

# Learning *from* Madness: Critical reflections on education and activism

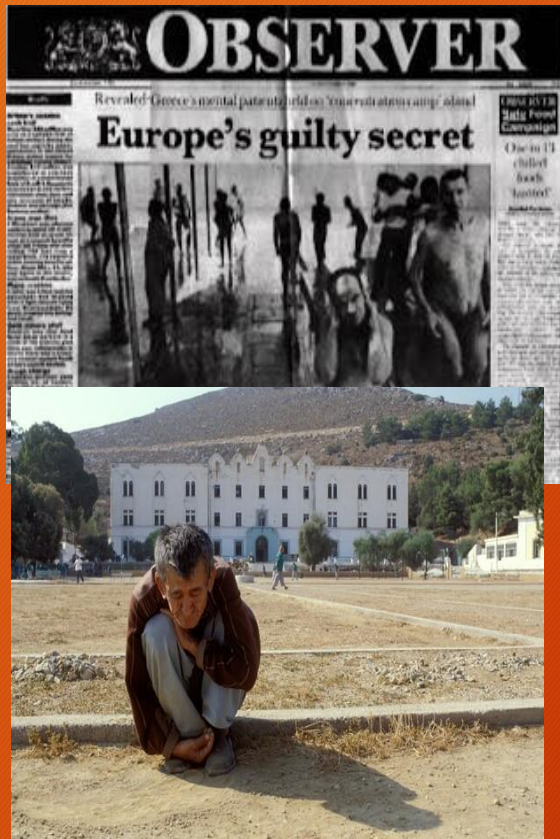
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A very big thank you  
to survivor allies and the CVNI  
community

for the opportunities to learn, unlearn and re-learn

# Learning through encounters with institutional psychiatry

Leros Psychiatric Hospital Greece (1980s)



Our Lady's Psychiatric Hospital, Cork, Ireland (1990s)



A political matter

A human rights matter

The value of shame and discomfort

The universality of Leros



# Institutionalisation: A concern of the past?



# Innovation without change...

- What is needed is not a *reform* but a *disruption* of dominant approaches and relations of superiority
- I am not saying something new here...
- Perhaps what is 'new' is a recognition that this disruption is also needed to our own critical approaches...

...when we continue to talk as 'experts' about madness, therefore contributing to the exclusion of knowledge from madness

# A Mad Studies framework of inquiry

- What needs to change is not what we know about Madness but ...
  - how
  - with whom
  - from whom
  - where
  - the processes and power relations...

...we learn and unlearn with and from Madness

# Unlearning in education: a contradiction in terms?

Are we prepared to question and 'let go' of knowledge

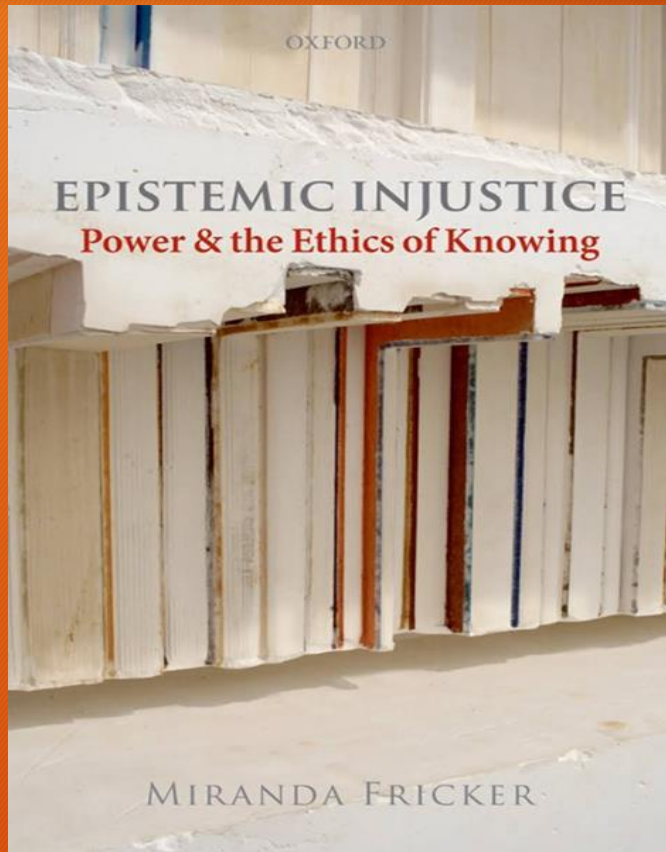
- With which we are familiar?
  - Not only diagnostic manuals but also binary and expert 'social' and 'psychological' approaches?
- Which gives us certainty, recognition, credibility and power?

The eternal  
temptation of the  
new 'expert' ...





# Unlearning: seeking epistemic justice



- Epistemic Injustice: when wrong is done to someone in their capacity as a knower.
- People with lived experience of Madness and distress:
  - are not considered credible witnesses, knowers, and understanders
  - are excluded from knowledge used for their 'care'
  - their real needs are ignored.

## Because of epistemic injustice

- Some forms of knowledge are considered more important than others
- Some voices are heard more than others
- Some testimonies, and experiences are more easily believed



‘There is a lot to be learnt from Mad knowledge, yet very few people are listening’ (Rai Waddingham, 2021)

# Insider-outsider: working inside and against systems

- Mental health education since the mid-1990s
- A challenging task
  - when students are expected to practice in dominant biomedical systems...
  - because of my own limited resources to think, practice, and teach 'outside the box'
- Building alliances with the emerging user/survivor movement in Ireland creates
  - new possibilities for critical thinking inside and outside the university
  - but also, some concerns about the interests served



# A good idea?

- People with self-experience, service users, survivors, Mad people participate in social work education
  - Sharing stories from their experiences
- Innovation without change?

# Unlearning: Reconsidering narratives

## The power of narratives

- Telling one's story can be healing, therapeutic, an act of resistance
- Writing down the story or being listened to authentically is affirming
- Long tradition of 'counter-narratives' being used to challenge the dominant narrative

Costa et al (2012); O'Donnell, Sapouna, Brosnan (2019); Sapouna (2020)

## And concerns about

- Voyeurism- 'disability porn' (Costa et al 2012)
- Individualisation, the danger of the single story
- A commodity that serves institutional interests
- Appropriation: complementing rather than challenging dominant systems
- Unequal status of the 'invited' speaker.
- Silenced voices

O'Donnell, Sapouna, Brosnan (2019); Sapouna (2020)





# Learning through allyship

## Being an ally

Identifying systemic harm

Making space for mad knowledge

Acknowledging privilege

Not an uncritical solidarity to survivor allies

An ally of the mad community while not being a member

Moving beyond binary positions

## Within the context of

- Corporate university
- ‘Inclusion’ and ‘diversity’ becoming core university policies.
- Working within and against systems that continue to devalue Mad knowledge



Learning through allyship

Can universities be radical spaces?

# (Un)learning-celebrating and interrogating our achievements

- Diversity of individual and collective narratives
  - Beyond simplifying binaries
  - Honouring complexities
  - Solidarity networks
  - Alliances between diverse communities
  - Interrogating our achievements
  - Democracy
  - Epistemic Humility
  - Remaining unsettled
- 
- Solidarity is incompatible with superiority

Thank you!

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