



DiGeSt

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What are you reading?

Lewis, B., Ali, A. and Russell, J. (2025). *Mad Studies Reader: Interdisciplinary Innovations in Mental Health*. New York: Routledge.

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Mad Studies is a rather young field, but as noted in the foreword to Lewis, Ali and Russell's recently published reader, it has seen a surge in writings in the last few years. Activists, artists, scholars and clinicians critically and constructively examine psychiatry, mental health care, and cultural relations of mental difference. This reader compiles a diverse and thought-provoking collection of writings, offering valuable insights for those interested in mental health, social justice, and the politics of identity.

What is striking is that only a few years before, *The Routledge International Handbook of Mad Studies* (Beresford & Russo, 2022) was published, notably by the same publisher. This handbook provides a critical exploration of Mad Studies while advancing its theory and practice. To trace the evolution of the field, it structured its chapters from organizing individuals with psychiatric experiences politically to establishing Mad Studies as an emerging discipline. By strengthening the theoretical foundations of the field, the handbook gives a robust framework for future scholarship and practical applications, urging readers to engage in the ongoing movement for mental health justice. Like the handbook, the recent *Mad Studies Reader* is expected to align with the movement it builds upon, as reflected in its title. Beyond offering a theoretical and historical overview of Mad Studies, the goal of this edited volume is to foster democracy by bringing voices from different subcultures within mad studies into conversation. The structure of the reader reflects this ambition, organizing chapters into four thematic sections: *innovative* artists, *critical* scholars, *concerned* clinicians and *daring* activists. This diversity of voices presents Mad Studies not just as an academic discipline but as a socio-political movement. Unlike the handbook, the selection criteria for the chapters included are less clear. Incorporating details about the selection process and clarifying the context in which the chapters were originally conceived could help situate them more clearly within Mad Studies. After all, some chapters were previously published elsewhere, while others were newly created; providing this context would enhance readers' understanding and applicability to their own work.

We notice that the editors aim to counter fragmentation and foster a broader coalition of voices, exploring the complexity of mental life and mental difference while promoting anti-sanist approaches to scholarship, practice, art, and activism. The inclusion of artistic and creative works not only illustrates the power of expression and self-representation for those marginalised by mental health systems, but also pushes readers to critically examine how mental difference is understood. It offers an empowering vision of a world where those labeled as 'mad' can speak for themselves, challenge oppressive systems, and reclaim their narratives. On top of that artistic methods can provide scholars with alternative ways to explore mad experiences and gain mad knowledges. Engaging with these diverse subcultures encourages readers to reflect on how to approach this extensive volume. Since the chapters can be read independently, one possible entry is to identify those most closely linked to personal experiences, preferred formats, or contributions to knowledge construction. One of the *Mad Studies Reader*'s strengths is its accessibility, making it a valuable resource for both newcomers and seasoned scholars in the field.

Approaching the reader from within university, where we are involved in courses situating Mad Studies, integrating this reader within the existing curriculum in Higher Education, however, presents challenges. As Archibald remarks: 'Before bringing Mad experience and wisdom into institutions, we need to seriously consider whether it will be genuinely valued and implemented with fidelity.' (Archibald, 2024). Yet, reviewing the reader's discussions on Mad pedagogies and Humanities (Castrodale, p. 29; Stefan, p. 204; Jones, p. 254; Bracken et al, p. 328; Leblanc-Omsted & Poole, p. 367; Bradley, p. 450) we feel compelled to persist in countering sanist oppression and psychiatric violence drawing directly on Mad Studies and survivors' narratives. 'As an area of education, Mad Studies offers pedagogical value. Mad Studies draws on Mad knowledge(s) to teach others about

Mad experiences, counter-sanism, and proudly acknowledge Mad identities.’ (Castrodale, p. 32).

To cultivate new Mad-positive subjectivities and reject deficit models of madness, adult education can engage with mental health discourses through Mad Studies-informed theories and onto-epistemological perspectives, according to Castrodale. Citing Procknow (Procknow, 2017), Castrodale highlights the need for further research on how adult educators engage learners bearing interlocking identities. Lewis proposes:

‘One way out of this hidden pedagogy is to adopt a version of what Fricker (2000) calls “perspectival realism” (Fricker p. 159). Different perspectives and different zeitgeists organize the real in different ways. There is a ‘real’ world, but at the same time, it is multifaceted enough to allow different interpretations and different ways of life (Procknow in Castrodale p. 450).’

This approach invites a fundamental rethinking of psychiatry in dialogue with the Mad Studies community.

In the spirit of Bradley Lewis’ invitation to expand the Mad Studies community, we plan to read some of these chapters collectively with members of our academic Mad Studies reading group. It is only one of the reading groups which emerged worldwide to compensate for the lack of Mad Studies graduate and under-graduate programs in universities. We welcome further exchange, as our online reading group – composed of Dutch-speaking scholar, artists, peer-supporters, journalists and activists in the Low Countries – meets once a month to explore these topics together in relation to our own lived experiences and our (academic) work and activism.

Lieve Carette and Liorah Hoek

Lieve Carette is a PhD candidate in Disability Studies (Ghent University) who works on the intersection of mental well-being of students in Higher Education and peer support. She has a background in clinical psychology and worked as a student counsellor. She builds on New Materialism, access intimacy, alternative methods, Mad and Disability Studies.

Liorah Hoek is a PhD researcher at the University of Humanistic Studies (Utrecht). She teams up with artists who identify as having plural personalities. Together they explore plural experiences with a particular focus on (literary) identification beyond binary identity markers. Part of this research consists alternative and creative ways to produce plural based knowledges.

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