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"When Father Christmas is the Gaslighter": How Special Education Systems Make (M)others 'Mad'

Abstract

This paper is written with, by and for (m)others whose children have been labelled as having 'special educational needs' (SEN). We use the term (m)others to pay attention to the continued impact of the gendered nature of care for (disabled) children at the level of the individual, but also to recognize gender as a social construct, and the many ways of being a (m)other (Anderson). Our broad aim is to explore the ways in which special education systems across the global North construct (m)others of disabled children as 'mad'. This discussion is timely given the high levels of conflict between parents/carers and global North special education systems in contemporary times. We explore 'madness' as a mechanism of social control produced in special education systems by paying close attention to what we describe below as 'intimate encounters' between (m)others and practitioners that occur day-to-day in (special) education settings. The developing analysis is shaped by the concept of 'gaslighting' which, we argue, offers a useful framework both for understanding deeply affecting and effecting 'intimate encounters' between (m)others and practitioners and for exposing the operations of power in special education systems. We conclude by reflecting on what new understandings of (m)others' madness have been revealed and how they have the potential to (re)shape practice.

Keywords: sociology of gaslighting, mad studies, critical disability studies, (m)others of disabled children, special education needs

Introduction

This paper is written with, by and for (m)others whose children have been labelled as having 'special educational needs' (SEN). We have chosen to bracket the 'm' when we write about (m)others first because we want to draw attention to the multiple ways in which parents/carers of disabled children find themselves positioned as "other"—they are storied as 'in denial' about their child's 'difficulties,' 'irrational', 'smothering their child', as well as having 'unrealistic' expectations and making 'unreasonable demands' of services (Lalvani). Second, the bracketing of the 'm' allows us to acknowledge the continued impact of the gendered nature of care for (disabled) children at the level of the individual—it is still the case that women carry out the majority of care work. And yet, by using the term (m)other we can also recognize gender as a social construct, and that there are many ways of being a (m)other (Anderson) outside of the 'mother-child dyad' so often imagined by the psy-disciplines of the global North (Runswick-Cole and Goodley).Our broad aim is to expose the ways in which special education systems, across the global North, are constructed in ways that make (m)others of disabled children 'mad'. That is, (m)others are positioned as unreasonable, demanding, and their opinions are dismissed to the point where they begin to doubt themselves. We explore 'madness' as a mechanism of social control produced in special education systems, by paying close attention to what we describe below as 'intimate encounters' between (m)others and practitioners that occur day-to-day in (special) education settings. The paper engages with cultural (Hamilton), psychological (Barton, Russel and Whitehead), and sociological (Sweet) representations of gaslighting, drawing them together to develop an innovative approach to thematic analysis which we detail below. We explore the operations of power in the system to open up opportunities for kinder encounters between (m)others and practitioners so that there is better support for children.

Mad (M)others

"Difficult women" have long been subjected to the processes and practices of pathologisation (Ussher 63). Hysteria was first described as a "woman's disease" by the ancient Greeks, and while discourses of hysteria have waxed and waned in the intervening years, it is still the case that angry women are characterized as "mentally disordered" (Ussher 63). Service systems, like education, are often underpinned by psychologized and individualizing models of parenting which render (m)others of disabled children particularly precarious in relation to discourses of madness (Douglas, Runswick-Cole, Fogg and Ryan 2022). In (folk) psychology, the madness of (m)others of disabled children is usually storied as having begun with the birth of a disabled child or, at least, at the moment of diagnosis of 'disability' (Lazarus and Folkman). The dominant narrative suggests that the 'loss' of a 'normal' child should be understood as a form of bereavement (Bruce and Schulz). (M)others of disabled children are described as experiencing 'recurrent grief' as they encounter repeated 'losses' as their atypically developing child misses developmental milestones and the (m)others' dreams for their growing children are repeatedly 'unfulfilled' (Bruce and Schulz). In this model, (m)others of disabled children are stuck in the stages of grief of 'denial' and 'anger' and unable to move towards 'acceptance'. The power of this narrative is that it makes it possible to (re)story any upset or frustration a (m)other may express as a consequence of unresolvable grief, loss and non-acceptance. Within such a framing, there is no need to pay any attention to what the (m)others and their children experience as discrimination and injustice in (special) education systems (Douglas et al. 2022). The narrative is circular and has seductively compassionate overtones.

The use of the term 'mad' is shaped by our reading of the politics and theories of Mad Studies (LeFrancois et al.). Mad Studies is critical of the biomedical model of mental health which constructs the interiority of a person and the nature of biomedical disease as the primary focus of concern and

intervention (Marek and LaFrance). The biomedical model is nurtured through the language of illness, curing, symptom, syndrome, trauma, and relapse working to obscure the social, material and interpersonal contexts of a person's life—such as social inequality, poverty, housing, or identity-based violence (Marek and LaFrance). Mad Studies allow us to focus our attention on the ways in which 'mad (m)otherhood' is socially constructed in and through services systems like education. It also affords opportunities to reclaim the term 'mad' and to challenge its negative connotations with more positive understandings (Rashed).

Special Educational Needs (SEN)

The term 'special educational needs' is ubiquitous in education systems across the globe. Nevertheless, it has been widely criticized for reinforcing a within-child causal model of disability, often described as the individual and/or medical model of disability, which places blame for lack of participation on the child as opposed to seeking to remove the barriers to their participation (Booth and Ainscow). The within-child model is reductive and ignores the complex interactive factors that create and maintain problem situations (Frederickson and Cline). However, the term continues to circulate in education systems.

In England and in Canada, deficit models of disabled children have continued to dominate in the context of decades of austerity and cuts to public services, including education. As a result, special education systems have become spaces of ever more heightened conflict. (M)others describe having to 'fight' for resources for their children's (special) education; this includes conflicts about school placements, but also about the type, nature and amount of support a child receives from a teaching assistant or from specialist services like speech and language therapy, occupational therapy or physiotherapy (House of Commons). In a context where resources are limited, the system must resist demands for 'more' and, often, this is done by constructing (m)others as 'sharp elbowed' and asking for

'too much' (Bryant, Parish and Kulawik) and 'more', and as having "erroneous beliefs, extreme concern and anxiety about their child's health" and support needs (RCPCH 8) in order to locate responsibility and blame outside of the system.

Intimate Encounters in (Special) Education Systems

Despite the conflict in the system, the idea that parents should work in partnership with education (and other) practitioners to support their children is widely accepted in global North contexts. In the early years, in particular, parents of all children and their teachers are expected to have frequent interactions with one another (Simpson and Warner). However, as children age, these parent/teacher interactions usually diminish in their frequency and the nature of the interactions change in terms of levels of engagement. And yet, for (m)others and children 'with SEN' meetings with practitioners often maintain or increase in pace, frequency and levels of engagement as children grow into adulthood.

Regular meetings between (m)others and practitioners are baked into the special education system through policy and practice. In England, the policy states that local authorities must have regard to "the views, wishes and feelings of the child or young person, and the child's parents" and that they must support the participation of parents and children in decision-making (DfE, DoH). In Canada, the Ontario *Education Act* states:

> **5.** (1) A parent of a pupil and, where the pupil is 16 years of age or older, the pupil, are entitled,
>
> (a) to be present at and participate in all committee discussions about the pupil; and
>
> (b) to be present when the committee's identification and placement decisions are made. O. Reg. 181/98, s. 5 (1).

This means that practitioners and (m)others are expected to meet regularly to discuss the child. The system is constructed as rational and purposeful and (m)others are expected to comply with its demands. And so, where (m)others are thought to be disrupting its smooth operation, they risk being characterized as 'difficult women'.

There is a raft of literature from England and from Canada documenting the struggles of (m)others of children in their intimate encounters with practitioners (Douglas et al. "Making Memories"; Hodge and Runswick-Cole; Riddell et al.; Rogers; Runswick-Cole). We characterize these as 'intimate encounters' because discussions focus on details of the child's learning and behaviour, their diagnosis and medical needs as well as the circumstances of family life, siblings, wider family support and parenting styles. Often these intimate conversations are justified as being necessary 'to help the child' and to find a solution to 'a problem of learning or behaviour' in systems premised on the view that the cause of the 'difficulty' is located in the child. And so, (m)others of children with SEN are routinely expected to share details of family life as part of the process of accessing services and support for their child (Runswick-Cole). While (m)others are expected to be accepting of and open to questioning, education systems often experience (m)others' curiosity about their child's experience and the support they receive in school as intrusive, and critical.

Gaslighting

The term gaslighting comes from the title of Patrick Hamilton's 1938 play, *Gaslight* (Hamilton). The play documents the manipulative attempts of a husband (Jack Manningham) to take possession of his wife's (Bella Manningham) wealth by trying to isolate her and make her believe that she is "insane" (Ruiz 687). Jack deploys a wide range of tactics to undermine Bella's sense of self; he confuses and distorts her reality to the extent that she must accept the reality he imposes as her own (Sweet). The play takes its title, *Gaslight*, from Jack's dimming

the gas lights and then insisting that Bella is imagining the changing light in the room (Sweet).

In the 1960s, the term "gaslighting" was first used by Barton, Russel and Whitehead in a 1969 article in *The Lancet* discussing involuntary hospitalisation as a form of abuse (Sweet). The term gained popularity in Anglo-American psychology in the 1980s and 1990s (Ruiz) and has been defined as "the effort of one person to undermine another person's confidence and stability by causing the victim to doubt [their] own sense and beliefs" (Kline 1148). Gaslighting is constructed as an individual psychological trait or as a mutual relationship between the "gaslighter" and the "gaslightee" (Sweet). This understanding of "gaslighting" has been taken up in colloquial use, where it is usually understood as a form of intimate abuse in which abusers attempt to get inside the head of their victims to assert power and control (Kline).

In contrast to the individualizing tendencies of a psychological approach, a sociology of gaslighting demands that we pay attention to manifestations of social power in intimate relationships but also to the ways in which macro-level social inequalities are translated at the micro level (Sweet). Sweet argues that a sociological approach to gaslighting must attend to the structural, cultural, and institutional contexts of power. She discusses gaslighting in the context of Intimate Personal Violence (IPV) and centres gender inequality as a condition of possibility for control. Sweet pays attention to the long history of labelling women as 'crazy', as overly emotional and irrational, and describes how this labelling occurs via the institutions of medicine and law, and, we might add, education. She argues that gender stereotypes intersect with other inequalities (race, class, and disability) to create unequal conditions in intimate relationships. A parallel can be drawn with the destabilising intimate encounters (m)others describe in education systems and legacies of ableism that normalize and value nondisabled bodies and minds (Campbell). Crucially for us here, Sweet argues that the

potential of a sociology of gaslighting extends well beyond studies of IPV and so we draw on it here to make sense of intimate encounters between (m)others and practitioners in (special) education systems.

The Project—Method and Analysis

This paper forms part of a wider writing project which began in 2018 and is a collaboration by a group of (m)others, academics, and practitioners, simply titled *Mad (M)othering*. *Mad (M)othering* began by exploring the use of the image of the 'mad mother' to destabilize, denounce and silence (m)others who advocate for their disabled children in service systems, like education, health and social care (Ryan; Douglas et al. "Mad Mothering"). We drew on resources from fields of critical disability studies (Goodley), mad studies (LeFrancois et al.) and matricentric feminism (O'Reilly) to develop an intersectional critique of 'good mental health' and 'good mothering'(Douglas et al. "Mad Mothering"). We began to re-claim 'mad mothering' as a potentially radical and desirable subject position (ibid.).

Having set out our theoretical framework (Douglas et al. "Mad Mothering"), our next step was to draw on this framework to "write back" to the oppressive discourses of "madness" that shape (m)others' lives (Douglas et al. "Making Memories"). The method of writing back emerged from a digital storytelling workshop held as part of *Re•Storying Autism in Education,* which resulted in the publication of a digital story *Memories* (https://www.restoryingautism.com/memories password 'Memories') and journal article (Douglas et al. "Making Memories"). *Re•Storying Autism* is an international participatory multimedia story making project that supports autistic and other individuals with neurodiverse labels (e.g., ADHD), family members and kin (e.g, siblings), and educators to make short videos about their experiences of education, to rethink autism and practice beyond

deficit models and to build coalitions (Douglas et al. "Re-storying Autism"). The *Memories* film and journal article, made as part of the project, explore the destabilising effects on (m)others of engaging in a system in which they are routinely disempowered. The film is a composite narrative reflecting on (m)others' experiences in the special education system. A (m)other describes being seen as being in denial about her child's difficulties, not taking them seriously enough, but also as 'asking for too much', as she feels her judgements are undermined. The film uses the app Procreate to animate handwritten black letters on a page; the words appear without the presence of a hand. At the end of the *"Making Memories"* paper (Douglas et al. "Making Memories"), we stated that:

> The digital story is finished, but our project is not. We plan to share our (digital) story making approach with other (m)others of dis/abled children so that they, too, can develop and share their stories. (14)

And so, this paper reflects on what happened when we shared our digital story with other (m)others of disabled children. From April 2021-January 2022, we held three workshops with nine (m)others of disabled children. We invited (m)others from South Yorkshire, England and Ontario, Canada, to come to a viewing of the digital story which we used as the stimulus for discussion. The choice of South Yorkshire and Ontario was driven by the university-based researchers' locations and by their connections with local networks of (m)others of disabled children.

We began the first workshop by sharing the *Memories* digital story (Douglas et al. "Making Memories"). The university based-researchers intentionally began by sharing a story based on our experiences, because we were acutely aware that (m)others of disabled children are already an over-researched group, asked to retell often intimate and painful stories with little evidence of these being used to provoke social change (Runswick-Cole and Ryan). Our aim was not to harvest 'new' stories of (m)others' madness, but to offer an

opportunity to reflect. This reflection inevitably resulted in each of the (m)others drawing on their own experience and sharing their (new) stories, however, the starting point was for university-based researchers to share our stories of (m)otherhood as a practice of solidarity.

In the *Memories* digital story, there is a section where a (m)other reflects on her experiences of navigating the special education system. She names the intimate ways patriarchal ableist education systems dismiss mothers' activism as madness, govern (m)others by questioning their very thoughts and feelings and remain with (m)others years later. She says:

> Looking back, it was gaslighting, making me lose faith in myself and in my judgments. My advocacy for support for education was 'unreasonable'; I was seen as 'asking for too much' and as 'exploiting my education and middle-class privilege'. I was accused of 'denying other children their rightful support'. Years later, I think I'm still uncertain about my judgments, still questioning myself about how 'reasonable' I am.
> (Douglas et al. "Making Memories" 8)

The digital story acted as a stimulus for workshop discussions, which were wide ranging but focused on the experiences of (m)othering a child who had been labelled with SEN.

At the third workshop, we shared a summary of themes (Braun and Clark) that had been generated in the previous two workshop discussions by exploring points of intersection, resonance and difference. Discussions of the themes flowed freely and ranged widely between (m)others from England and Canada, despite their different geographies, and each discussion influenced the next iteration of the analysis. While the terminology was sometimes different, their experiences were similar and resonated with one another.

We have to acknowledge the complexities of this approach. In the discussions, there were moments of unease and of tension when participants' reflections on each other's stories were in tension with one another, particularly because many of the (m)others occupied

multiple subject positions as (m)others, practitioners, and researchers. This required careful checking that we had understood what participants were saying, and that the (m)others were happy to continue. In the end, one participant withdrew. There were also opportunities for (m)others to check in with one another after the workshops.

Only the university-based (m)others were directly involved in the development of the summary themes for discussion in the third workshop. On the one hand, we understand that this approach undermines our commitment to flattening the power relationships in research, as the university-based (m)others held disproportionate power to shape the discussions. On the other hand, the university-based (m)others were acutely aware of the risk that we were asking too much of (m)others and we did not wish to make participation in the project overly burdensome. We were mindful of recent research advice that people should not be asked to look at large amounts of text (Locock, Crocker et al.). (M)others were remunerated for their participation with vouchers. Again, we are aware of the inequality between (m)others who are paid by their universities to participate and (m)others who are remunerated only with vouchers.

The thematic analysis presented here is influenced by but departs from Braun and Clark's approach. We read and re-read the transcripts of the workshops looking for points of connection but *at the same time* as we read the original script for the play *Gaslight.* We read the play carefully, paying attention to the discursive techniques that Jack used to destabilize Bella's sense of self and self-belief. We then returned to the transcripts of the discussions with (m)others in the workshops. We read across the transcripts and the play scripts to look for points of connection and resonance between the two. This process of reading across the transcripts and the script helped us to frame the thematic analysis and each theme begins with an extract from the play. The analysis is also closely informed by the ways in which gaslighting has been conceptualized in psychology, and in sociology as we describe above.

This led us to pay attention to gaslighting as something which occurs at the level of the individual in intimate relations but is also understood as an operation of power within institutional contexts (Sweet). We argue that by bringing two different cultural texts together, the play and the transcripts, to inform the analysis new insights have been generated that would not have been possible had we considered the transcripts without paying attention to the discourses at work in the play.

A draft of this paper was shared with all the (m)others for their comments on the analysis which were incorporated into the discussion below. We use pseudonyms for quotes by focus group participants including those by the researchers.

Discussion

This thematic analysis has been informed by a developing understanding of the concept of gaslighting and by the play *Gaslight.* We explore five themes: the construction of mad women; the deconstruction of (m)others' knowledge claims; compliance and/as resistance; allyship and gaslighting as an operation of power.

1. Mad Women

> MR. MANNINGHAM: Then, by God, you are mad, you unhappy wretch. You're stark raving mad – like your wretched mother before you. (Hamilton 11)

As Sweet argues, gender often plays a role in the workings of gaslighting, and, as we see in the quote above, Jack not only accuses his wife of being "mad" but does so by alluding to the history of mad women when he compares his wife to her "wretched" mother (Ussher 63). In the context of special education services systems, we can also see 'madness' operating

as a mechanism of control of "difficult" women (Ussher 63). In the workshops, the discussions were woven through with accounts of (m)others being positioned as 'mad'. When Anisa questioned her child's school placement, she described being made to feel "silly", "foolish" and "demanding". Anisa describes being "treated like some sort of hippie mum" whose views could not or should not be taken seriously in her intimate encounters with practitioners. (M)others seemed to be aware of the role that gender plays in the making of madness, but were also aware that gender stereotypes intersect with other forms of marginalization to create unequal power relationships in intimate encounters (Sweet):

> Mothers get wrapped into that group of 'others' who get devalued, working-class people, racialized people … there is this idea that women are lesser and you don't have to take account of their rights as much (Noelle)

What's more, the (m)others were acutely aware how difficult it was for them to break free of the accusations of madness in a context where (m)others of disabled children are considered to experience 'recurrent grief' (Bruce and Schulz). As Erin explained:

> So everything you say is [considered to be] irrational because you're either really terribly upset about your child or you're in denial about the level of [of their] difficulty. So there's no possible rational thing that you can say.

Madness feels inescapable for (m)others of disabled children.

2.(De)constructing (m)others' knowledge claims

> MR. MANNINGHAM: I think you [Mrs Manningham] imagine things. (Hamilton 7)

In *Gaslight*, we see Jack using a variety of techniques to de-stabilize Bella and to assert his power over her. At times, his tactics, as we saw above, are overt and direct: "you

are mad." At other times he is more subtle, suggesting, more gently, for example, that his wife "imagines" things. Throughout the play, he uses direct and indirect accusations of madness which have the cumulative effect of destabilising his wife's sense of self, making her doubt herself and what she knows.

(M)others, too, experienced the cumulative effects of attempts to de-legitimize their knowledge. Anisa told us:

> Well, the thing in the film [*Memories*] really stood out for me, and it made me flush actually because it brought back so many memories, was when you said [in the film] mum 'feels', you know, the quote. The amount of times I've seen that written in a report from the school about me.

As the *Memories* film depicted, in special education systems, "mum's" views are drained of power as their knowledge is dismissed. The (m)other's view is storied instead as a 'feeling'. This 'feeling' is constructed in direct contrast with the views of practitioners who are imbued with authority through professional knowledge judgement based on expertise and experience (Douglas et al. "Mad Mothering"). Here too, gender plays a role in the construction and deconstruction of knowledge in special education systems. Anisa describes the contrast in how her views are treated in comparison to those of her male partner:

> My partner at the time, the dad, was saying 'you know what you're talking about. And [our daughter] is fine.' And the professionals would just hone in on [what he said] and say 'oh no, it's all coming from the mum.'

In fact, when (m)others made claims to knowledge this simply served to reinforce their status as 'mad'. As Anisa went on to explain, they became known as the "mother who has done too much reading." The historical view that too much learning makes women "mad" or "bad" lingers in the lives of (m)others (English).

Several (m)others also occupied professional roles within the special education system. In these roles, (m)others were accustomed to the privilege of having their views constructed as 'knowledge', rather than feelings. This was in sharp contrast to their lives as (m)others, where the power they experienced in their professional lives evaporated. This was clearly articulated by Karissa, a (m)other and an educational psychologist,

> I'm an educational psychologist and as an educational psychologist, I would be saying X, Y, Z [but when I talk about my own child] school says 'Oh, okay. Yes. We'll wait and see what the psychologist says'.

Karrisa explains that the system cannot accommodate the dual role of (m)other-practitioner and so, to protect its smooth operation, the system must ensure that her 'professional status' is denied—in the special education system, she is 'only' a (m)other.

3. Compliance and/as resistance

> MRS. MANNINGHAM: Yes, Jack. I expect you are right.
>
> MR. MANNINGHAM: I have no doubt of it, my dear. It's weak-mindedness to think otherwise. (Hamilton 3)

In *Gaslight*, Bella is faced with her husband's constant attempts to undermine her. There are times when Bella seeks to defend herself by placating her husband; she tries to calm him by saying that 'he is right'. She uses compliance as a defence mechanism to the constant barrage of criticism. However, rather than serving to protect Bella from the charge of madness, this simply allows her husband to reinforce the idea that she is "weak-minded". At times, (m)others also tried to placate practitioners. Amy described how she would always apologize at the start of the meeting but knew that it "set off the power imbalance, right from

the beginning [of the meeting].” In their attempts to resist power in the system, (m)others tried hard to perform the role of the ‘good mom’ just as Bella tried hard to be a ‘good wife’. Amy described: “sitting there trying to create a context so that you're not perceived badly.”

For (m)others, being a ‘good mom’ meant engaging in a complex process of managing emotions. Ellie told us:

> You have to be careful about the emotion that you show.
>
> So like, so it's okay for moms to cry sometimes. That's okay.
>
> A little bit of crying. I think it brings professionals on board a bit. But it's not okay to be angry, at least, not, not for a long time. There's some emotion that seems to be okay to show. And, and some that aren't.

This need to manage emotions resulted in (m)others engaging in what can be seen as *hard* emotional labour (Hochschild). Amy told us:

> We're caught. There is so much work. We've got to assess body language, look at the people that are facing us. We've only got a, you know, like a three or four second window to make a quick decision. And then we might've really stymied things. Why does it feel like we're always on the back foot? Doing the work. How to appeal to them and how to get your case across? And what's going to push those service buttons… You know, it's, it's difficult. Isn't it?

And yet, despite their best efforts to perform the role of ‘good mother’ they were constructed as bad:

> They said ‘your son has gas’. I was, like, are you kidding me? They wanted to know what we had bought for dinner last night? (Nikki)

Not only was the (m)other held responsible for her son’s bodily functions, this became an opportunity to encroach further into the family's life. Intimate details of what the family had

for dinner last night are demanded by the service system with the implication that the 'wrong' food has been provided (Runswick-Cole).

Nevertheless, (m)others also staged direct acts of resistance to the operations of power. As one (m)other told us, practitioners were introduced by their full names and the professional titles in an Identification Placement and Review Committee (IPRC) while she was introduced as 'mom', and not her name. She corrected them: "My name is Nikki. Can you stop calling me 'mom'?"

There were also examples of (m)others re-claiming 'mad mothering' as a potentially radical and desirable subject positionIn the first workshop Anisa, one of the (m)others in the group, introduced herself saying: "Hi, I'm insane, I'm a mum of three. I'm an advocate. I'm a mature student."

In *Gaslight*, as she tries to resist her husband's manipulations, Bella struggles to make sense of what is happening to her. (M)others also described the difficulty they had making sense of what was going on in the special education system when they felt things were starting to go wrong for them and for their child, as Martha described:

> I always say it's been like a Twilight zone when I moved into [the special education system]. There's all this stuff that was happening that I had absolutely no idea about. Not until we moved into that realm. And if you tried to speak to people, who aren't in that world, they think you're a nutter [mad] because they can't possibly believe all these things actually really happen.

Even in their compliance, (m)others' knowledge was dismissed as deficient through discourses of madness.

4. Allyship

> ROUGH: You are not going out of your mind, Mrs. Manningham. You are being slowly, methodically, systematically being *driven* out of your mind. (Hamilton 26)

As the play, *Gaslight*, draws to a close, a policeman called Rough arrives with information for Bella. He tells Bella about Jack's connection to the murder of a woman who lived in their apartment previously. Rough reassures Bella. He tells her that she is not going mad, but she is being systematically driven mad by her husband. With the support of an ally, Bella begins to understand the full extent of Jack's manipulation of her. Allyship was also crucially important to the (m)others. Edith worked for a charity that supports families of disabled children:

> I'm an operations manager [for a charity]. We have 1,900 parents on our database of kids with special needs and we exist to bring them together.

Edith stressed the importance of peer support and bringing together families with similar experiences.

Another (m)other talked about the importance of supporting other parents: "And that's why I joined the parent group to try and advocate for everybody" (Martha). This focus on allyship provides a strong counter-narrative to a policy discourse in England, which positions middle-class (m)others of disabled children as using their privilege at the expense of other less well-resourced families (House of Commons).

These moments of allyship were referred to by one (m)other as 'micro kindnesses' which she described as the opposite of microaggressions. Erin responded to the story of being called "mom" in a meeting saying:

> You know when they call you 'mom' [and not by your name], that is a kind of microaggression…. It is a way of maintaining the power dynamic, making sure it stays there… a micro kindness is the opposite of that.

Understanding microaggressions and micro kindnesses in the special education system was important to (m)others. Ellie said:

> I'd love to see a bit of educating [practitioners] about microaggressions and micro kindnesses.

5. When Father Christmas is the Gaslighter—Gaslighting as an Operation of Power

In the final workshop, reflecting on the previous discussion, (m)others commented on the striking commonality of the experience of being made 'mad' in special education systems in England and in Canada. When reflecting on the workshops, Anisa said:

> What stood out for me more than anything is that the experiences [we've had] were universal. So it wasn't based on where you lived then; we've got people coming to the other side of the world with the same experiences. And I was surprised about how we could have all just been living in the same town.

This commonality of experience of (m)others in England and in Canada is useful in shifting the analysis away from intimate encounters individualized through a psychology of gaslighting to focus instead on these encounters as manifestations of power within special education systems through a sociology of gaslighting (Sweet). In (m)others' reflections on their discussions, gaslighting is revealed as so much more than an individual psychological trait or as a mutual relationship between the "gaslighter" and the "gaslightee". The commonality of experience across different geographical contexts, but within similar service systems, reveals the limits of framing gaslighting as "the effort of one person to undermine another person's confidence and stability by causing the victim to doubt [their] own sense and beliefs" (Kline 1148). Rather, gaslighting is exposed as the manifestation of ableist, patriarchal power relationships in which particular kinds of bodies and selves are constructed as ideal and so as fully human (Campbell). Gaslighting is produced within neoliberal special

education systems which require (m)others to yield to their demands to operate smoothly. It is important to be clear that injustice is deeply felt in intimate encounters between individual (m)others and practitioners, but it is always produced *in and by* systems.

This awareness of the cultural and systemic operations of control was reflected in the conversation between (m)others below:

> Erin: [When my son was first diagnosed] I thought that people [practitioners] were telling me the truth and that they were there to help. Now, I feel that was a stupid thing to think. I realize now that's not how it works. But that realisation is so profound. I had such trust in them. It is like believing in Father Christmas and finding out that he's not real. And it isn't just about those individuals we met. It's like the system *is* Father Christmas. And not just in education, but in health and social care as well. So it's so devastating.
>
> Anisa: I'm at the beginning [of navigating the special education system]. So I might be a bit raw. But I agree. And it's still going on. There's that thing of your knowledge being questioned.
>
> I used to trust that the system was working. And if I hadn't had the experiences I had previously had with my eldest [conflict about diagnosis and about the support they were entitled to], I would have trusted it for my son. When I told the GP what had happened to my daughter, she said: "No, I'm sure they would have given her a bit of support. I'm sure they did their best." I got really …, I just said "No. You are not listening to the words that are coming out of my mouth!"
>
> Ellie: So that's very destabilising. Isn't it? There's a lot of strategy of gaslighting

through this.

Noelle: Yes. And, listening [to Erin and Anisa] I was thinking, you know, Father Christmas *is* the gaslighter.

The (m)others describe Father Christmas *as* the gaslighter. In their discussion, Father Christmas is not an individual practitioner, rather he stands for the special education system. The (m)others describe the way in which they came to the special education system believing that it would support their child. They had been enculturated into believing in the SEN system, just as they had been enculturated, in their youth, to believe in Father Christmas. And so, when they come to the realisation that the system they believed would support them is actually doing them harm, they are shocked, angry and disappointed.

Conclusion

Mrs MANNIGHAM: Come and take this man away! Take this man away! (Hamilton II 89)

As the play concludes, Jack lies tied up on the floor, having been restrained by Rough, and Bella calls for him to be taken away. For the (m)others we talked to there is no such resolution; the narrative arc of their stories remains incomplete as they continue to navigate in and outside the special education system for their children. And yet, despite there being no neat resolution to their stories, the discussions with (m)others have raised new insights into the nature of intimate encounters between (m)others and practitioners.

The first is the importance of allyship for (m)others of disabled children. Unlike Bella who is rescued by an outsider (Rough), the (m)others are rescued by and find allyship with

their peers—with other (m)others who are being made 'mad' in the special education system and sometimes by professionals who ally themselves with mothers (Finkelstein). Community support is hugely important in countering the de-stabilising effects of the special education system on (m)others. It offers (m)others the opportunity to step out of the "twilight zone" and into the light of shared experience. The second insight is that, at times, it is possible to reclaim the label of madness as a desirable subject position and to occupy multiple subject positions as "insane" "a mum of three" and a "mature student" at the same time. With support around them, (m)others found ways of resisting the operations of power in their intimate encounters with practitioners, by re-claiming their multiple identities as (mad) (m)others. Perhaps most importantly, a sociology of gaslighting offers new insights into, and perhaps, ways of re-making intimate encounters between (m)others and practitioners in special education systems. We can recognize the injustices that are deeply felt at the level of the individual, at the same time as paying attention to the operations of power in a system to open up opportunities for kinder, and less aggressive, intimate encounters between (m)others and practitioners.

While some (m)others may recognize Father Christmas as the gaslighter, for change to happen, we need practitioners to reflect on this too. We recognize that this is difficult work and that the (m)others' accounts are difficult to hear; they make practitioners uncomfortable. Karissa, a (m)other and educational psychologist, argued that we all need to reflect on "our relationship in and with the system." As a way to invite this reflection, researchers worked with student intern Martha Ward from the University of Sheffield's Student Undergraduate Research Experience scheme to make a digital story capturing (m)others' insights and arguments included in this paper. In September 2022, we shared the film (https://vimeo.com/776824387/fa8053450c) with the mad (m)others group. (M)others' recognized their own experiences with the system in the film and described the film as

"powerful" "capturing it very well" and "a discussion that is needed." And so our next step will be to meet with practitioners, share the film and our analysis and ask them if they still believe in Father Christmas.

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