

Doing Mad Studies: Making (Non)sense Together¹

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I am the person who is credited with having coined the term *Mad Studies*, and want to explore in this article how this new concept took shape.

In the spring of 2008, I was unemployed after working for a year in the School of Disability Studies at Ryerson University. Finding myself free of the university, and free of the structures of academia, I was able to think in different ways. For example, I began to wonder about some of the limitations of Disability Studies as a space within which to do research focusing on madness and Mad people (I intend to explain what the concepts of “madness” and “Mad people” mean in this context).

In 2007, Ryerson University’s School of Disability Studies certainly provided opportunities to do some of the kind of research that I wanted to pursue. There were trailblazers within the department, such as David Reville, who was teaching *Mad People’s History*.² It was clear to me that he was managing to do the kind of work to which I was attracted. However, I thought that our options—as Mad people within the discipline of Disability Studies—were still limited by the overarching, or governing, concept of “disability.”

I did a lot of thinking, and a lot of writing, about the limitations of Disability Studies in the spring of 2008. I wrote in a personal journal which, unfortunately, I managed to lose. Seven years on, I still wonder whether this journal, which covers a key period of my life, will ever be found.³

In the summer of 2008, I got locked up.⁴ During the spring I became euphoric: such was the extent to which I was enjoying life outside the university! I remember reading *Zen and the Art of Happiness* (Prentiss, 2006), which is a guide to change the way we think about the world. The idea presented by this book is that events will unfold in the most fortuitous ways provided that we place our trust in the world’s mysterious ways. I followed this advice to let go and surrender to the hidden ways of the world, but this method may have worked too well. The effects of applying it were that I just kept getting higher and higher, writing faster and faster, and seeing more and more connections.

¹ This article is an adapted version of a keynote presentation that I gave in 2015 at Durham University, United Kingdom, at a conference called “Making Sense of Mad Studies” (Ingram, 2015). I would like to thank Christine Peddle, a student at Memorial University of Newfoundland, who transcribed a video-recording of my presentation.

² This course was initially developed by Geoffrey Reaume, who subsequently relocated to York University.

³ What happened to this journal remains a mysterious and painful loss. This is an appeal.

⁴ I have documented some of my earlier experiences of being locked up in Ingram (2007).

I have been a bit scared of the process of revisiting that time and re-awakening those experiences. While getting myself ready for the keynote presentation on which this article is based, something quite similar happened. I had written reams of notes and had found myself unable to thread them together. The result was that I was at a loss to know how to proceed, so I grouped my thoughts around a number of points to address. Hopefully this approach gave my presentation—and gives this article—something resembling coherence, except that “coherence” is one of the values that I am hoping that we can, through Mad Studies, call into question.

I

Although I am credited with having come up with the term *Mad Studies*, I feel it was as if many people were playing a game of pass the parcel at a birthday party, and I happened to be the person who unwrapped the last layer of wrapping paper. Frankly, it could have been anyone in the circle who found themselves holding the newborn concept when the music stopped.

The ideas of the Mad movement have been in circulation in both of the cities in which I have lived over the last 20 years, Vancouver and Toronto; as well as in many other places around the world. Everyone in the Mad movement has contributed to shape the social context out of which the term *Mad Studies* has emerged. Within such a context, there are elements of chance to the circumstances in which the initial articulation of a new concept takes place.

I think that *mad studies*—written in the lower case—has existed in many different times and places. For example, I see Nietzsche as a forerunner of Mad Studies. I think he was one of the people who was continuously writing about his own struggle with madness in his philosophy, before eventually being psychiatrized (see, for example, Nietzsche, 1892/1978, 1908/1992). There are many post-Nietzscheans in the 20th century—Bataille (1954/1988; 1961/1988; 1967/1989), Blanchot (1969/1993; 1973/1992; 1973/1995), Klossowski (1969/1997), Deleuze and Guattari (1972/1983, 1980/1987; Guattari, 1995)⁵—whose work also provides launching points for Mad Studies.

I would love to write about Deleuze and Guattari, but have chosen not to on this occasion. The obstacle is that to do so would mean getting into material that is less accessible; and I want to keep this article as accessible as possible, as was the presentation that it is based on. My decision acknowledges the contribution of Price (2011) in her book *Mad at School*, which is one of the founding texts for Mad Studies in the United States, along with the book *Disability Incarcerated*, which is an excellent edited collection (Ben-Moshe, Chapman, & Carey, 2014).

In the description of the Durham conference, Mad Studies was characterized as an emerging discipline. When I first talked about Mad Studies in public, it was in a paper at a Disability Studies symposium at Syracuse University in May 2008, which was about two months before I was subjected to psychiatric confinement. At

⁵ See also Kaufman (2001).

Syracuse, I spoke alongside Jijian Voronka, and our presentations were developed from conversations that I had initiated at the beginning of 2008 about Mad Studies.

To describe Mad Studies as an emerging discipline is a statement that I am not altogether comfortable with; and, it appears, the same applies for quite a few of the audience members at the Durham conference. The way I described Mad Studies in the paper at Syracuse was as an *in/discipline*, by which I meant that it was both a discipline and an indiscipline. We are always caught in these doubles, and there is no way around this.

II

During my keynote presentation at the Durham conference I wanted to ask how people in attendance felt about Mad Studies. During the first day of the conference, we had heard some responses and reactions to Mad Studies in general terms, but I had some more specific questions for the participants. I asked a series of questions, requesting the participants to respond by raising their hand to indicate approval as many times as they wanted. They were told that they did not have to limit themselves to picking only one option. The questions I posed to them were:

- Would you see it as a positive development if Mad Studies were to become an established academic discipline in universities? [The responses showed that some people would approve of this development, while others are either ambivalent or would disapprove.]
- Would you see it as a positive development if Mad Studies were to be established, or to take shape, as a field of knowledge outside academia? I'm thinking of the kind of reading group in Amsterdam that Keller (2015) described, which seems to me to be an example of Mad Studies happening outside of academia. [There was considerable support for this option.]
- OK, let's give people a chance to express a preference for a combination of the last two options. Would you like to see Mad Studies developing both inside and outside academia? [There was also considerable support for this option.]
- Now let's ask the negatively framed question. Who doesn't approve, that is, who thinks it is not a good idea for Mad Studies to take shape as a field of knowledge? Is there anyone who thinks that the emergence of Mad Studies is not a good idea? [There were a few votes for this option.]

If Mad Studies is to take shape inside or outside academia, then it has to practice collectively what Mills (2013, 2014) introduced as the concept of "sly normality." In order to enter the university, Mad Studies would have to practise "sly normality," and the people comprising Mad Studies would have to take this approach.

There are two sides to this equation: on the one side, showing that there is method in our madness; and on the other side, preserving madness in our method. This second side is to ensure that Mad Studies actually remains Mad. It has to retain components of madness, which means that while it is important to do the work that resembles other established bodies of knowledge – as an academic discipline and/or

a field of knowledge beyond academia – I think what it can also partially bring about is a form of mimicry that, in the way Mills (2013, 2014) talked about, has a subversive effect on academia, i.e., on all other academic disciplines.

The ultimate horizon that I would hope for would therefore be that if Mad Studies does enter academia that it unsettles *all* academic disciplines: That is what it should do, because universities are the place of reason. If Mad Studies achieves its objectives, it needs to have as part of its end goal the shaking up, the disturbing, of all forms of academic knowledge.

III

On my personal situation, I'm living in one of the houses that was set up by the Mental Patients Association. The Mental Patients Association is now called the Motivation, Power, and Achievement Society (MPA), which is one of the examples of recovery bullshit that was discussed at the Durham conference (see *Recovery in the Bin*, 2015). Having been extremely progressive, and an example of radical democracy in the early 1970s, the organization is *not* progressive now (Beckman & Davies, 2013; Davies & MPA Documentary Collective, 2013).

I want to give one example of a recent personal experience. There is a federal election happening in Canada at the moment. I wanted to put a sign for one of the parties in front of the house and was not allowed to. I was told that the MPA has a rule against people putting a sign up in front of the house because it might be understood as representing the views of all the people in the house, regardless of whether you talk to the other people in the house and they agree with you.

I am referring to my living circumstances in order to emphasize that by going to the Durham conference I came out of retirement. I am considered “unrecoverable” in Canada, both because of my mental health diagnosis and because of the iatrogenic damage done by psychiatry, which has, I believe, led to my fibromyalgia,⁶ and means that I am not in a condition to work in academia at this point.

I am sorry for jumping around with my thoughts, but it really is all I can all do here, and partially—this is an important point—my inability to think *straight* implies that Mad Studies has queering and queerness within it, at least I hope it does. My inability to think straight is one of the things that is relevant to how Mad Studies takes shape. Many people doing Mad Studies are going to face this dilemma, so it is going to be a problem that people will have to deal with one way or another. Hence this process of thinking and relaying my thoughts that I am struggling with is part of the issue, or rather one of the issues to be considered in Mad Studies.

Which brings me to the question of the title of the Durham conference, “Making Sense of Mad Studies.” I want to step back from that title and ask: to make sense or not to make sense, maybe that's the question! Or maybe it is a matter of

⁶ Fibromyalgia syndrome (FMS) is the name given to a condition that can consist of a bewildering variety of symptoms, which commonly include: chronic pain in muscles and joints, chronic fatigue, non-restorative sleep, memory problems, and cognitive challenges (often referred to as *brain fog*).

both making sense and not making sense, so that there can be a making sense at times and not making sense at other times, which collectively comprises Mad Studies. In short, could we perform making (non)sense together?

To turn to this other side of the equation—to not making sense—means continually bringing up questions of nonsense and introducing nonsense. In fact, this nonsense is plural, as all these things are plural. With madness, all these things are multiplicities, as was talked about in McWade's (2015) presentation on the politics of recovery. As we are always dealing with multiplicities, trying to pin down madness as one thing is, I think, to miss the point: It is a million things.

IV

On the relationship between Mad Studies and psychiatry—if Mad Studies does enter academia as a separate discipline, it is clearly going to take a lot of criticism from the discipline of psychiatry. As a discipline, psychiatry is remarkably closed, and indeed almost hermetically sealed. Psychiatry assumes it has a fundamental right to pronounce on just about everything: on law, on sexuality, on school shootings, and so on. Psychiatrists appear on television talking about all of these issues, and yet as soon as anyone wants to talk about psychiatry, the response is, “No, you're not an expert.” That paradox has to be exposed, and is one of the core tasks that lie ahead for Mad Studies.

V

The last issue I want to address is ethics. As I have stated, I can discuss some of my material, but most of it I cannot assemble sufficiently for this article, nor was I able to for the presentation on which it was based. Moreover, this block may be faced by most of the people who comprise the Mad movement. As has been said, there is going to be a tension between academics and non-academics—just as there has been with Disability Studies, with academics becoming removed from activist communities. This separation arises because of what academia obliges academics to become: To a certain extent, it may not be possible to carry out the duties of a university lecturer (or professor) while remaining fully committed to the struggles of the broader Mad community.

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