



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Conversation as Mad Method and Manifestation of Care in the Academy

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Abstract

This paper introduces conversation as an analytic strategy amenable to building Mad method/ologies and disability justice praxis in the academy. As a method, we argue that conversation disrupts traditional academic notions of *what* counts as research and *who* are counted as contributors. This work troubles the conventional and siloed approach to scholarship in the social sciences and humanities, which predominantly values independent scholarly pursuits yielding single-authored outputs and reproduces a competitive and individualizing academic culture. Crucially, our collaborative research process manifested a care ethic that was responsive to the needs of each contributor. Conversation as Mad method prompts a reconceptualization of how we engage in qualitative research through the power of community collectives, shared labour and analysis, resisting the neoliberal university and its individualist, ableist, and sanist logics and practices.

Keywords

Mad studies, Mad method/ologies, qualitative research, disability justice, neoliberal university, ethic of care

History

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Introduction

We are a team of researchers and educators who came together to work on a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council-funded study mapping graduate student/faculty mental health praxis in Ontario through a Mad and Critical Disability Studies lens. Our project, “Mapping the Gaps”, aimed to: a) examine how sanism manifests in Ontario university graduate programs; b) investigate how Ontario graduate faculty experience and resist sanism in their work; and c) illuminate how manifestations of sanism are co-constructed together with other structural forms of oppression (specifically in relation to race, citizenship, class, gender, and sexual orientation).

We utilized situational analysis as our method (Clarke, 2003, 2005), a critical postmodern extension of grounded theory. Data collection involved focus groups with graduate students and individual interviews with faculty, administrators, and support staff at three Ontario universities. Situational analysis has diverse theoretical origins, drawing on feminist (Haraway, 1991), poststructuralist (Foucault, 1972), and new materialist (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) theoretical works to offer a theory/methods package (Clarke et al., 2017) well aligned for critical examination of complex situations involving human (e.g., students, faculty, administrators, support staff) and non-human (e.g., policies, institutional norms and values) actors. With some alteration – necessitated in part by our collaborative approach outlined in this article – we followed the analytic process detailed by Clarke et al. (2017), which involved the construction of messy, relational, social worlds, and positional maps to illuminate the relationships between key actors (human and nonhuman) in mental health praxis to address our research objectives. As we reflect on the specifics of how we executed data analysis – or how we worked together to create these maps and tease out research findings – conversation proved to be a key analytic approach; one which allowed for a dynamic, dialogic, iterative, and sometimes unruly process of analysis through exchange and mutuality, a Mad method.

In this paper, we describe our process of conversation as an analytic strategy and outline how we see this as building on Mad method/ologies and core disability justice principles. The first section of this paper provides a brief background on the ways in which conversation has been utilized as a method in qualitative research. Taking talking seriously, our aim here is to demonstrate how critical conversation contributes to Mad method by showing how our collaborative community conversations led to an innovative, iterative, and dialogic process towards making Mad analysis. The second section of this paper explores how conversation as a Mad method is connected to core disability justice principles, and particularly interdependence. In the third section, we discuss how our process, and Mad and disability justice praxis more broadly, talk back to the neoliberal university to disrupt *who* and *what* count in the academy. We conclude by expanding on how conversation fostered a collaborative research process that manifested an ethic of mutual caring within and beyond the university. Interspersed throughout this article are short interludes and responses written from the perspective of five co-authors, which are personal and professional reflections that give insights into our process and practice.¹

Savitri's Interlude

I struggled as a co-author who volunteered to write the first draft of this manuscript. The precarity and relentless hustle that engulfs the postdoc experience told a story of unwellness in many areas of my life and as I strove for that 'first author' badge, a mark

¹ Every co-author is not represented in the interludes or responses. Five co-authors wrote an interlude, with two of the five also choosing to respond to another co-author's interlude. This, too, reflects Mad praxis and our care ethic as a team in that we respect the capacities and decisions of our fellow co-authors on whether or not to write an interlude and/or response. In addition – and while not a comprehensive representation given word count constraints – responses to interludes are meant to briefly, in their own way, demonstrate conversation as Mad method and manifestations of care in the academy.

of ‘significant intellectual contribution’. The academic expectations placed on young scholars, which are essentially requirements, call on us as workers to belabor parts of ourselves in the name of professional advancement, but at what cost? Outwardly, “Everything’s great,” I’d say, and it certainly appeared that way as I conducted research on several projects and built out my individual program of work, successfully applied for grants, taught multiple courses, and remained engaged in community and service work.

My health, however, bore this weight; and after a second research trip within the span of three months where I contracted COVID-19 and became symptomatic upon my return to Toronto, the debility I experienced was numbing. This article would have to wait for the next round of submissions. I viewed this as a professional failure. And when I called each of my co-authors to apologize, to explain my inadequacy, they each greeted me with sincere care. In every conversation, there was concern, first and foremost, for my health and wellbeing. In every conversation, there were reassurances and stories shared of similar struggles. In every conversation, there were laughs, offers of assistance – to readily pick up the work where I left off and encouragement to take the time that I needed. None of this came as a surprise to me because my co-authors practice and model the principles of disability justice. The rigid expectations of the academy led me to magnify what I saw as professional failings with little consideration of an academic environment that often eats its young. In so many ways, these conversations were demonstrations of Mad method in action and manifestations of profound care – thank you, team.

Starting the Conversation (as Mad Method)

We are certainly not the first to propose conversation as a component of qualitative methodology. Indeed, “conversation analysis” is an established qualitative method that emerged in the 1960s (Schegloff, 1968; Sacks et al., 1974), and several other qualitative approaches, including collaborative autoethnography (Chang et al., 2012) and dialogical methods (Sullivan, 2012) may at times engage with conversation. However, rather than a stand-alone qualitative methodology, what we aim to describe in this paper is an analytic strategy that we believe could be taken up as a tool within a wide variety of qualitative methodologies and approaches. More specifically, our paper is concerned with how we used collaborative conversation as an analytic strategy to execute data analysis through a Mad and critical disability studies lens.

Lori’s Interlude

We didn’t set out with an intention to use conversation as an analytical tool. As I think Mad method requires, our process was messy and iterative, and very much determined by what would best serve to draw out the brilliance of the specific folks around the table. In our grant proposal, we said we would use situational analysis (a postmodern extension of grounded theory advanced by Adele Clarke, 2003). So, we

started out by reading Clarke's work on situational analysis, and we came together with a loose plan to follow what we understood to be the steps she was laying out. Except then, we started talking. And then we talked some more, and some more. And then we drew some pictures of what we were talking about, and we talked about those pictures. And then eventually we figured out we should probably be recording the talking, and the drawing, so that we could extend our conversations to include more folks who couldn't be sitting around the same physical table with us.

As our analysis was crystallizing, we realized that in fact we had been talking all along: with our colleagues, in conceptualizing the study; with study participants, in the interviews and focus groups and Zoom chats; in our monthly research team meetings, where we shared what we were hearing and talked about what we thought it meant; and even in the WhatsApp messages we shared back and forth in the lightbulb moments (and in the not-so-lightbulb moments too). It was through all this talking that we came to understand our data, collectively. It was also through all this talking that we came to care (more) for one another – and to see that caring as a form of resistance to the sanist structures we were studying. I don't think I have ever been part of a data analysis process that felt so generative, and so fulfilling, and so care-full.

Our study of graduate student mental health was grounded in a Mad studies tradition, whereby we were interested in illuminating the ways through which the systems and structures of postsecondary education might be operating to produce psychiatric distress for graduate students. We chose situational analysis (Clarke, 2003) as our qualitative methodology, given its utility in mapping out both the human and non-human actors involved in the "situation" of graduate student mental health. Situational analysis is well-aligned with critical social theory and so we were confident that it would be congruent with our Mad studies and critical disability studies lenses. And indeed, it was – but our Mad studies praxis (Costa & Ross, 2023) called us to employ situational analysis in a way that would centre collaborative knowledge production and disrupt ableist and sanist notions about who is considered an authentic knower.

In very practical terms, this meant re-imagining what we understood to be the analytic process for situational analysis to allow for multiple analysts, with different levels of qualitative expertise/experience, working in collaboration. We started out by having each team member independently read and notate selected interview transcripts, and we came together with the intention to draw from that independent analysis in developing a grounded theory codebook and beginning to create the analytical maps that are central to a situational analysis approach (Clarke, 2005). And while we did ultimately engage in several of these more traditional elements of a situational analysis approach, we found that it was conversation that best enabled us to tease out the complex relationships between key actors in our situation. Specifically, we would each share the insights generated through our coding process, and then engage in dialogue: "Remember when...?", "That reminds me of...", "I don't understand what you mean by...", "It's a Ponzi scheme!" We would record these discussions, both in the form

of audio recordings and in the images which came to make up our situational maps, so that our collective insights could be shared back with members of the research team who were not physically present at our analysis meetings.

We understand our approach to conversation as an analytical tool to be in parallel with how qualitative scholars have positioned writing as “the most important device for analyzing qualitative data” (Eakin & Gladstone, 2020, p. 10). Just as writing “plays a central role in *creating* the findings” (p. 10) of much interpretive qualitative research, in our project, conversation enabled us to create our findings through dialogue, mutual exchange, and intentional collaboration. This happened most concretely during the meetings that were dedicated to analysis of our data, but also in all the conversations that happened in and around our other meetings and interactions. These conversations enabled us to draw from one another’s knowledges to make connections, draw insights, ask new questions, and come to some collective answers, in ways that made the analytic process accessible to all members of our team – not only those who had the time and/or skills to carry out more “formal” qualitative data analysis.

Why do we see conversation as Mad method, specifically? According to LeFrançois and Voronka (2022), Mad methodologies centre Mad people and Mad voices, and trouble conventional notions of the academy. We found that conversation accomplished this: it enabled our analytic process to be inclusive of our various perspectives, as critical scholars and simultaneously as Mad and disabled people. When analysis takes written form, one voice necessarily dominates; in conversation, our multiple voices and perspectives remain intact, while simultaneously building on one another. Indeed, conversation allowed for real-time scaffolding of one another’s ideas, resulting in a collective product that was truly co-produced.

Finally, conversation as an analytic tool speaks back to the epistemic violence captured in our study of the academy. Conversation, as a Mad research method, is rebellious – a way of speaking truth to power in a microcosm, which then allows for us to do so in larger and wider spaces, like through the planned outputs for the Mapping the Gaps project (i.e., a knowledge translation tool [‘Survival Guide’] for graduate students, community and academic conferences, and an edited volume) – all of which lay heavy critiques against the university in a call for a dismantling of ableist and sanist institutional policies and practices.

Two members of our team are of Caribbean origin, and they have likened the defiant function of conversation as Mad method to that of the Trinidad and Tobago Carnival character, the Midnight Robber. This icon of masquerade, influenced by the West African storyteller – the Griot – dons a wide-brimmed hat and is often draped in loose-fitting black attire with white skeletal imprints and other symbols of death (Pitt, 2017). The character rouses audiences as they engage in elaborate elocution performances or, as Honoré (1998) describes, “his most deadly weapon: his speech, his ‘robber talk’ (p. 125).” Robber talk “is full of heroic exploits, improbable feats and a sense of having survived insurmountable odds. It is intentionally bizarre, and extremely disrespectful of the boundaries of ‘civilized society’ and the limits of

propriety” (Espinete, 1998 as cited in Pitt, 2017, p. 99). Robber talk has multiple functions, one of which is emancipatory and centers a politics of resistance; to name and put oppressors in their place from the point of view of the marginalized; to underscore the power of the spoken word (of talk) to make meaningful interventions.

Today, the Midnight Robber gives orations on any number of contemporary issues, offering social and political critique on the rise of nuclear weapons and the spectre of war, coups and political instability, corruption, and colonialism and imperialism (Honoré, 1998). Conversation as Mad method, in the spirit of robber talk, views orality as a powerful non-normative approach to knowledge production and communal ways of knowing often associated with marginalized groups (e.g., Mad and disabled folks, colonized peoples). All of this considered, it is also important for us to acknowledge that conversation also includes non-verbal forms of communication and discussion – ASL, communication boards, and other augmentative and alternative communication (including through various devices). Like Mad methodology and its “comfort with unruliness” and work to “unveil and disrupt colonial ways of knowing in order to make visible ‘the unheard of’” (LeFrançois & Voronka, 2022, p. 155), conversation as Mad method is rebellious in its approach and its insistence that research and knowledge production must be done differently if we are to create capacious learning and working environments that allow for us to bring our “whole selves” (Ortiz, 2012) to the dialogue and to action.

In Dialogue with Disability Justice

Both our findings and our process align with the disability justice principle of interdependence, articulated by Sins Invalid and Berne et al. (2018) as follows: “We meet each others’ needs as we build toward liberation, knowing that state solutions inevitably extend into further control over our lives.” A practice of interdependence is central to our process of maddening our method, particularly insofar as it operates in resistance to academic norms and values in relation to independence. Both our own study and other critical disability studies writings on the academy (Khuc, 2024; Dolmage, 2017; Price, 2024) highlight how these norms of independent scholarship serve to reproduce ableism and sanism in the academy, by elevating those who can and/or do perform productive independent scholarship over those who cannot and/or do not (or can’t/don’t at the pace or quantity that ableist norms require). Our process disrupted notions of independence, given that when analysis is produced through conversation, it is often impossible to make individual attributions for the insights that are generated. Rather, the product is collective and anti-capitalist, with the contributors’ analyses woven together in a way that cannot easily be teased back apart.

Further, our conversational method leaves space for each analyst to bring as much or as little as they have to each conversation, acknowledging that we are not all able to show up at our full capacity in every moment. Working interdependently means that we share a collective responsibility for the final product; we jump in to add to, support, or take on pieces that a

given analyst may not have capacity to contribute in that moment, knowing that our co-analysts will do the same for us in other moments.

Jiji's Interlude

I fell suddenly ill right before the empirical research started on this project, and went on long term disability leave from my work. This felt catastrophic in a million ways, and brought forward a long-held fear of mine: what would happen to my overall safety if I became 'too disabled' to work? Given that this occurred shortly after I was awarded tenure, I was, it turns out, okay. But sending those signals to my bodymind to let myself know that it was safe to let go of everything beyond the matter of my own life proved tricky, especially given the relentless clenched panic that accompanies everyday life under late-stage capitalism.

I had varying experiences of taking leave from different research teams: this one was the best of them. This was not surprising to me given that I have been a part of other research projects that Dr. Lori Ross has led, and I know that she builds her research teams with community-based informed research intentions. This includes expecting disability to show up in ways that might prevent team members from carrying out their work. This thoughtful, intentional, and relational team building skill set is well beyond my own ability, and I greatly admire her capacity and commitment to collaborative methods. No doubt people experience team dynamics in a variety of ways, but for me in this instance, my ability to check out without apology and then check back in when I was ready to with ease and again without apology felt like disability justice.

Lori's Response

OMG Jiji you made me cry a little. But this wasn't only about me! I mean, I guess it's a little about me, because I chose to work on this project with folks that I knew would show up for each other in this way. But I think your experience of not having to apologize for disability maybe says more about us as a team than it does about me as a leader? Because isn't disability justice always collective?

As we work in this interdependent way, we are acutely aware of how this is in tension with what the academy requires of us. For example, how do we attribute authorship for the products of our collectively produced analysis? While some form of collective authorship would be most consistent with both our process and our values, we know that author order matters, and it matters most to those of us who occupy more marginal positions in the academy (with respect to both the nature of our employment/attachment to academia, and the social locations we embody). What does it look like to resist ableist and sanist academic values of independence, while still maintaining a foothold that will enable us to continue to carve out Mad space in the academy?

Fady's Interlude

My writing is always collaborative—most writing, most publications, even those with only one author are collaborative projects. Think of the conversations with family, friends, and colleagues over dinner, in a coffeehouse, or at a conference—moments that spark a thought, provide a new idea, or help bridge two lingering ones yet unresolved. For disabled and Mad folks, we've often hired editors to bring our work into alignment with normative expectations of academic writing. And now, non-human actors have been brought into the fold—software and AI—doing the work of making our contributions coherent (a possibly sanist goal if I ever did see one!).

To me, conversation as Mad method acknowledges these already pre-existing collaborations between human and non-human elements. Rather than hiding them, setting them aside, or reproducing the academic individualism that can make us sick, this method recognizes the inherently shared quality of research—and the benefits of interdependent, anti-capitalist approaches. It denies the myth of the sole author. It rejects the notion of original ideas as something that can be owned by a single person. It advances an understanding of epistemology as shared memory and, equally important, as shared authority.

Conversation as Mad method—whether in qualitative data analysis or in the writing up of that data—is also a form of access. It aligns with another principle of disability justice: collective access. It brings those of us who are persistently at the bottom or along the periphery up and in. It makes work accessible—not through accommodations, those personalized, individualized approaches that demand medicalization and psychiatrization—but by making room for those of us who think, read, write, and work differently. Suddenly, those of us whose talents are less recognized within traditional academic spaces and by conventional metrics are not just users but contributors. What we say ends up mattering.

Talking Back to the Neoliberal University: Disrupting *Who* and *What* Counts in the Academy

Acting primarily as lone subjects and individual workers in the academy – especially as disabled and Mad people – serves to reinforce the unsustainable practices of the neoliberal university. Slaughter & Rhoades (2004) tell us that one of the central founding principles of higher learning institutions was to function as a place of knowledge generation and exchange in service of the public good. The restructuring of higher education, led by a shift favouring market principles in the 1980s, allowed for “knowledge privatization and profit taking in which institutions, inventor faculty, and corporations have claims that come before those of the public” (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004, p. 29). The social contract forged between the university and society diminished in favour of neoliberal imperatives and academic capitalism (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). This has only intensified in an age of austerity and the retrenchment of

government funding to the education sector in Canada and the United States, which we have experienced in the Canadian province of Ontario where many of us are based.

As a team, we refuse to yield to the atomization that neoliberalism compels. We do so through small acts of defiance. As disabled and Mad people, we engage in a constant struggle to combat funding cuts; to reject the continuous and rapid downloading of work on faculty and graduate students; to rebuff the competitive rat race for smaller pots of research grants; and to protest the expansion of precarious labour practices in the university. We choose to work and organize as a collective because it is a strategy of survivance in educational institutions that sacrifice employee wellbeing at the altar of 'fiscal health'.

Acts of rebellion against institutional academic norms can take many forms. The case of Grigori Perelman and his declination of the Fields Medal and the \$1 million Clay Millennium Prize – two of the most prestigious honours in mathematics – is one such example. Perelman, a mathematician and geometer, was awarded these prizes for his contribution in proving the Poincaré conjecture, which had stumped his peers for nearly a century. One of the chief reasons cited for his refusal of the Clay Millennium Prize and the accompanying monetary award was he believed the decision to be “unjust” and “considered his contribution to solving the Poincaré conjecture no greater than that of Columbia University mathematician Richard Hamilton,” whose work he built on to prove Poincaré (Associated Press, 2010). Perelman, who rarely gives interviews and is described as “reclusive”, is quoted as saying, “Hamilton’s openness and generosity – it really attracted me. I can’t say that most mathematicians act like that... If everyone is honest, it is natural to share ideas” (Nasar & Gruber, 2006). The prize money was used to establish the Poincaré Chair, which supports early-stage mathematicians (Clay Mathematics Institute, 2014). While mathematics is viewed as a highly collaborative area of study, it can be argued that the infighting and jostling for prestige and public recognition contributed to Perelman’s complete withdrawal and break from the field as he no longer views himself as a professional mathematician (Nasar & Gruber, 2006). It seems fitting to conclude this section with a quote from Perelman: “It is not people who break ethical standards who are regarded as aliens... It is people like me who are isolated” (Nasar & Gruber, 2006).

Merrick’s Interlude

Many social justice-based researchers in fields such as Mad Studies and Disability Studies are members of marginalized groups. This means that many of us have experienced varying levels and types of violence throughout our lives (e.g., state violence, institutional violence, and interpersonal violence). This leads me to ask, what considerations might there be for research teams made up of survivors (both psychiatric survivors and survivors of trauma/violence more broadly) seeking to employ conversation as Mad method? More specifically, what happens when there is conflictual conversation? How do we navigate tension and dissent while employing conversation as Mad method? Many of us have participated in, witnessed, or heard

about activist groups and research teams that started out with ideals such as interdependence and an ethic of care, but ended up imploding from internal conflict and lack of capacity to address dissent and conflict. Much of this may be influenced by past or ongoing experiences of trauma, but this often goes unsaid. Power dynamics are also at play; research teams must navigate the power relations imposed by academic hierarchy as well as those created by interlocking systems of domination, and conferred by subject position (e.g., whiteness, cisgenderism).

In employing conversation as Mad method, how might moments of dissent and potential conflict get suppressed rather than dealt with? How is conflict smoothed over in accounts of research methods and outcomes, as necessitated by the conventions of academic publishing and report writing? Conversation as method may operate well on teams with high levels of trust created through longstanding working relationships or preexisting friendships among team members, but how do we build this when it doesn't already exist organically? I have more questions than answers, but I think some of the answers may lie in fostering repair skills and building capacity and knowledge of practical conflict resolution. However, how to go about building that capacity in the neoliberal academy raises yet more questions.

Savitri's Response

This!! Merrick, one thing your intervention raises for me is how we, as a team, handled conflict when it (rarely) arose, but nonetheless did, and what we learned during the process of resolution. I can think of one occasion where an idea raised by one team member was misattributed to another. This was largely because our method was so collaborative that it was difficult to individually parse out knowledge contributions by a single team member. The situation was addressed with full accountability, sincere care, and in good faith. Merrick, like you said, it does make me wonder how this situation may have unfolded differently had we not entered this work with already established, strong, and trusting relationships in place? This gives me pause while also prompting me to think about concrete strategies of conflict resolution and other reparative practices in the face of team discord and strife. Perhaps these are considerations for another paper.

Conclusion

More than Chatter: Towards a "Conspiracy of Mutual Caring"²

Our collaborative research process simultaneously manifested a care ethic that was responsive to the needs of contributors, allowing for us to bring our full selves – and all of the complexities, strengths, and messiness – to this work in acts of collective preservation. This

² Andaiye, 2019

care ethic is akin to what Guyanese activist Andaiye (2019) calls a “conspiracy of mutual caring” (Andaiye, 2019, para 4), an invitation and provocation that prompts us to think about liberatory politics and commit to liberatory praxis; how we are always bound up together in our struggles. Andaiye (2019, para 4) describes the origins of this idea:

I had first experienced a special form of this kind of relationship in the women’s ward of a psychiatric hospital in the United States in the early 1970s. Class, race and gender relations were stark: almost all the inmates in the ward were working class – black, brown and white; almost all the nurses female, the guards male. How psychiatric hospitals (like prisons) are used and who is locked away in them is profoundly political. The aspect of that experience that gave me back some power in an almost completely disempowering environment was the conspiracy of mutual caring created among and by a group of us as women warehoused in a space where we knew in that way of knowing that has no words, that acting only as individuals we might be completely destroyed.

We are not just allies who *support* the work but are conspirators who *do* the work, and conversation as Mad method, in part, allowed for this *doing*. This involves mutual care, which comes with an understanding that we do not necessarily have a unified voice – as sometimes demonstrated by our interludes. It is also an acknowledgment that “the personal is not just personal: the story of each of us, if we tell it true, carries in it everyone’s story; and our collected stories carry in them the power relations of the whole society” (Andaiye, 2019).

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