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A GENEALOGY OF THE CONCEPT OF "MAD STUDIES"

Richard A. Ingram

On May 3, 2008, I gave a presentation at an academic conference at Syracuse University on what I termed an “in/discipline,” Mad Studies (Ingram, 2008). Alongside me, Jijian Voronka presented on Britney Spears, a paper that was an example of doing Mad Studies. My presentation was mostly impromptu, in spite of the large amount of writing that I had done in the first four months of 2008 on Mad Studies.

In addition to launching the concept of Mad Studies at an academic conference, I shared ideas on the Mad Students Society listserv. My thinking was that Mad Studies was a concept that had emerged from Mad movement groups and communities, and it was important to ensure that Mad Studies was understood as an invitation and an opportunity shared as widely as possible.

In this chapter I want to trace the concept back to the first time it entered my consciousness in the academic year 2000–1, and to trace how my thoughts about the concept have evolved since 2008. I want to describe some of the events, collaborations, and groups that provided a context for the concept of Mad Studies to emerge in 2001, and to be launched in 2008.

Having completed my comprehensive examinations, I was working in 2000 on a chapter plan for my doctoral dissertation. In addition to this task, I had to declare the subject areas of my dissertation. During this period, I heard what Michel Foucault termed “the thought from outside” (1990). Indeed, it was at once a voice and a vision. What I heard, and what I foresaw, was that a day would come when Mad Studies was an important concept, and formed as a field of knowledge.

In 1997, Irit Shimrat’s book, Call Me Crazy: Stories from the Mad Movement, had established the concept of a Mad movement. “Mad movement activists in this country,” Shimrat writes, “have started self-help, political and creative groups that have made a real difference” (1997:152). When I read this book, I realized that I was far from alone in my intuition that psychiatrization as a process was doing me far more harm than good. Shimrat’s inclusion of writings by many Mad activists demonstrated that there was a Mad movement across Canada. The book also showed the overlaps between LGBTQ+ movements and the Mad movement.

On the one hand, the concept of Mad Studies seemed like an obvious step from a knowledgeable Mad movement to a body of knowledge with its own name. On the other hand, it was not inevitable that a field of knowledge called Mad Studies would emerge. In a sense,
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thinking the concept of Mad Studies involved losing touch with reality. It was not the only time I would have the experience of losing touch with reality in order to imagine Mad Studies.

In March 2001, a demonstration took place outside of the Vancouver Convention Centre, where the World Assembly for Mental Health was being held. It was at this demonstration that I first met leading activists including Irit Shimrat and David Oaks. It was also during this time that the World Network of Users and Survivors of Psychiatry held its first General Assembly, though this event was not one I attended in person.

In the wake of this momentous demonstration, a series of events called “Madness 101” were held at the Humanities Storefront, which was situated in Vancouver’s downtown Eastside. Like other events at this location, Madness 101 was intended to bring educational opportunities to people for whom such opportunities were scarce. Madness 101 was an example of what I thought of as Mad Studies in a formal dimension. Meanwhile, a satirical online website, Mad Nation, was an example of Mad Studies in a more informal dimension.

By the time I was ready to defend my dissertation in April 2005, I felt that its subject matter fell under the heading of Mad Studies. However, I had not declared Mad Studies as one of my subject areas. The reason for this decision was that I had become interested in the principle of “copyleft,” which is an invitational approach that opens up ideas for use by others. I was concerned that declaring my dissertation as belonging to the field of Mad Studies would make the term “Mad Studies,” like the dissertation itself, copyright of the University of British Columbia.

In taking a copyleft approach, I was inspired by a collective with the name, Critical Theory Ensemble. Personally, I had been involved in a collective called ETC, or Ephemeral Theory Collective.\(^1\) The four members of this collective had given papers at a conference at the State University of New York, Buffalo in the fall of 2001. Together we had read Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s magnum opus, *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987). Writing and presenting as collectives de-emphasizes the role of the individual, highlighting how our ideas are developed through conversation.

In the spring of 2006, I was invited to be an organizer of Vancouver’s Mad Pride events, which are coordinated by Gallery Gachet and take place each July. Being involved in Mad Pride gave me a better understanding of the Mad community in Vancouver. Meanwhile I was interviewed for a post in the School of Disability Studies at Ryerson University in Toronto. Although I was not offered the advertised position, I was offered a one-year position as a Senior Research Fellow for 2007, which I was pleased to accept.

Being located in Toronto enabled me to collaborate with Ephemeral Theory Collective member, James Overboe, on a series of workshops with the title, PsychoCrips. The concept of psychocrips was intended to draw attention to the commonalities between psychiatrized and disabled communities in the Toronto region; for example, by highlighting the disabling effects of psychiatric treatment and the traumatizing effects of medicalizing disability. In these workshops there was an emphasis on envisioning futures which was intended to balance research into eugenics, the bleakness of which often seems to suggest that disabled people have no future. These workshops covered a variety of issues, including intersections between dis/ability, race, and gender.

My position at Ryerson finished at the end of December 2007. In January 2008, I found myself with time to reflect upon the concept of “Mad Studies.” One of the highlights of my year at Ryerson had been guest lecturing in David Reville’s class, Mad People’s History. I had known about Reville since reading Shimrat’s *Call Me Crazy* (1997), to which he is a contributor. What I began to wonder was whether the kind of course that Reville had crafted in Disability Studies might be the basis for a new discipline of Mad Studies.
In my writings, my goal was to prepare material for the conference organized by Robert Menzies: Madness, Citizenship and Social Justice. I thought that the upcoming conference was a clear sign of a field of knowledge beginning to coalesce, and that this entity needed a name. To bestow a name, however, would have complicated effects that were worthy of careful consideration. To this end, I returned to Deleuze and Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987) to think about the two sides of Mad Studies: Mad Studies as discipline, and Mad Studies as indiscipline.

The articulation of “Mad” to “Studies” produces a phrase that appears paradoxical. Is it even possible to establish a field of knowledge when the subject and object is Mad? There is, in short, something senseless about Mad Studies. This indiscipline is subversive in relation to existing disciplines, and therefore in relation to academia. In Deleuze and Guattari’s terminology, this knowledge is rhizomatic and nomadic, as opposed to arboreal and settled (1987). To the extent that Mad Studies unfolds as sense, it becomes another discipline alongside existing disciplines. What I foresaw in 2008 was that Mad Studies would have sense and senselessness, and would therefore become an in/discipline.

In preparing for my presentation at Syracuse in May 2008, I drew on the study of linguistics that had formed part of my MA in Ideology and Discourse Analysis in the Department of Government at the University of Essex. As with Women’s Studies, Disability Studies, and Deaf Studies, Mad Studies would act as a nodal point (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985); that is, as a point of condensation of meanings supplied to its position at the centre of a growing discourse. There would be two sides to Mad Studies. On the one side, it would bring together writings from the perspectives of Mad subjects; on the other side, it would enable Mad subjects to write about any topic in which madness was prominently mentioned, so as to deconstruct rationalist logics by showing the extent of their dependence on the signifiers “mad” and “madness.”

As the date of my Syracuse presentation approached, my mind unravelled. By the day of the presentation, I was no longer able to coordinate my thoughts as intended. Instead, I took Antonin Artaud as an example of someone performing in spite of, or rather, inspired by, madness. I had to trust that a stream of consciousness presentation would produce a valuable talk. I began by reading out a brief manifesto:

We hold these truths to be self-evident…

We crazies can heal ourselves of the destructive side of madness. We need others to understand that we are the primary victims of this destructive side, while acknowledging that others are too often subjected to its effects.

We can heal ourselves when we have space and time to learn how to bring forth the creative side of madness. Individually and collectively, we are working to acquire the skills required to shift from destruction to creation. Yet under the current regime of state-run and for-profit management of madness, the conditions for acquiring these skills arise all too rarely.

We hope that societies will recover their lost wisdom by coming to recognize once again the tremendous potential that resides in our unorthodox imaginations. We remark that this potential is already recognized in a select few; among whom privileged individuals are often business leaders and entertainment stars. We long for the gap between the select few and the abandoned multitudes to be bridged.

We await the time when our epiphanies are no longer misrecognized as mania or psychosis; when our dry spells are no longer misrecognized as depression; when our frenetic energies are no longer misrecognized as ADHD or borderline personality disorder; and when our search for an inner place of refuge is no longer recognized as autism.
A time will come when our “bodyminds” are no longer declared incompetent, and are no longer regarded as accidents waiting to happen. A time will come when we can laugh and cry, love and hide, freely, and without fear. A time will come when there will be no punishment for allowing your imagination to run wild.

As the presentation proceeded I decided to end by talking about Franz Fanon, champion of “The Wretched of the Earth” (1963). The result was an impassioned plea at the intersection of madness and anti-colonialism on the part of the emerging in/discipline of Mad Studies. It is my view that I needed to be at least in part “out of my mind” in order to call for an in/discipline that only came into existence through speculative articulation.

I want to emphasize, though, that Mad Studies did not begin only in an academic environment. During my visit to Toronto in the summer of 2006 I had attended a meeting of the group formed by Lucy Costa, the Mad Students Society. On the day I attended, the guest speaker was long-time local activist, Don Weitz. I introduced the term Mad Studies to the Mad Students Society listserv in the spring of 2008, showing how Mad Studies might be done by sharing ideas on which I was working for my presentation at Syracuse. Given that this listserv reached Mad activists in the community, this act of sharing ideas meant that Mad Studies was an invitation and an opportunity available not only to academics, but also to grassroots activists. It was my hope that Mad Studies as an in/discipline would also thrive beyond the bounds of academia.

In 2011, Margaret Price’s book, Mad at School, was published. The title and content were, in my view, consistent with the concept of Mad Studies as in/discipline: Mad at School announced a new discipline, and proclaimed indiscipline as valid knowledge. At the time I was working at Simon Fraser University, thanks to a two-year Canadian Institutes of Health Research postdoctoral fellowship, for which Marina Morrow was the principal investigator. In the course of my research, I came across an article by Rebecca Birnbaum, the daughter of Morton Birnbaum, the doctor and lawyer who coined the term “sanism.”

In May 2011 I presented the paper, “Sanism in Theory and Practice” at the 2nd Annual Critical Inquiries Workshop, which was organized by Marina Morrow’s Centre for the Study of Gender, Social Inequities and Mental Health at Simon Fraser University. In this paper I showed that the concept of sanism emerged at the intersection of race, gender, and madness-as-disability. The concept of sanism has been further developed by lawyer and legal scholar, Michael Perlin, in The Hidden Prejudice (2000). Naming the ideology that is resistant to madness and Mad Studies is itself an important step forward. The speech act of giving a name to a phenomenon brings into being, as J.L. Austin posited, entities that did not exist previously as such.

Since July 2012, I have not been able to sustain regular employment due to fibromyalgia and chronic fatigue, as well as ongoing mind problems. In particular, pain has corroded my ability to think. I was invited to write the Introduction to the book, Mad Matters: A Critical Reader in Canadian Mad Studies (LeFrançois et al, 2013), which was not possible due to these health problems. It is this book that is commonly seen as putting Mad Studies on the map in the English-speaking world and beyond.

In 2015, I was invited to give a keynote presentation at the conference, Making Sense of Mad Studies at Durham University. As part of this presentation, I asked for a show of hands to indicate who supported and opposed Mad Studies becoming an academic discipline. The results were roughly even between those who preferred Mad Studies to remain outside academia and those who saw its future within academia. The other purpose of this poll was to centre myself, so as once again to underscore that Mad Studies is an invitation and an opportunity for others.
During my stay in Durham, I was interviewed by Victoria McGowan for Mentally Sound Show 9. I mentioned that “not everyone […] is happy with Mad Studies in the way that it’s taking shape. That’s important, it’s important to acknowledge the differences that exist, and to give room for dissent.” Introducing a new concept is not only a reason for acknowledging a contribution, but is also a reason for assigning responsibility for shortcomings. There is plenty of scope, for example, for intersectional work to expand the diversity of Mad Studies.

In this overview of the genealogy of Mad Studies, I have sought to describe the context in which different ideas about the meaning of Mad Studies emerged. I am delighted that what began as a crazy idea in my head has become an idea that is inspiring an increasing number of people to contribute to Mad Studies as an in/discipline.

Note

1 Members of the ETC were: Joy James, Charles Barbour, James Overboe, and myself.

References


