or possibility (Fricker, 2007). In countering epistemic injustice, Mad Studies promotes the constitution of a shared deviant identity, so we may reclaim the validity of our stories in a compassionate play. To be compassionate however does not come easily but requires readiness for something of an escapade, necessitating us to allow space for the differences that not only separate, but enliven us (Roemer, 2023). Undertaking this collective adventure can further fuel Mad Studies’ promotion of compassionate thought to disrupt the dominant processes of knowledge-making within the academy and society more generally (Bruce, 2021; Ingram, 2016). Mad Studies achieves this by subverting the means by which traditional power structures invalidate the nonconformists who dared let the veil of their mind slip, taking advantage of how, as Mad persons, we find ourselves on the outskirts of a socio-normative acceptability. From the shadows comes a new appreciation of the light.

Such a Mad study involves opening a window on how ‘expert’ analyses are themselves riddled with value judgements, relying on an inconsistent ‘common sense’ narrative of distress as ‘illness’, which surrounds the construction and maintenance of meaning in Modern, twenty-first century society (Latour, 2003). This construction of meaning involves the process through which perceptions are moulded and how we then focus our attention toward what we deem to be important – a process of construction and consolidation, structured through the intertwining of our relationships, values and wider being (Fiorin and Delfitto, 2020). After all, one could question how living in systems that engrain discrimination whilst marching us towards ecological catastrophe forms the barometer of an aspirational normalcy. We might ask, is there not a rebellious necessity in indulging our madness and casting out from behind these masks to dance at the Saturnalia in a fit of ecstasy? However, to avoid narcissistic exceptionalism and a slip into debauchery it is important not to ascribe to such romantic fantasies around the edge of the map, for dragons are oft sneaky and vengeful beings. The fundamental question is: if we are not to celebrate our Madness, how can we channel it compassionately? Inspired by the works of Mad Studies, I wish to present a counter-

hegemonic narrative (Martinez, 2022) through which to challenge the means of traditional academic knowledge production. A quest to reappraise the frameworks which define Madness in an emancipatory foray.

Part II

“Even a stopped clock tells the right time twice a day. And for once I’m inclined to believe Withnail is right; we are indeed drifting into the arena of the unwell. Making an enemy of our own future. What we need is harmony. Fresh air. Stuff like that.”

I, Withnail and I (1987)

Firstly, it is important to consider that Mad Studies aspires not only to be an academic and activist tea party for those who are, or have been, susceptible to disagreements in their relationship to ‘sanity’, but wills us to embody its lessons through emancipatory actions (Menzies, LaFrancois and Reaume, 2013). Emancipatory actions better served if we can seek out harmony which, in allowing us to piece together different voices and perspectives, can constitute a unifying ideal for Mad Studies. In the process, we lay the groundwork for an inclusive philosophy that carries us away from the perceptions others have laden upon us to a full spectrum of dreaming – not a straightforward aspiration, with ongoing disagreements about how the in/discipline should situate itself (Ingram, 2016). However, written from a UK perspective, this piece subscribes to not imposing orthodoxies, but seeking to find a way to encourage solidarity in light of differences of experiences and opinions (Sweeney, 2016).

This raises the question of whether a unifying mantra is necessary, or even desired, in that any attempts to coalesce diverse experiences always risks leaving some side-lined. However, this need not be the case, for unity does not require assumptions of conformity if we take inspiration from direct action circles working towards consensus-based decision making. In direct action circles, each participant’s best intentions are taken as given in the quest to find common ground through mutual development of understanding alongside each other (Graeber, 2005). Therefore, the experience of every person is intrinsically valuable, giving rise to new and important knowledge. Such a collaborative process strengthens the collective voice and intragroup connections amongst participants to make the possibility of reaching new horizons more likely. While it is not the destination that is important, but the way in which the process heaves all we can ‘see into sight’ more clearly. Thus, the compassionate procedure comes to define us, encouraging the enjoyment we receive from involvement and engagement to take precedence over what we achieve (Seranfiski, 2016). This is what I have learned from Mad Studies in the academy, that it is not a point of shame to have had a diverse response to distress but that each flame which guides and challenges us takes a different shape. Appreciation for this reveals that an element of the subject’s emancipatory potential is fostering an inclusive community for people who have been judged on the idiosyncrasies of their own struggle. We must now uncover exactly what that means.

My personal experience, for example, was of drowning in judgement for what I saw as my brain's decided way of relating to itself and the world I inhabit. This is because my own experiences of the arena of the 'unwell' conveyed a diabolical definitiveness that acted as an opiate against uncertainty but denied me any sense of connectivity to the world outside my dreams. Instead, growth required a 'healthy' scepticism rooted in comfort with uncertainty (Ince, 2021). Consequently, this essay refuses to indulge the tyranny of positivity found in some narratives of madness (Noorani, 2019) and instead channels the will to cognitively appraise situations (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984) as part of a reflexive journey – a reflexive journey given traction for me by finding shared understanding within the Maddened academy. My experience had previously been denied credibility through medication as opposed to conversation. In realising the spectrum of experience and meaning, Mad Studies helped me discover a subtlety not captured in the simplistic narrative of deficit and biological abnormality purported by the medical regime (Fannen, 2021).

Mad Studies has served as an inspiration through which I have reframed my Madness and come to a new appreciation that narratives are not 'facts', no matter how convincing they seem, but instead are constructed through the centrality of humanity's narrative spinning capabilities (Gottschall, 2013). I was not entirely apathetic, nor a magical Pirate Captain doing battle with the Royal family. However, we give credibility to sources that fit in with our dynamically shifting view of the world, a world we construct both sensually and socioculturally as a fundamentally collective species. We must together, therefore, seek to reveal the ways Mad Studies differentiates from the dominant discourse of 'mental illness' in contemporary Western thought. A process that not only occurs in the in/discipline's challenge to biomedicine's hegemony over Madness but in its whole approach to meaning making. This is related to Mad Studies' layered subjectivity, facilitating travel in a more promising direction than that suggested by dispassionate cultural thought. Therefore, a conceptual ideology founded in a humble, networked compassion introduces a dynamism into talk of Madness that may bring the world back to life.

Part III

Any speciality, if important, is too important to be left to the specialists. After all, the specialist cannot function unless he concentrates more or less entirely on his speciality and, in doing so, he will ignore the vast universe lying outside and miss important elements that ought to help guide his judgment.

Isaac Asimov (1983, p. 123)

The specialist sits in the psychiatrist's chair and tells you they have a particularly clever idea of what's going on inside *your* head. They beguile you with tales of brain chemicals and promise you magical cures no matter what you dread. Although it appears their lens is not sufficiently philosophically interrogated, making their science poorer (McGilchrist, 2021), as they say *you*

are too engrossed in your thoughts to see them and that their 'detached' analysis will reveal greater truths. This is the Modernist fallacy.

In this context compassion becomes our antidote, a counter to Bruno Latour's (1993) conceptualisation of Modernity. Latour, a sociologist famed for his critical approach to science, sought not to dismantle scientific institutions but shine a light on their workings to increase trust in their processes and outcomes (Latour, 2018). He defined Modernity as a system of thought which seeks to explain 'natural' phenomena as distinct from 'cultural' influences (Latour, 1993). The distinction is important because this split culture seeks to insecurely dominate by enforcing human exceptionalism. A human exceptionalism, lacking the capacity to fully integrate our species' position *of* and *within* the world, instead presenting us as masters *over* the planet in a state of conflict with where our life comes from (Lent, 2021). Modernity is the grounding philosophy for the reification of a detached 'objectivity' and was given such power through the Enlightenment's position as a dominating metanarrative, explaining the world in totality to the detriment of other explanations or experiences (Ward, 1994; Bruce, 2021). By defining others' ideas or world views, Modernity is the basis of a colonial thought stream (Smith, 2021), antithetical to approaching the unknown with the sort of curious compassion that could be so r/evolutionary to uncovering new understandings of the world and promoting new meanings. Therefore, whilst Modernity prides itself on conquering the unknown, it refuses to engage with the kind of openness that may lead to genuine new insights to take shape.

To understand this, we can see biomedicine as one manifestation of the dominant metanarrative of Modernity, leading to its positioned 'epistemic superiority' within and beyond the realm of health (Nogueira, 2018). Psychiatrists embody this as they are seen to be *the* authoritative figures defining mental distress, whilst their influence also defines and is defined by disparate areas, such as law, childhood, and sociocultural history (Foucault, 1964). Psychiatrists are thus given the role of Modern sages, despite their training often limiting them to a biological focus on mental distress (Fannen, 2021). We should therefore ask where their epistemic humility is, as mere specialists of a field that leaves too much indiscernible. Biomedicine thus forms an exemplar of Modernity's methods, revealing the dual process of 1) choosing to understand complexity by breaking things into their constituent parts, the lowest common denominator, in the case of biomedicine, being neurochemicals (Johnstone & Boyle, 2020), before 2) designating a hierarchy of expertise based on knowledge of this narrow perspective (Latour, 2003). By disrupting the metanarrative of Modernity, we can thus further the ambitions of Mad Studies, encouraging a less alienating, more phenomenologically integrated version of biomedicine and all examinations of distress to take shape.

Emphasis is placed on the collaboratively imaginative project and extending an invitation to appreciate how understanding does not represent a 'social fact' but exists as a presentation of self at a particular juncture (Sweeney, 2016). In doing so, we become aware of the means through which the assumptions and histories of writer and reader come together in a mutually constructive process. Something that Mad Studies, in championing "making

(non)sense together” (Ingram, 2016), shows a reflexive awareness of. Mad Studies thus brings to life a spirit which can be channelled, making no claims to the pretence of narrow objectivity, instead encouraging an interpretive jaunt discursively. It is not enough for Mad Studies to reactively push back against the excesses of reductionism without creating a counter-narrative that ecologically plants us in the natural world whilst seeing our abilities to temper its most constraining excesses. To do away in entirety with the idea that brain chemicals may be going awry during the manifestation of mental distress is to itself put on certain lenses which conform to a murky mind-body dualism (Dunedin, 2023). An assumption we would better do without if we are to promote genuine care.

Part IV

*At the sick bed of Cúchulainn we'll kneel and say a prayer
But the ghosts are rattling at the door and the devil's in the chair*

The Pogue's, *The Sick Bed of Cuchulainn* (1985)

To achieve our crusade, we require not only our voices but a certain quality of belief that can be translated through actions, and writing that may capture each other's and the wider population's attention (Vonnegut & McConnell, 2019). Such writing need not be text on paper but can involve any effort that lays out our readings of the world we inhabit (Elliott and Culhane, 2017). Presenting our understandings requires a certain vulnerability that may be counterbalanced with a compassionate mindset (Bruce, 2021). Realising there are others who share in our hopes, bolsters us to lay out our own genuine truths that wrap up our fears and dreams into relatable thought waves for another. So, if we return to the original question of 'where do we want to go?', a space where our transgressions are not stigmatised is encompassed in Mad Studies' ethos. Yet, how do you foster genuine ties in such a disparate, even intangible, community? I would argue this requires a certain trust that through our actions we may ripple out and create the conditions for new dreams to be lifted and fears to be abated.

Consequently, rendering an encompassing trust requires not only the championing of our friends but also understanding those who may have challenged us and even caused us pain. A lesson I take into my inspection of a biomedical regime that has both saved me and torn me apart. Challenging myself to respect the intentions of others even where I do not condone their behaviour. For whilst we can chastise those with whom we do not agree, this is unlikely to lead to meaningful change (Roemer, 2023). For example, I am keenly aware that my own critical voice has often been the spikiest thorn in my efforts to find peace, while self-compassion becomes the boots with which I now tread where I was once stumbling barefoot through bogs.

Practising self-compassion, despite only being tentatively linked to compassion for others, utilises the same regions of the brain (López et. al., 2018). This is because all compassion is a dialogical exercise that comes into existence through the making of space for expression and acknowledging efforts to be genuine (Shafak, 2020). At its heart self-compassion may not only be an encouragement to keep going, but also make clearer the path. Self-compassion can offer both refuge on our journey and a map for which direction we desire to tread our dreams, a pedagogical approach of respecting ourselves not to engage in relationships in which we oppress others or allow ourselves to be oppressed. In turn, we expand our communication circles to realise a new grounding from which to make our voices felt (Freire, 1996). Therefore, compassion promotes a security that makes space for uncertainty, allowing us to explore the magic in our diffuse perspectives.

To develop this we will take La Marr Bruce's manifestation of madness as a space likened to the allegorical 'ship of fools' and the desperation of those hauled from their homelands as slaves - "It seems to me that neither imagination nor historiography is apt to apprehend the seasickness of spirit, the existential dread, and the feverish homesickness that might menace a mad prisoner or black captive trapped at sea" (Bruce, 2021; 2) - and we begin to come to a realisation of our place upon the waves. Bruce's vision captures how being enveloped by 'irrationality' is often portrayed as the dissolution of our humanity in Modern society (Grinker, 2021), highlighting a brutal synergy between the image of being torn from your home and dragged to one where you are considered less than and the pangs of being deemed insane. Although we should be careful not to look to dissolve our mad experiences to reintegrate other privileges (King, 2016), maybe we can capture the kind of genuine empathy that difficult experiences lay into the foundations of our being, that gives rise to the potential for post-traumatic growth to sprout (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). That is, we can take inspiration from Bruce's words to utilise our privilege to champion the truth held in each of our once disregarded perspectives. A captaining of our voices that will offer the most opportunities if fostered through a collectively imaginative spirit.

A mentality some may argue relates to the Enlightenment's calls for liberty, equality and fraternity but was in fact more likely to be found on a ship inhabited by those who went against God and different nation state's navies (Graeber, 2023). In what is a self-professed provocative work, David Graeber opens a reading of history that sees ideas like democracy and the welfare state as more likely born from piratannical committees than any god's supposed chosen hierarchies. When brought together with La Marr Bruce's reading, we begin to see, in the metaphorical sea of outcasts, not an overwhelming swell of hopelessness but the potential distillation of new utopian dreaming. Building on this we can take into our imagination how pirates doomed themselves to hell with their blasphemous ways and movement towards the noose and ask if going Mad, whilst respecting it comes with some painful insecurity, may provide new insights to help contest the excesses of division in contemporary society (Shafak, 2021). Madness therefore becomes an act in imaginary dreaming that challenges us not to fit in, but to existentially use our positions and experiences

to breed solidarity with all who have been decreed insignificant. In the process incorporating ours' and others' perspectives to construct a disruptive knowledge base.

Part V

***“What we have in common is our pain, we’re given the keys,
To unlock what it takes to fight for what we believe in”***

Little Simz, I love you, I hate you (2021)

Our memories form in our imaginations (Joyce, 1920), creating the semblance of a coherent narrative that sets the context for how we go out and interact with the world. This life story is constructed relationally with our understanding of how we are perceived, allowing us a sense of self that forms the basis of all our learning and experiences. Whilst this is seemingly an obvious point it is one which is too easily missed, particularly by those from a Western tradition of scientific thought who refuse to address the assumptions which scaffold their ideas (Latour, 2012). Truth is, after all, not a universal value but is distorted depending on where it is found. Truth in a court of law is different to that in a laboratory, indicative of not only the significance of context but how values are morphed and evolve temporally (Ulmer, 2023). Such an acknowledgement of the significance of context requires us to embrace the complexity of our lived realities. Especially when considering our position within the Anthropocene, which makes a mockery of the separation of nature and culture (Latour, 2012) and how humanity’s tying of progress to domination over the world is increasingly proving to be a dangerous delusion (Bookchin, 2007).

Important to Mad Studies because, for those who have experienced acute distress it is often obvious that not everything is always as it seems. However, through our pain we (hopefully) know things need not always be that way. For example, if we consider the concept that depression is an ulterior mode of consciousness (Whiteley, 2021) then what lessons are there to take from its realm? Mad experiences can consequently construct anti-normative praxis through which we may blend how we are impacted by the world in which we live with our agency (Avelino, 2021), encouraging us to query the very notions of generalised ‘progress’ and instead inspire others to critically digest what they are experiencing through the provision of resources (Leblanc-Omstead and Kinsella, 2016). A process which invites each of us to consider how our unique position may be impacting our relationships to ourselves and to wider knowledge in a manner that dissects the potential for cognitive biases to overload discourses, instead grounding a compassionate curiosity that can encourage new learning opportunities. A curiosity that sets the scene for what building Mad Studies from the foundations of compassion can achieve.

By extension such a pedagogical framework allows our imaginations to run wild, creating space for our maddest fantasies to dialogically take root so they are less easily dismissed. In the process developing a conversation that indulges the incoherency of thought and action that describes diffuse systems. Incoherencies which can in turn help us develop the capacity

for the kind of increased connectivity (Lockwood, 2023) that may operate as a mechanism for social change. We may acknowledge that through the development of a shared perspective we can create a culture capable of reducing the alienating excesses of Modern society (Shafak, 2020). After all the insurgency against sanism cannot survive or thrive if it is not aligned with wider ambitions to undermine all aspects of domination that strangle the lifeblood out of those who are too easily dismissed. Further, such an approach encourages a diversity of interest which may invitingly sprinkle spice into life, encouraging views of solidarity in different directions upon which we look. So, one person's struggle against adversity or trauma comes to symbolise more than a private problem (Mills, 1959) and chimes into belief that a better world is possible despite the pains it has already inflicted. It is after all only through hope that we may look through the tirade of negativity that populates news cycles and our own sometimes dishevelled experiences and construct the will to not only carry on but fight for something new whether inside or outside ourselves. So, by respecting ourselves and not denigrating our or other's experiences, however alien or unhelpful they may appear, we open a newfound curiosity through which to explore and indulge in the myriad ways the world may spring optimism for a better tomorrow.

Part VI

"We are an army of dreamers and that is why we're invincible"

Subcomandante Marcos (1995)

Now we have a map for how Mad Studies may utilise its strengths to challenge the status quo through its centring of compassion, I fear we are still no closer to answering the original question. I therefore summon a guide who best represents to me what is needed to achieve the propagation of growing new respect, Subcomandante Marcos of the Zapatistas. Not that we must struggle with guns to be granted land where we may build our ideas peacefully, but holding an acceptance that at times we may have faced violence for standing up for our dreams of more attuned selves who can exist in this world in greater harmony than we previously perceived possible.

Such violence exists on a spectrum from the explicit denials of liberty and enforced medication that Mad persons face to the more subtle ways in which epistemic injustice manifests (LeBlanc-Omstead and Kinsella, 2016). Violence that can have harrowing implications for our sense of self and agency, leaving deep-seated scars about our sense of worth, particularly, in my experience, when my internal chemical composition has been forcefully changed whether due to an unwelcomed needle in the buttocks or the explicit threat that they have the right to do so should they wish. A clear disregard of the nominal ethical principle of respecting another's bodily autonomy. However, surviving such indignities can serve as inspiration to fight for a world where others do not have to live the same fate and make clear the hypocrisy that comes with the enforcement of treatment. From my own perspective this would entail more from the biomedical regime in terms of genuine conversations about how I may be committing self-harm I do not perceive in relation to my

environment. A task not straightforward, but by centring a will to compassionately understand what is meaningful to me, that would undoubtedly be possible to appreciate where unusual experiences have disrupted my life and relationships and where they could inspire me moving forwards. A far healthier ideal than denouncing me as laden with deficit and not fit to breathe free.

In short, by teaching us about how struggles require a certain idealistic determination that looks beyond the narrow boxes with which the powerful have laden us, and moves forwards our dreams through actions and poetry, the Zapatistas constitute positive role models (Colectivo Relámpago, 2022). Teaching us that it is only through resistance that we may maintain ownership of our experiences, allowing us the freedom to construct our own cultures that can provide the conditions to achieve dignity and flourish (McKenna, 2023). A strategy with hope if it is centred through creativity and even myth making capacities (Conant, 2010). Myths being the soil of cultures, which may provide strength in times of adversity and inspiration to consolidate Mad Studies as a networked breath of solidarity. Can we therefore not rewrite the myths of Madness?

This can encourage the development of new power which can collaboratively draw innovative ideas and concepts together. Especially if we relate madness to how those deemed to have 'serious mental disorders' and their close relatives have displayed means of achieving a certain creative spirit (Kyaga et al., 2011). Showing how even the biological can be reframed, from how it is expected to mark impairment to a more positive, yet still not deterministic, perspective. Making it appear less repulsive, opening the door for an effect in multitude directions (Huxley, 1954), something of a crude or spontaneous psychedelic experience. Experiences of Madness, through their toying with the typical rules at play, can encourage a nuanced respect for appreciations of reality (Hardwick, 2025), what we have described as meaning making. That is not to describe madness as compassionate, but to hold a valuable perspective, one that if respectfully cultivated can benefit our aim to disrupt the dispassionate voice of the Moderns and their stranglehold of a domineering culture.

To conclude, we must tread carefully so as not to sacrifice the lamb of reason at the altar of a fundamentalist iconoclasm, but to heed Mad Studies' lesson that notions of objectivity involve a network of value creation between writer and reader in a complex manner (Faulkner, 2017). A process bound up by questions of privilege of whose 'truth' is deemed most significant or acceptable (Bruce, 2021). This is apparent in relation to biomedicine which wields much of its power by ascribing from the current dominant philosophy, claiming to study humanity dispassionately. When instead, biomedical researchers are bringing their conceptions of social reality to proceedings (Lock and Nguyen, 2010), unwittingly stigmatising sufferers of mental distress by positing normative assertions around what is a 'proper' way to handle existence (Fannen, 2021). As such we can see that conceptions are set through the workings of power and its establishment of the boundaries of acceptability (Johnstone & Boyle, 2020). Mad Studies' critique of biomedical orthodoxy is perfectly placed to appreciate intuitively, in turn championing newfound epistemic possibility grounded in phenomenological subjectivity.

So let us take our Madness and see not just pain but a creative disruption. And from the ashes may we develop more socially attuned and compassionate selves that may contribute to a kinder society less liable to perpetual crisis and catastrophe.

Now and then we had a hope that if we lived and were good, God would permit us to be pirates.

Mark Twain, *Old Times on the Mississippi* (1875)

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