Original Article

Doing it Ourselves: Crafting a Mad Zine Methodology

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Abstract

This article describes the approach we developed in our research project about radical mental health zines, or mad zines. Rather than importing a set of accepted methods from elsewhere, we drew on insights from the emerging fields of Zine Studies and Mad Studies and crafted our own DIY approach. As we wanted to develop a methodology that was congruent with the politics, cultures, and ethics of both the zine community and mad movements, we attempted to cultivate what we refer to as a Madzine sensibility. We detail that here, alongside the ideas that informed it. We describe how we used this approach to develop the specific methods we used in our research. We are not claiming to have fully resolved any of the ethical-political challenges involved in researching zines in general, or Madzines in particular. Rather, we share here our process, in the hope that it will be useful to the growing number of scholars who are researching zines and/or using zines in their research.

Keywords

creative methods, DIY culture, zines, mental health, Mad Studies

Introduction

Drawing upon the emerging critical fields of Mad Studies and Zine Studies, this article explains how we developed our approach to researching radical mental health zines (or Madzines). We demonstrate how our approach was less about developing a specific "methodology" and more about cultivating an appropriate sensitivity toward zines and madness, which, in turn, informed our methods. The initial aim of our research was to explore how Madzines "craft contention" about mental health knowledge and practice—in other words, how zines challenge prevailing understanding about madness, distress, and psychosocial disabilities (see Figure 1).

This paper describes how our research evolved and expanded from its initial inception (Spandler, 2021). It explores how we attempted to develop an approach that is congruent with both zine cultures, which are rooted in countercultural activist politics (Duncombe, 1997; Mageary, 2021), and Mad movements, which are rooted in psychiatric survivors' critiques of mainstream approaches to madness and distress (Beresford & Russo, 2021; LeFrançois et al., 2013; Lewis et al., 2024; Reaume, 2021; Smith, 2024). For example, we engaged with zines as alternative forms of knowledge (not just receptacles for alternative knowledge), and with zinesters as coproducers of knowledge (rather than mere research "participants"). In addition, rather than interpreting or analyzing zines, or the people ("zinesters") who make and circulate zines, we invited the people who engaged with our research, especially those participating in the zine workshops we facilitated, to write blog posts for our dedicated website.[1] We reference these in this article, and in other outputs from the project (Anderson & Spandler, 2025), and they will form the basis for our edited book about Madzines (Spandler and Anderson, 2026). For these reasons, our methodology and our research findings are inseparable—in other words, we do not have separate research "findings."

The rest of this article is structured as follows. The next section contextualizes the relationship between zines and research and outlines how zines have tended to be used in research to date. We follow that with a section drawing outlining the ethical and political challenges involved in researching Madzines and the need to cultivate a Madzine sensibility. We then go on to describe how that sensibility informed the way we approached our research: identifying Madzines; "being with" Madzines; making Madzines, sharing Madzines; and facilitating Madzine workshops. While not claiming to have resolved any of the ethical challenges

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Figure 1. Images from the zine we made for our interview with research funders.

involved in researching Madzines, we offer some suggestions and considerations for the growing number of researchers interested in researching zines and/or using zines in their research.

Zines and Research

A zine (pronounced "zeen"), short for fanzine or magazine, is a DIY (do-it-yourself), low-budget, limited-circulation publication. Zines, which take many forms, can incorporate pictures, images, text and collage, photography, and/or other creative elements. They are often produced in small runs, using a photocopier, before being folded, stapled, glued, or sometimes delicately handsewn (Watson & Bennet, 2021). Zine creators (or "zinesters") are often motivated by a desire to share their own experiential knowledge, derived from membership of marginalized or otherwise less-empowered communities (Piepmeier, 2009, 2012; Ramdashan Bold, 2017; Todd, 2006). It is for that reason that zines have been dubbed "notes from underground" (Duncombe, 1997).

Zines have been used as, and are sometimes reduced to, "public engagement" or "dissemination" tools in social sciences and health sciences research (Gameiro et al., 2018; McNicol, 2014). However, in the context of a resurgence of interest in off-line DIY media, zines and zine cultures, increasing numbers of researchers, especially postgraduate students, have been researching zines, and sometimes using or creating zines as part of their research designs (Bagelman & Bagelman, 2016; Bradley et al., 2025; Cameron, 2012; Carette et al., 2024; Lupton, 2022; Watson et al., 2022). Such activity—some located outside academia (French & Curd, 2022)—has been fueled by a growing frustration with conventional research methods, and a resultant interest in more creative approaches (Kara, 2020; Leavy, 2020).

Zines are, then, being taken up as part of a broader challenge to traditional (post) positivist research and as a way of "doing research otherwise" (Tachine & Nicolazzo, 2023). For example, zines are being used as a methodological tool—one that resists extractivism and enhances research participants' agency, individually and collectively, to tell their stories on their own terms, build relationships, engage in dialogue and co-create alternative resources (Baker et al., 2024; Sinha & Back, 2013; Worley, 2015). Zines have been considered a good vehicle for telling difficult and challenging stories, especially those that do not fit the conventional structures imposed by, for example, linear recovery narratives (Cooper, 2021, 2024; Walker, 2025). For instance, Carolyn Chernoff has facilitated zine workshops that enable what she refers to as "tough talk" (e.g., about emotive subjects such as domestic violence). In addition, researchers have been making zines as a means of locating, articulating, navigating, and "doing" emotion (Bradley et al. 2025).

As zines are taken more seriously in (and as) academic scholarship, an awareness has been growing that we need more appropriate, ethically sensitive, and relevant methods for researching (with) them. As a result, zine scholars have begun to articulate specific zine-centered methodologies and methods that are rooted in zine practices (Cooper, 2024; Hays, 2020; Lymn, 2014; Walker, 2025; Willis, 2022). Some, for example, have argued that researchers need to develop a different kind of relationship with zines—responding to them more like art or poetry—through cultivation of a focused intimacy with them (Watson & Bennett,

2021). According to Watson and Bennet (2021, p. 146), zines "represent a style, approach and sensibility—a particular way of orienting toward, creatively engaging with and experiencing the world."

However, while zines feature increasingly in academic scholarship, detailed methodological accounts are rare, especially in a mental health research context, where there are additional ethical and political challenges. This article sets out to address that gap and to complement other emerging scholarship on this subject. We outline our attempt to develop a zine-sensitive methodology fit for our research project exploring the role of zines in "crafting contention" about madness and distress. We describe how, rather than "importing" or "applying" accepted already-existing methods, we have chosen, intuitively and organically, to evolve our own DIY methodology. As the creation of DIY zine culture is a *collective* as well as an individual endeavor, as we have developed our approach as a research team, this might more accurately be termed "Doing it Ourselves" (Clark-Parsons, 2018).

In his groundbreaking graphic book, *Unflattening*, Comics scholar Nick Sousanis argues for, and exemplifies, the "fresh methods" and "new ways of seeing" that are necessary if we are to understand a complex and multi-dimensional social world (Sousanis, 2015, p. 32). He argues that we need to go beyond text, which "flattens" the complexities of our multi-dimensional world. In our own research, we sought to understand how zines themselves, viewed through a Mad Studies lens, might offer up "new ways of seeing." This is especially important in a context where dominant practices, like psychiatric diagnoses and psychological interpretations, can oversimplify, pathologize, and individualize—or, to use Sousanis' word, "flatten"—our understanding of madness and psychological difference. We ourselves wanted to avoid researching madness (and zines) in ways that reduced, objectified, or "flattened" them, or otherwise ran counter to—and inadvertently negated—the values and ethos of zine and mad movements. Doing this required developing the fresh methods that Sousanis recommends.

A Madzine Sensibility

A Madzine sensibility refers to our attempt to be politically and ethically attuned to both Mad culture and Zine culture, through embodying an ethics of care, responsibility, and accountability. Mad and zine cultures are each internally heterogeneous, and they are externally distinct from one another. Nonetheless, there is—within each and between them—significant overlap, in the form of shared values and practices. Both mad and zine cultures are intrinsically anti-authoritarian and anti-professionalized, and both value lived experience, privileging bottom-up, grassroots knowledge. In an academic context, both Mad and Zine Studies—two relatively new fields of study—have sought to remain embedded in their respective communities; have been motivated by a desire to create relevant knowledge for those communities; and aim to challenge the accepted principles of much mainstream scholarship.

For example, Mad Studies scholars seek to unsettle what counts as knowledge, sense-making, and rationality through emphasizing the "method in our madness and . . . madness in our method" (Ingram, 2016, p. 14). One recent Mad Studies text, *a Mad Turn*, rejects positivist notions of "data collection" in favor of a mixture of "un-methods" or "anti-methods"—challenging conventional understandings of quantitative, qualitative or mixed method research (Smith, 2024). There is evidence of some shared influence. For example, zine scholars have, like some Mad scholars, drawn upon texts like Chela Sandoval's (2000) *Methodology of the Oppressed* which describes the application of lived knowledges and skills to the sense-making practices of non-dominant subjects (e.g., Licona, 2012).

Just as Queer Studies scholars refer to Queering research; doing a Queer reading; or using a Queer lens (Spandler & Barker, 2016), so Mad Studies scholars increasingly refer to "Maddening" research; doing a "Mad reading"; or using a "Mad lens" (Wolframe, 2014). This implies that, just as Queer Studies shifts the analytical gaze away from individual LGBT+ people onto oppressive cis-heteronormative cultures, so too, Mad Studies turns the gaze away from individual mad people and onto the "maddening" practices, relationships and structures that pathologize them (Costa, 2014). With all this in mind, we were acutely aware of the risk that—in our approach to researching Madzines—we might inadvertently reproduce the pathologizing, sanist and individualizing practices that still prevail in mental health practice and research (see Jones & Kafai, 2024; Leblanc & Kinsella, 2016; Russo, 2021).

At a "Zines Assemble" event at the Wellcome Collection in London in 2022, Peter Willis introduced us to the term "zine-ic," following Cui Su (2012) who used the term to refer to a specific way of reading and understanding zines, that "channels" the five key qualities of zine culture: care, collaboration, radicality, access and the sharing of knowledge. This concept helped us to express our developing insight that our research was not simply *about* Madzines but could also be about thinking *with* them—that is, methodologically, our research might fruitfully strive to *mirror* the culture that produces them. And that idea, itself, is zine-ic. That is because one of the most common routes to knowledge sharing and collaboration within zine cultures is through encouraging others to engage in zine-making practices—what has been referred to as the spirit of emulation (Duncombe, 1997). Therefore, our research is not only about how Madzines (by means of their content and their form) can unsettle and contest mainstream understandings of madness and distress. Our research also learns from, and

Figure. A zine JA made, early on in discussions about our methodology.

tries to channel, what it is that a Madzine, or a zinester, or a community of zinesters, can "do."

This approach echoes Arthur Frank's approach to studying illness stories, which thinks *with* stories, not just *about* them, and "lets stories breathe" (Frank, 2010). Frank's dialogical methodology explores not (just) what a story "means" but also what it can "do" for people (that is, its performativity). We wanted to explore how that idea might work in relation to zines, that is, how we might think *with*, rather than just *about* them. This subtle, but crucial, distinction—between thinking *with*, and thinking *about* zines—came to shape our choice of methods.

One key consideration in developing our research was our responsibility toward mad and zine communities, especially zinesters (people who make and share zines). Many psychiatric survivors object to being anonymized in conventional research outputs, as that means that they cannot be associated with their ideas, thus denying them recognition, individually or collectively, as valid knowers (Walker, 2024) or organic intellectuals (Cresswell & Spandler, 2013). We were acutely aware of the need to form and maintain ethical & considerate relationships with zine creators (Fife, 2019). While some zinesters explicitly state, in their zines, how they would like their work to be referenced, many do not, little imagining that their work will be cited. While we wanted to respect the often personal and private nature of zinesters' insights, we still wanted to validate Madzines as a form of knowledge in their own right: different from, but no less valuable than, other forms of knowledge.

In short, then, we wanted to find ways of citing zines that would recognize them as alternative forms of knowledge, rather than just viewing them as "data" or relegated to the status of "gray literature." We were, however, aware of specific ethical issues involved in citing zines, especially perzines (zines about individuals' personal experiences), which often contain highly sensitive material. We were therefore delighted to discover that a network of zine librarians and archivists has developed a "Code of Ethics" as a guide to archiving and cataloging zines (Zine Librarians Interest Group, 2015). Their insights into the ethics of zine acquisition and sharing, while not straightforwardly transferable to a research context, helped us think through how to credit zinesters' work.

Zines challenge conventional forms of publication, referencing, and citation, not least because it is not always clear who created them or when (Hays, 2020). They have been described as a "parasitic" media form, which often appropriates, recycles, and sometimes subverts other texts and media (Poletti, 2019). In addition, zines are often shared or traded between zine makers and their friends, rather than circulated and published in a traditional sense (Fife, 2019). Even where a zine is reproduced and sold—for example, online, or at a zine fair—that is often with the expectation that the buyers will themselves be members of a marginalized community, and the creator might not consider that their zine could end up in a library or zine archive or be referred to in a research output. By contrast, many zine scholars are themselves embedded in zine communities, where they create and circulate their own zines. That poses additional epistemological and ontological opportunities and challenges and raises important questions regarding scholarly identities and positioning.

Further critical questions have emerged about academic co-option, colonization, exclusion, and elitism. For example, some zinesters have expressed concerns about "extractive" academic practices whereby zines have allegedly been used and reproduced by scholars without explicit permissions being sought or granted.[2] Stories of this kind, that circulate among the zine community, can impact profoundly on the delicate relationships of trust forged over time between academics and zine makers. It is often by paying attention to instances where zinesters feel that their trust has been violated that the ethics of zine research can begin to be articulated (Cooper, 2024).

The defenses mounted to such accusations of extractive practices—that the researchers have simply been "borrowing," "recycling," or "cutting and pasting" material (a common and accepted zine practice)—could be identified, unthinkingly, with some qualities of the "zine-ic" approach that we outlined earlier. Although there might be some justification for this, especially if we take a "mirroring" approach to zine research, it highlights that one quality cannot be considered in isolation from another, but rather each must be understood as part of a broader, holistic, and ethical approach to "zine-ic" research practice. In other words, easy "access" to zines, and the "emulation" they elicit, should not become separated from the duty of care that is owed to those who make them.

Our approach does not remove the unequal relationships that, as Cuthbert (2022) notes, continue to characterize creative research, especially in academic settings. That we have not solved these ethical and political conundrums comes as no surprise. These tensions are intrinsic not only to zine culture but also to mad politics, where psychiatric survivors have expressed similar concerns around extractive and exploitative research practices (Papoulias & Callard, 2022; Russo, 2012; Beresford and Russo, 2016; Survivors History Group, 2011). They are there to be understood, appreciated, and continually worked with by researchers, not necessarily resolved or finalized. In that spirit, the following section outlines some of the ways we have attempted to put our ideas into practice and what we have learned in the process.

Putting our Madzine Sensibility into Practice

In tune with zine culture, our methods have been rough, affective, and continually evolving. Rather than deciding in advance what we were going to do and how we were going to do it, we were interested instead to see where the research might take us. Drawing on post-humanist theory (Haraway, 2003) and inspired by our canine companions, we "followed our noses." Our research had that in common with Lea Cooper's practice-based PhD about health-related zines, which ran in parallel to our project. Cooper adopted the Queer method of following "desire lines" and "engaging in the embodied modes of reading zines that zinesters employ in other contexts: flicking, skimming and being orientated by desire" (Cooper, 2024, p. 42). Drawing on Kate Eichhorn's (2013) *The Archival Turn in Feminism*, Cooper has referred to this as a "meandering methodology."

We have also been influenced by other zine researchers in the field, such as Paula Cameron (2012) who investigated how women made zines to explore their experience of depression. She proposed the idea of "seam-ful" research methods which, like zines themselves, are not neatly finished or polished but make visible their workings, joins or stitches (Cameron, 2012). By contrast with conventional (seemingly) seam-*less*, academic research, we have sought in our Madzines project to make clear the process and workings of our research. For example, rather than waiting until the project finished to share our "findings," through polished research outputs, we have tried to share our ongoing thinking: through crafting our own zines, writing blog posts ourselves, and inviting zinesters, and other people who have engaged with our project, to contribute to our project website.[3] These activities became a core part of our research, constituting not just our method, but our outputs too.

The idea of "bricolage" has been seen as a useful metaphor for research that uses multiple methods, as each becomes necessary in the unfolding context of a research situation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). In common with other researchers who use creative methods—and, indeed, with zine makers themselves—we understand the creation of knowledge as a *craft* (Sakata, 2023). Qualitative researchers have been likened to quilt-makers (Flannery, 2001). However, it is not from textiles but from zines themselves that we took our own inspiration. One of the most common techniques used in zine making is collage, and our research could be seen as using a collage of different methods. The next section describes the development of the specific methods we adopted. This account is by no means exhaustive but gives a flavor of how a Madzine sensibility has informed our work.

Identifying Madzines

Our first task was to identify what we had begun to refer to as Madzines. We were already somewhat familiar with zines before we started the project. HS, the principal investigator and editor of *Asylum magazine*,[4] had been actively collecting radical mental health literature as part of their long-standing research into the survivor movement. JA, the project's senior researcher, is also involved in *Asylum magazine* and, through her work as a mental health social worker and educator, was familiar with survivor literature and some historical patient magazines. TW, the PhD researcher, was experienced in making survivor zines, comics, and other artwork. We would notice a proliferation of zine archives, libraries, festivals, and "distros"[5] in recent years, mostly community-based and/or online and some affiliated to larger institutions, like universities and independent publishers.[6] However, while most zine distros and collections contain zines with mental health themes, those are often not distinguished from the general collection of disability, queer, self-help, or health-related zines. That could be seen as desirable, given the problems of categorizing zines in relation to contested mental health diagnoses, and the fact that mental health is deeply entangled with many other social issues and identities, to such an extent that one of our collaborators has even claimed that "all zines are mental health zines" (Ahsan, 2023). It does, however, create a challenge for researchers (or indeed anyone) seeking to locate zines relating to madness and distress.

Our initial plan to spend time in zine archives and attend zine fairs was frustrated, due to the pandemic, but we used social media and the radical mental health networks in which we were already embedded to locate, purchase, swap and download zines. Through making links with established zine libraries (such as the Edinburgh Zine library, Glasgow Zine library, Queer Zine library and the Feminist library), and with new and emerging collections (such as the Wellcome zine collection and the Mental Health Zine library), we started to identify, explore, and

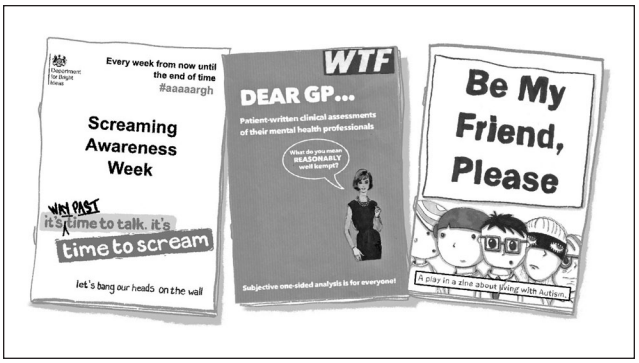

Figure. Illustration of Some of the Madzines We Identified That Became Cornerstones of Our Madzines Collection (by Jac Batey).

acquire zines. As word spread about our project, we were delighted to receive zines unsolicited, through the post or in our email inboxes.

When we started to think about what makes a zine a Madzine, one of the criteria we used was that it contests what might be considered to be "mainstream" knowledge about mental health, madness, and distress. That is, of course, context dependent—and includes challenges to some of the "alternative" understandings about madness and distress that are now widely accepted within some critical psy-disciplines. As we ourselves have been steeped in both mainstream and critical approaches to madness and distress, Madzines unsettled our *own* understandings too.

Moreover, on starting to engage with zines, especially more contemporary, hand-made, one-off perzines (personal experience zines), we began to realize that our experience of their unsettling Madzine qualities, derived not just from their content but also from their form. They were not always easy to understand or unravel, at least not through conventional forms of textual "analysis." We found ourselves watching, as Madzines moved around between us, and asking what it was that they were "doing."

Being with Zines

A concern with engaging with what zines do and how they do it—rather than simply with seeing zines as "texts" to be read—has become central to zine studies (Radway, 2018). There has also been increasing recognition that zines can be a powerful way to explore, articulate, and center researcher's emotional reactions (Bradley et al., 2025). These ideas were useful in sensitizing us to how Madzines were affecting us: whether and how they were moving, touching, and informing us, beyond the power of words and argument. As we suggested earlier, these unsettling affective qualities are an important part of what we think makes a zine a "Madzine," with the power to contest mainstream understandings of mental health.

As a result, we developed the idea of "being with" zines—rather than analyzing them as objects of study—as a method. This approach felt especially fitting to us because it mirrors what many psychiatric survivors say that they want from, and beyond, mental health services: to be accompanied by people who can get alongside them and their distress, without pre-judgment and without unwanted or coercive interpretations and interventions. Lea Cooper highlighted a similar issue in their recent doctoral work:

> My own history as a psychiatric survivor, who made zines in part to resist the control I felt mental health services had over narratives of my life, means I am . . . suspicious of any methodology that requires an analysis or interpretation that mirrored the same analysis or interpretation I explicitly made zines to resist, or that might replicate wider epistemic injustice or violence. (Cooper, 2024, p. 40)

In line with this, we have taken care to avoid imposing our own, one-way interpretations onto other people's zines. We have been interested less in analyzing their content, in search of underlying meanings, and more in exploring how zines function and have agency. Lauren Cooper (2022) has referred to the problem of researchers "flicking through" zines to extract data, without deeply engaging with their form or content. This, she argues, disregards the effort and time the zinester put into the zine's creation, demonstrating a lack of appreciation for its essential zine-like spirit and materiality (Cooper, 2022). While we had similar reservations, our own way of being with Madzines has, as it has evolved, included both deep engagement and the "skimming, flicking, or scanning" that Lauren Cooper critiques, and that paradoxically Lea Cooper defends as a neuroqueer meandering method (Cooper, 2024). This aligns with their idea of following "desire lines," which, they argue, is common practice among zine enthusiasts, and "a potentially generative form of selecting, reading and interacting with zines" (Cooper, 2024, p. 21). We felt it necessary both to "flick through" large zine collections to identify potential relevant Madzines, and also to spend considerable "quality time" with particular zines—or collections of related zines—to understand whether, or how, they unsettled what we considered to be accepted understandings of madness and distress.

Self-help and self-care zines were a case in point. It came as no surprise to us that normative understandings of mental health find their way into zines, as well as other kinds of literature. Self-help zines struck us as of particular interest on that score. While some of these clearly fell outside our understanding of a Madzine, others proved to be subtly—or not so subtly—subversive. We used the blog on our website as a forum to explore these kinds of issues. For

Figure. Images from the Madzine methodology zine made by JA at the start of the project.

example, see the dialogue between HS and Meg-John Barker about what makes a self-care zine a Madzine (Spandler & Barker, 2021), and other commentaries on that topic (e.g., Archibald, 2024).

"Being with" a zine that expresses something powerful, especially in a way in which we had not quite seen it expressed before, can provide a sense of accompaniment or companionship (Frank, 2016; Haraway, 2003). As researchers, we have found ourselves carrying minizines around in our pockets and reading them for insights, not only into our research questions but also into our own lives. We have come to appreciate how zines, as examples of what Sherry Turkle (2007) might refer to as "evocative objects," can act not only as companions to our emotional lives, but also as provocations to thought, as well as tools for wider critique and quiet activism—or craftivism (Greer, 2014; Pottinger, 2017).

Making Zines

Emulation is often proposed as one key characteristic of zine cultures—read a zine, make a zine, exchange a zine. Because of its simple format—by contrast, say, with a formal publication—a zine can inspire a response in kind and, in the process, break down real or imagined barriers between the producers and consumers of knowledge (Duncombe, 1997). Therefore, it is not surprising that zine researchers often make zines themselves, as a means of understanding and communicating what they have been doing. For example, as part of her research about life writing, Anna Poletti moved from a focus on reading zines to making them (Poletti, 2008, 2019). Making zines, she has said, allowed her to situate herself within the textual culture she was studying *on the terms set by that culture*. Lea Cooper, a seasoned zinester, when faced with an issue regarding their doctoral research—about the health-related zine collection at the Wellcome library—asked the (zine-ic) question "What would a zinester do?" "Make a zine!" came their reply (Cooper, 2024).

We too have been crafting our own zines—not simply as a method of "disseminating" our research, but as a way of "being with" zines differently. TW, who tends to process her thinking through pictures and was already a zine maker, has experimented with zine form to express what it is like "from inside" particular "mad" experiences, like dissociation (Walker, 2023). She has continued to craft her own zines, throughout the project, and has integrated zine-making into her PhD methodology. HS is most at ease with the written form. Though familiar with the curation of *Asylum magazine*, HS has not always felt comfortable engaging with approaches such as drawing or collage. Our own differences have helped us—as a team—to anticipate the diversity of response we encountered when facilitating zine workshops; challenging any presumption that zine making is an accessible and appropriate medium for all. JA, drawn to creative practice but initially new to zine making, made a wide variety of project-related zines which felt increasingly "organic," as the project has progressed (Anderson, 2025).

Our first forays into zine-making during the project were often quite instrumental, using zines as an alternative way

Figure. Our collaborative "Choose Your Own Research Adventure" Zine [Swansea Zine Festival 24-Hour Zine Challenge].

to impart information. For example, we produced a zine to outline the project's aims and took this to our interview panel with funders (see Figure 1 in the introduction). Then we started to make zines to help us think through and explain our emerging methodology (Spandler & Anderson, 2021). For example, an early zine played with the idea of mirroring zine and mad cultures.

It is helpful, as researchers, to have a sense of both ends of the researcher/researched dynamic. An early interview about this zine, with one of our Madzine collaborators—Jac Batey—gave us a taste of having our own creative practice scrutinized[7]; and its subsequent inclusion in a Wellcome exhibition[8] has given us an experience common to many zinesters—of an artifact of our own making moving unexpectedly into a more public, and mainstream, arena.

We worked from home during the first year of the project due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Making zines and sending them to one another helped us get to know one another better, care for ourselves and each other, and share ideas about our research. We learned a lot from engaging with online zine events during this time. For example, we joined in with the Swansea Zine fest 24-hour challenge, co-producing a "choose your own research adventure" zine.

As our research proceeded, we began to summarize our reading in zine form, which proved an accessible way to share ideas with others. For example, we made zines as a way for us to think and feel our way into books about zines, such as Stephen Duncombe's (1997) classic *Notes from Underground*, and others that have shaped our thinking more broadly, such as Arthur Frank's (2010) *Letting Stories Breathe*; Miranda Fricker's (2007) *Epistemic Injustice* and Erin Manning's (2016) "The Minor Gesture."

Figure. Images from a zine JA made about Arthur W Frank's book, *Letting Stories Breathe*.

As we spent more time with zines, attended zine-related events and workshops, and encountered a wider variety of zinesters, we came to see how we might become more creative in our approach to zines. In other words, we began to think *through* and *with* (not just *about*) zine making. Moving beyond words (and, significantly, type) helped to bring color, texture and three dimensionality not just to our own zines, but to our research, including our approaches to dissemination and analysis (Anderson, 2025). For example, we made a few videos of ourselves engaging with zines (tracing the shapes and turning the page), to give a sense of

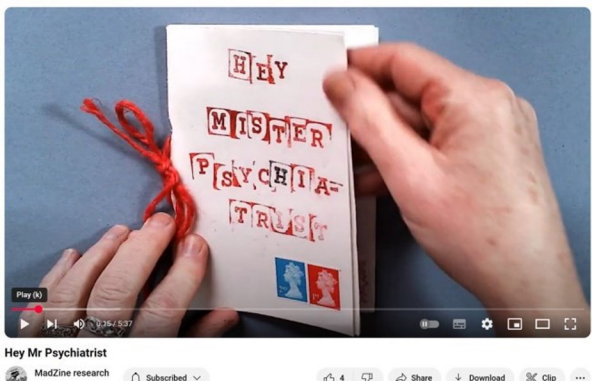

Figure. A still from one of the videos that JA made which share a zine online in a way that tries to retain a sense of its embodied qualities.

their materiality, what "being with" zines felt like, and how seriously we took them (Martin-Fowles, 2023).

Zine making has been used as a method of *data collection* (Cameron, 2012; Ptolomey, 2024) and as a way of *sharing research findings* (Covid Realities, 2021; Tantam et al., 2024). However, there are only a few emerging examples of zine making used as a specific method of *analysis* (see, for example, Biagioli et al., 2021). As part of our project, TW developed a specific zine-centered method of analysis during her doctoral research project (Walker, 2025). She made zines in response to, and as a way of making sense of, the interviews she conducted with established zinesters. In so doing, she used zine making to feel her way into the characteristic style and structure that the individual zinesters had used in the zines they had shared with her, employing materials and processes similar to those that they had used.

This method helped TW understand participants' zine-making processes on a more visceral level. It highlighted the dynamics between individuals' approaches to zine making, the processes they chose, their motivations and their relationship to zine culture(s). It also helped her appreciate how different zinesters made active use of the different qualities of materials, and of specific techniques to achieve their aims, and this fed into her developing analysis (Walker, 2025).

Integrating zine making, and appreciation, with the "rigor" and the particular rational and logical type of sense-making that is expected in academic practice, continues to be a challenge. This is a challenge that Mad scholars, and those from other creative disciplines, who are used to addressing these issues in analogous contexts, have been actively addressing. In a Mad Studies context, see, for example, Ingram (2016) and Smith (2024).

Sharing Zines

Another key quality of zine cultures is the spirit and practice of exchange, as exemplified during zine fairs, where zinesters trade or swap their zines with one another. Our primary interest, in exploring how Madzines can be used to enable change, made us keen to share those we found with others, rather than to keep them to ourselves for our research

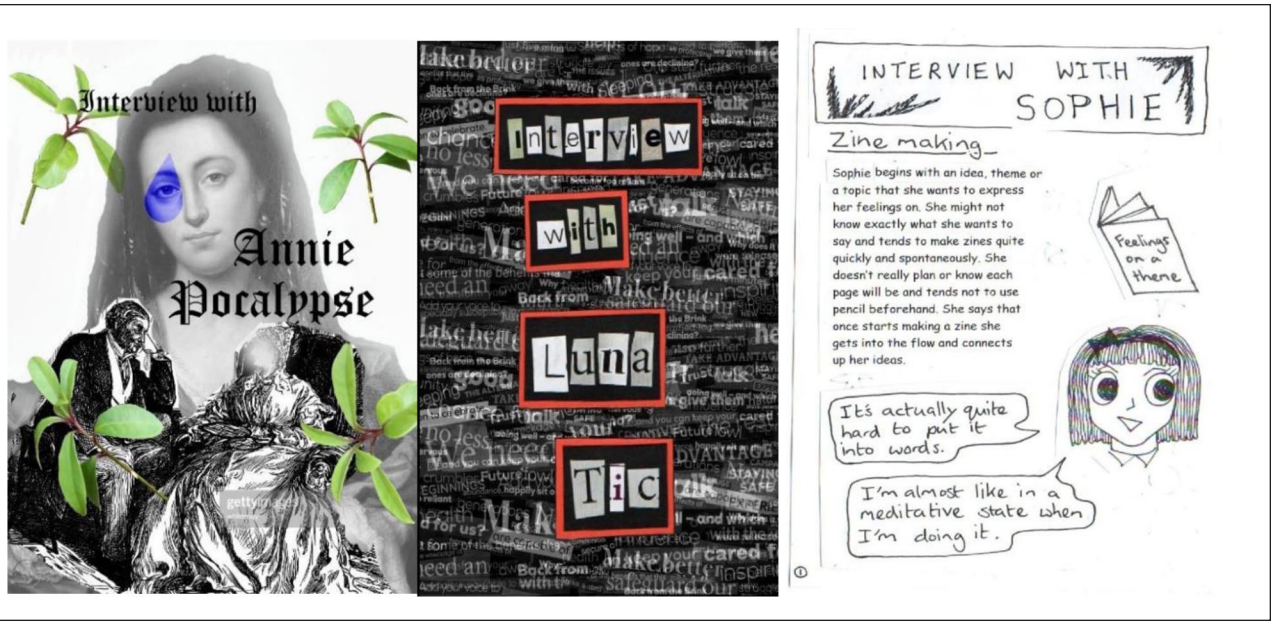

Figure. Examples of the covers of some of the zines that TW made about her interviews with experienced zinesters (in their style).

Figure. Madzine stall at Outside(r) Zine Fair in Coventry, where we shared some of the madzines in our collection.

Figure. Madzines reading tent and table. Reimagining Mental Health event, Lancaster, 2022.

purposes. Therefore, we shared and/or traded some of the zines we were collecting, or had made, both at zine fairs and among members of the critical mental health networks that we are all embedded in.

For example, members of *Critical and Creative Approaches to Mental Health Practice* (CCraMHP) have been meeting in Lancaster for the past 15 years, talking, reading, and viewing films together—often discussing articles from the latest issue of *Asylum magazine*. In the first year of the project, we arranged for members of the group to receive a package of Rachel Rowan Olive's zines through the post (Rowan Olive, n.d., 2017). We had identified Rachel's zines as quintessential examples of Madzines in that they simply, but powerfully, contest prevailing mental health politics and practices, using humor, parody, and satire.[9] CCrAMHP members were surprised and impressed by the ways in which Rachel had managed to crystallize such big ideas in zine form. They experienced the zines, with their hand-made quality, as a "gift" from Rachel herself, echoing the findings of other research projects (Piepmeier, 2009). Rachel's zines proved to be valuable "talking pieces" as they moved between us, connecting—through their humor and relatability—fellow survivors, friends, and mental health workers.

More recently, we have run several events where we have "showcased" Madzines from our collection, designing workshops around them and/or creating "pop-up" Madzine libraries (Anderson, 2022; Anderson & Spandler, 2024; Not Alone Collective, 2024). Inspired by projects such as the Graphic Novel Reading Room,[10] we have tried to create environments conducive to sustained engagement with the zines—for example, at one event, we pitched a comfortable reading tent, with cushions, where readers could be and spend quality time with the Madzines in our collection (Stenning, 2022).

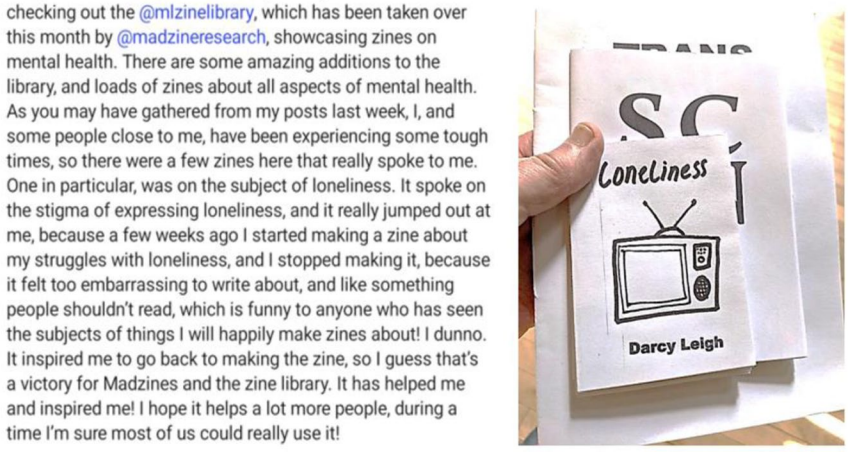

Figure. Darcy Leigh's Loneliness zine, and screen shot of zine club member's Instagram response.

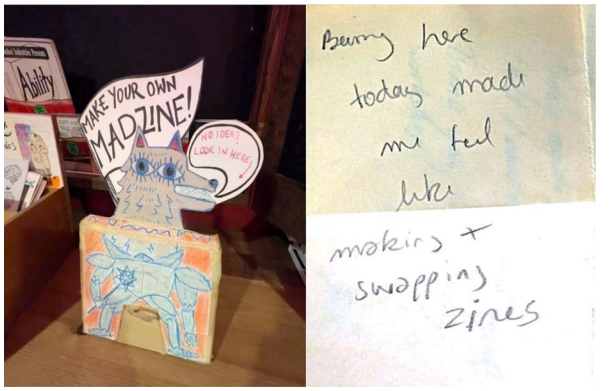

Figure. Morecambe and Lancaster Zine Library Takeover, and feedback from a Madzine workshop.

Figure. Sharing zines with students and a Lecturer in Health and Social Care.

We learned more through finding creative ways of sharing zines than we might have done had we focused on interpreting them and disseminating our findings "about" them. For example, our Madzines takeover of the Morecambe and Lancaster zine library elicited some powerful reactions to zines such as Darcy Leigh's "Loneliness."[11]

The zine distributions and pop-up libraries have functioned as staging posts. To date we have been living with the Madzines we have collected, in boxes, distributed between our homes. We have had that in common with other nascent zine libraries and, like them, hope in the future to make our collection more publicly available, probably through lodging it within a permanent collection. In that way, anticipate that it could be more actively used, as a resource for scholars, activists, and others.

Facilitating Zine Workshops

We have provided opportunities not only for identifying, "being with," and sharing Madzines, but for creating them together too. While many zinesters make their zines on their own, at home, zine workshops frequently provide a starting point. We began, during Covid, by inviting mad zinesters to facilitate online workshops for mental health groups we were already part of. They were intended to help people—including ourselves—to develop our Madzine sensibility. For example, Dolly Sen ran a workshop for us called "How to be subversive" (Anderson, 2021), and Rachel Rowan Olive demonstrated, in an online session, how much can be conveyed through drawing simple stick figures (Roberts, 2021).

As the lockdowns ended, we started to facilitate face-to-face Madzine workshops—both in formal settings, such as Higher Education conferences and seminars, and in a variety of more informal, community settings, including zine-related projects. For example, we hosted Madzine workshops with Mad Studies scholars, health and social care students, service users, survivors, and mental health activists. These workshops enabled us to reflect on the possibilities and limitations of Madzine pedagogy in mental health (Anderson & Spandler, 2025).[12]

We modeled these workshops on those we would attended ourselves, adding a Madzine twist. We usually brought along a selection of relevant zines from our developing Madzines collection, to inspire attendees' own ideas and practices. We provided basic zine-making tools (paper, pens, scissors, glue, letter stamps, etc.) and materials to use in situ and/or take home (including, sometimes, relevant mental health publications that people could choose to collage or remix).

We gave participants some basic instructions on how to make a simple mini-zine out of a single piece of paper and, if asked for, we offered prompts on loosely mental health-related themes. As our thinking about Madzines evolved, so too did the range of materials we provided—as we became sensitized to the expressive potential of tracing paper, fabric, tin foil, string, etc. We were frequently and pleasantly surprised at how people used the workshops to engage with zines in creative and unique ways. While a minority of participants spent their time perusing the Madzines we had brought along, most people were eager to make and share their own creations.

That held true, not only of the students we encountered, and those workshop attendees who might be seen to accord with a stereotyped image of a "zinester"—a young, middle-class, arty outcast (Reynolds, 2020). It also held true of many of the long-term service users at a mental health center in London, where we were invited to co-host a zine workshop. Most of the people in the room had never heard of zines and initially did not seem that interested in the workshop or our research either. However, despite us offering limited facilitative steering, they began to riff off the broad theme that we gave them—the causes of mental ill-health—utilizing the material we provided to create unique responses to the issues that most impact them.

TW, in her doctoral research, also facilitated zine workshops with mental health service users who were new to

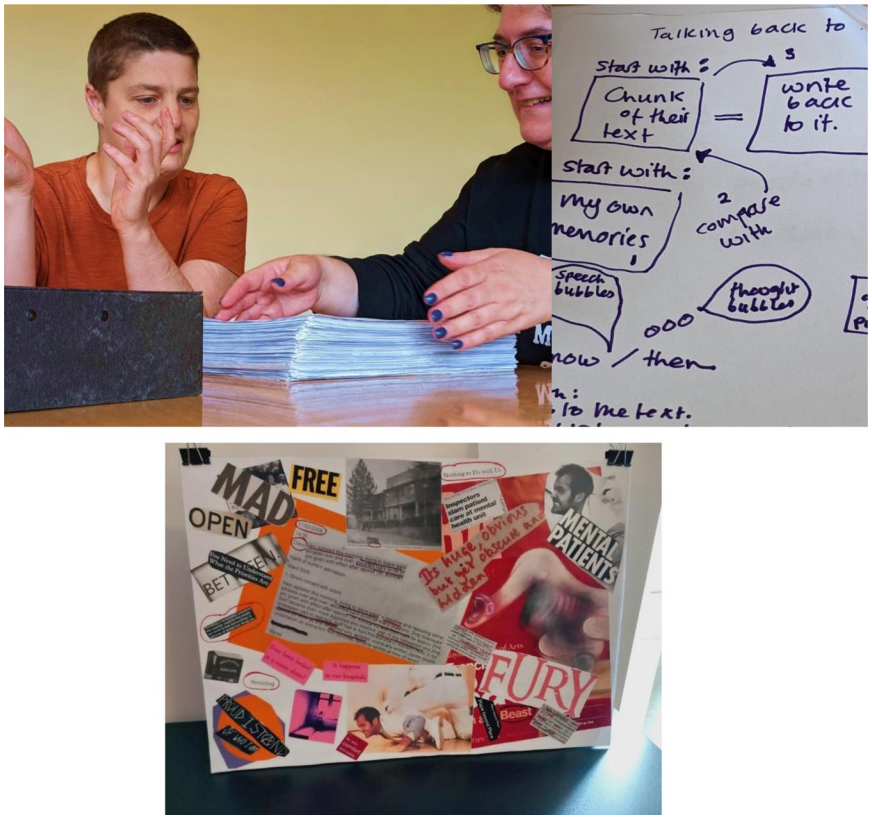

Figure. Workshop with Dina; notes from the workshop, and the Madzine collage Dina made, incorporating her psychiatric medical notes.

zine making and zine cultures. She introduced zine-making as a way that people could express and share stories that might be difficult to tell in other contexts, including "service user involvement" settings. As part of this process, she introduced participants to zines that other survivors had created and, once they had made their own, she invited them to think about who they would like to share their creations with. If participants decided they wanted to share their zines with others, she offered to help to facilitate this. While TW had anticipated mental health service users might have wanted to share their zines with service providers, TW learned that they preferred, at least initially, to use them to develop their own knowledge among themselves as peers, rather than to attempt to influence providers (Walker, 2025).

As well as running workshops for groups, we also hosted a one-off workshop with a survivor colleague who asked us to help her explore how she might (re)use her psychiatric care records from a traumatic in-patient stay in a zine, as a way of reclaiming her agency and story. As a result, rather than creating a classic mini-zine, which she felt would be too confining and might mirror the experience of physical restraint she has been subjected to in hospital, she created a large Madzine collage to help her express her resistance and desire for freedom (see Poursanidou, 2025).

Rather than seeing these workshops as producing "data" which we could analyze, we invited participants to blog for us afterwards about their experiences and what it was that they had learned. Drawing on their insights, we put together a tiny mini-zine—"A Madzine is a crafting tool"—with direct quotes from the blog, the title taken from a blog by one of the workshop participants (Dunedin, 2023). The text we included in the zine reads as follows:

> A Madzine is a crafting tool,
>
> to communicate experience at the edge of existing language,
>
> where half-hidden knowledges can be touched and felt;
>
> to tell new stories from "inside the experience"
>
> that don't hold others hostage to our own perspectives;
>
> and to shape alternative universes,
>
> in which people can live and hold their own.
>
> Madzines speak of many hopeful things,
>
> but to hear them we must be close.
>
> We must be present with our own self.

Figure. JA crafting zines with the "Brown Babies" Group.

Figure. Making zines in Hiroshima.

That stipulation—regarding presence—held true of ourselves, as facilitators too. We actively joined in with the process of being with and/or making zines. While we did not seek to acquire people's zines, as data, we found that many workshop participants were keen that we include their zines in our research and offered them as donations to our Madzine library. Others wanted to take theirs home to finish them, reflect on them, or gift them to friends, family or, occasionally, mental health workers.

While we have, thus far, described how our research methodology *emerged* from our ethical sensibilities, there were also examples where our research *expanded* into new and unexpected domains. When we began our exploration of how Madzines contest understandings about mental health, we had not anticipated facilitating zine workshops outside of a formal "mental health" arena—in contexts that nonetheless connect strongly with questions of madness, distress, and survivorship.

For example, when we facilitated a Madzine workshop at the International Creative Research Methods conference in 2023, Suzannah Scott-Moncrieff made a zine about her great, great grandmother Jeannie, who had been incarcerated in Aberdeen infirmary and whose life she had been researching. Suzannah later blogged for us about how the zine about her ancestor became, in the process of its making, about Suzannah herself and her own brushes with madness (Scott-Moncrieff, 2023). Her blog post highlighted the conflicts that the sharing of her grandmother's story threw up for her. "Was it my story to tell?" she asked herself, in the process enabling her zine to travel outside our immediate context of "mental health."

That is because the ethics surrounding the sharing of stories of our ancestors concern not only mental health survivors and their families, but *all* families and, especially, families coping with past trauma. JA, at the time, had been consulting on a (seemingly) unrelated project exploring the experience of the children born to Black GIs and White British women during World War Two (Bland, 2019). She had been involved in some powerful conversations with their children and grandchildren, and felt that they might be interested in making zines and, more particularly, in Suzannah's zine. Her instinct was right, with one member—on encountering it—pronouncing it "a little booklet with so much, and a sense of justice within it too." Suzannah's zine helped spark further discussion—within the self-dubbed "Brown Babies" group—about the ownership of the stories of our ancestors.

In another example, we were invited to run a Madzine workshop with local peace activists in Hiroshima, during a visit intended to help us locate our work within a broader context of restorative practices (Spandler, 2024). We were initially nervous—not least about taking our rudimentary form of paper-folding-into-mini-zine to the land of delicately constructed and intricate paper cranes. However, we were impressed—during a 3-hour workshop in which participants shared responses to the Hiroshima bombing and its aftermath (Kurozumi, 2024)—by the weight of the knowledge, especially trauma-related knowledge, that a zine's frail structure can contain. This all pointed to the versatility, flexibility—and even "magic"—of what a Madzine or a Madzine workshop, can be, and do (Martin-Fowles, 2023).

Conclusion: Learning from Madzines

It is no surprise, given the growing appeal of new creative methods and the resurgence of interest in zines and zine cultures, that researchers have been turning to zines both as subject and as method in their work. In addition, new fields like Mad Studies and Zine Studies have been creating opportunities for those from non-traditional academic backgrounds, including mad-identified people and zinesters, to turn toward research. However, it is important that researchers—wherever they are located—take the ethics and politics

of zines seriously and approach such research with care and sensitivity.

This article has explained how we have tried to do that in the context of madness and zines. We sought actively to engage with DIY cultures and to bring their ethos into our research. We attended zine fairs, visited zine libraries, joined in with—and ourselves facilitated—zine making workshops, and made, bought, swapped, and shared Madzines, including through pop-up Madzine libraries. We have actively involved zinesters as coproducers of knowledge, not only through inviting commentary on their own zines, but also through soliciting engagement with the broader theoretical questions that, as researchers, have been exercising us. In those ways, they have been active collaborators in our sense-making process.

In return, we have offered some suggestions and considerations for people interested in researching zines and/or using zines in their research, especially if they are informed by, or in tune with, Mad Studies (or by neighboring disciplines, such as Critical Race Studies, Disability Studies and Queer Studies). We are not prescribing these as definitive methods for researching zines; rather, we are suggesting that researchers need to bring a nuanced understanding of zine culture to bear when considering the implications of the methods that they choose. We do not claim to have resolved the methodological challenges involved in researching zines, let alone those that pertain to "madness" or mental health. Nonetheless, we hope that our reflections may help the increasing numbers of scholars who are using zines in their research to evolve—in the spirit of DIY—their own zine-ic methods.

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Notes

1. www.madzines.org/blog.
2. For example, there was criticism of the publication of Teal Trigg's book about zines (Triggs, 2010) because of disagreements around whether she had permission to cite and include particular zines. Some people even boycotted the book, and a website was created encouraging people not to buy it.
3. www.madzines.org.
4. *Asylum, the radical mental health magazine* is on the "official" end of the imagined spectrum of mad zines.
5. Zine distros are places that distribute zines. This can include people's homes and independent bookstores.
6. See the United Kingdom and Ireland Zine Librarians website for an extensive list https://uizl.wordpress.com/uk-and-ireland-zine-libraries-directory/.
7. www.madzines.org/filmed-interview-about-our-seamful-madzine-methodology-zine/.
8. Zines Forever: DIY Publishing and Disability Justice, Wellcome, March 14 to September 14, 2025.
9. www.rachelrowanolive.com/work/zines.
10. www.graphicnovelreadingroom.com.
11. www.wellcomecollection.org/works/y7b3uwb3. At the time of writing, like most nascent zine libraries, our madzines are scattered around in our houses, in various boxes.
12. Since then, others have started to use zines critically in teaching and learning settings in the mental health field. For example, following a Madzine session we ran there, tutors at Northumbria University invited health and care students to make a zine illustrating their experiences of a Mad Studies module and reflecting on what they felt they had learned from it (Rebair et al., 2025).

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