One of several anthologies in mad studies to appear in the last decade, The Routledge International Handbook of Mad Studies reflects both the growing depth and innovative methodological and theoretical contributions of this new interdisciplinary field.[1] Edited by Peter Beresford and Jasna Russo, the Handbook consists of thirty-four chapters spread over five parts, all of which have been authored by people who identify as psychiatric survivors. As Beresford states in the introduction, the book explores the past, present, and future of mad studies as an interdisciplinary academic field and community-based activist project.

The contributions to this ambitious volume range from more traditional, although critical, academic articles to shorter pieces that provide first-person and other accounts of survivors' broad range of experiences with madness, organizing, working within various mental health systems, and creating new knowledge. Mindful of critiques that mad studies privileges white, academic, Global North voices and experiences, Beresford and Russo, and the volume's many contributors, take a global approach to thinking about mad studies that is grounded in survivor experiences and activist work.

In their respective chapters, editors Beresford (introduction) and Russo (chapter 1) define mad studies. Beresford explains that it seeks to “create a philosophically and ideologically grounded movement with the capacity to take effective action based on survivor-led understandings of madness and human well-being” (p. 6). Russo adds that mad studies is founded upon various processes of joint knowledge making that in turn rely on mutual support. First-person, especially survivor, experiences, lives, viewpoints, and knowledge are privileged within mad studies. Yet the field also relies on multiple social actors including mental health service users, allies, professionals, researchers, family, friends, and so on—provided these people value the defining characteristics of mad studies, which include the rejection of a simplistic biomedical model of madness and an emphasis on first-person or experiential knowledge.

Part 1, which consists of ten chapters, traces the international origins of mad studies through its sometimes loose connections with survivor and other related movements in the last quarter of the twentieth century, and especially since the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in
Since the creation of the CRPD, people around the world, most of whom identify as psychosocially disabled, have been working to transform mental health care and mental health law in their various countries or regions. Authors in this section write about their experiences working in New Zealand, India, Peru, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada, and with the Pan-African Network of People with Psychosocial Disabilities. With its many first-person accounts, this section—and the book more generally—serves in part as a (transcribed and edited) historical resource. It provides readers with an intimate account of the growth of mad studies as an interdisciplinary, community-based research praxis and social, ideological, and political position.

In part 2, the editors are concerned with situating mad studies in its broader historical, disciplinary, philosophical, and legal contexts. This section contains four chapters that discuss the genealogy of the concept of mad studies and its relationship to disability studies (especially the social model), and ask the question: How is mad studies different from anti-psychiatry and critical psychiatry? The answer to this question is, at least in part, that mad studies has its roots in the mad community while the other two were initiated and led by professionals. The final chapter in the section discusses the potentially violent and damaging consequences of mental health law and the ways in which the CRPD and international human rights law can draw upon the “absent knowledges” of survivors and other people living with psychosocial disabilities to enact legal reform.

Part 3 showcases “knowledge equality” in mad studies. The section could be titled “Mad Studies and Knowledge (In)equality.” The authors in this section discuss individual and structural racial erasure in mad studies (chapter 15), the epistemic injustices that continue to undergird psychiatric systems (chapter 16), the commodification of “experiential knowledge” (chapter 17), the pathologization of maternal distress (chapter 18), the regulation of madness within social work in Canada (chapter 19), and finally, the global “anti-stigma” campaigns in mental health (chapter 20). Each of the authors in this section demonstrates how a more critical mad studies approach that foregrounds experiential knowledge and attends to epistemic injustices can transform teaching, research, and practice by placing multiple knowledges and their production on a more equal footing.

Part 4 highlights the work of those researchers and activist-authors “doing mad studies.” This section contains nine chapters that explore madness and distress in a wide range of contexts. The medicalization and demedicalization of madness in Nicaragua (chapter 21); the move from asylums to criminalization, police, and prisons in Australia (chapter 22); and using auto-ethnographic mad studies to explore madness and political conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina (chapter 22), are discussed in this section. In chapter 24, activist Carolyn Yeo uses prose and poetry to explore the meanings of physical spaces in the experiences of mad people. The next three chapters provide innovative survivor-led critiques of current thinking on suicide, violence, and recovery, respectively. In the section’s penultimate chapter, activist-author Essya Nabbali uses critical race, Indigenous, and mad studies to critique the Canadian National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls and to chart a path forward for contemporary agenda setting and policy creation. The section concludes with a thoughtful chapter on how mad studies’ anti-psychiatry and survivor-led frameworks can be used in developing research on spirituality.

The six authors who contributed to part 5 contemplate the future of mad studies. Long-time Canadian survivor, activist, and educator David Reville, who contributed to the development of mad studies in the academy, expresses his concern about the sequestering of mad stories in the academy and advocates for their return to the
community. Likewise, Victoria Armstrong and Brenda LeFrançois call for a stronger connection between the community and the academy in the promotion of the democratic principles of mad studies. They also voice their concerns with the neoliberal co-optation of mad stories—a concern shared by many mad scholars and activists. In his chapter, Femi Eromosele highlights the ways in which African advocacy groups have drawn upon the CRPD in their efforts to articulate new conceptions of personhood and justice rooted in the African communitarian notion of Ubuntu. Prateeksha Sharma uses her work in India to make a call for activists and authors to move beyond identity politics and linguistic categories to a recognition of the importance of social and economic class in determining which voices get privileged in both local and global conversations about madness. She argues, moreover, that activists, authors, and author-activists need to recognize the differences between the Global North and South to build a more authentic “emancipatory resistance” to psychiatric power (p. 14). In the section’s final chapter, survivor Colin King emphasizes the importance of an Afrocentric approach to mad studies and the need to challenge white privilege more broadly if scholars and activists are to present meaningful alternatives to psychiatrization and the devaluing of madness and distress—a theme that is persistent throughout the book.

The book’s editors, Russo and Beresford, offer their final thoughts on the issues facing mad studies, as well as its future, in an afterword and postscript, respectively. In her afterword, “The Ethics of Making Knowledge Together,” Russo reflects on the long process of editing the book, which quickly turned into a process of cocreation. She encourages readers and future researchers, authors, and activists to take up this process of cocreation, to dwell in the complexities raised by madness and mad studies, to turn their gaze from the individual mad person to society, and to extend that gaze beyond psychiatry to the wider network of mental health systems. Russo also asks, Who is the “we” in mad studies? Who is included and where are the political, ideological, and disciplinary borders or boundaries of mad studies? Analyzing and dismantling established hierarchies of knowledge is a central task of mad studies, but what is created in their place is still an open question for most scholars, researchers, and activists. Russo argues that we need to honor experience and difference without isolating them in separate spaces. We need to reclaim a “we” that signifies our multiplicity and intersectionality while at the same time builds coherence, community, and alliances. She leaves it up to readers to decide how best to make creative use of difference in their efforts to move toward change and a future that we can all inhabit. Russo speaks to this same issue in her chapter in part 1, where she quotes Canadian activist-author Brenda LeFrançois, who wrote that mad studies can exist “within or without academia, but never without community” (p. 19).

In his postscript, Beresford also talks about the powerful insights that the contributors provide to the Handbook. He notes the extent to which working on the Handbook revealed and reinforced the need to consider the social production of madness and its relational qualities. He asserts that we live in a “mad and maddening world” (p. 374). In our current moment, Beresford argues, neoliberalism and biopsychiatry are working together to create individualized and pathologized explanations for mental troubles and distress, and both seek to responsibilize people in attending to their own well-being. Yet people around the world remain committed to other ways of thinking and being in the world. According to Beresford, when we think globally, and especially about the Global South, we see that the future of mad studies lies beyond a simple critique or rejection of psychiatry and the medicalization of madness. Like the many contributors to the volume, he encourages activists and authors working in mad studies to have a broader vision for their field.
Bringing philosophical and theoretical coherence to mad studies, while at the same time moving beyond its roots in the Canadian Mad Pride and British psychiatric survivor movements, is a distinguishing feature of this volume. As Russo argues, “Mad Studies opens up avenues to contextualize and de-center psychiatric oppression and avoid the dead-end roads of identity politics” (p. 22). She, and other contributors to the volume emphasize that mad studies does not imply embracing a mad identity. The Indian activist-author Bhargavi V. Davar (chapter 3) is not alone in arguing that mad studies scholars must be intersectional in their research and in their movement organizing. She and her colleagues in India are part of the global movement of psychosocially disabled people working to transform mental health care, and they are also part of the zero poverty movement and the caste resistance and Indigenous peoples movements in India. Although Davar considers herself part of the mad studies community of scholar-activists, and an ally to people who identify as mad, she and many of her colleagues in India do not identify as mad. For them, mad is too narrow a descriptor, in part because it depends on a critical relationship with psychiatry, which has its roots in Western, particularly US, Global North discourse and practices. As Davar, Beresford, Russo, and others note, the future of mad studies is in local/global studies and activist organizing that immerse themselves in the maze of intersectionality, analyze and work to deconstruct or dismantle power relations, and align themselves with other social justice movements.

Despite the Handbook’s rich focus on destabilizing hierarchies and building an intersectional mad studies outside its historic center in the United Kingdom and Canada, Beresford uses his introduction in part to search for an ideological and theoretical forefather for mad studies (à la Mike Oliver, whom Beresford names in the introduction). Beresford finds his ideological and theoretic forefather in Peter Sedgwick, an anti-psychiatry professional (educational psychologist) with lived experience. According to Beresford, Sedgwick’s Psycho Politics (1982) “rejected the prevailing individualistic medicalised model of ‘mental illness’ and saw societies as driving people into madness and distress” (p. 5). Beresford further declares that “while Mad Studies has emerged in the twenty-first century as a pioneering new development, it is directly linked to the values and principles first emphasised by Sedgwick” (p. 6). Beresford outlines these principles as “being ideologically positioned, collectivity, [and] building on alliances” (p. 6).

While Sedgwick’s work is no doubt a valuable contribution to critiques of anti-psychiatry as nihilistic in its negation of madness, one must ask why a movement as innovative and diverse as mad studies might feel the need to link itself to a Western, Global North, white male forebear. Given its broadly democratic roots in the psych-survivor movement, its deep commitment to destabilizing hierarchies of knowledge-power, and its emphasis on decentering whiteness, the academy, Global North/Western perspectives, and biomedical expertise, it seems out of place and unnecessary to link mad studies to Sedgwick. The theoretical, philosophical, ideological, methodological space opened by mad studies’ innovative approaches to knowledge production and political action should be filled by new, more innovative ways of interpreting the movement’s past, and a more explicit commitment to its global, decolonizing, justice-oriented future. Perhaps future mad studies author-scholar-activists will write a different origin story for their field.

With its international scope, its persistent efforts to decenter white, Global North voices and experiences, and its close attention to the historical, philosophical, and theoretical underpinnings of mad studies, The Routledge International Handbook of Mad Studies offers a valuable introduction for people new to the field. Those activists and scholars who have been part of the development of mad studies, and those working in disability
studies who wish to incorporate mad studies into their teaching, research, and practice will find much of value in this volume as well. It should be essential reading for anyone interested in mad studies.

Note


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