‘Madness’ is a slippery concept that has been constructed and reconstructed over time between oscillating ideas of normalcy and deviance. Depending on the medical, socio-economic, political and commercial interests of any given period it has been understood as a disorder of the brain, as a result of environmental conditions, or to have both biological and psychosocial causes.

Without denying the devastating realities of mental distress, this module looks at how and why certain human behaviours and mental conditions have been interpreted as ‘disordered’ within cultural understandings of gender, ‘race’, sexuality and age. We will explore the politicisation and commercialisation of different mental conditions, including the roles of psychiatry and anti-psychiatry, as well as of feminism, and the civil rights and survivor movements.

Madness has a rich history. You will learn how to analyse a wide range of primary source material produced from the late nineteenth century to the present day, including patient case notes and first-person narratives, medical texts, newspaper reports, photography and art, film and literature – all of which reveal continuities and change in the understanding and representation of madness from a range of perspectives. Guest speakers will join some of the seminars to present and discuss their work.

By asking whose interests the meanings of madness served, as well as how these understandings influenced treatment and the subjective experiences of patients, you will learn how to engage more critically with mental health issues of today.

Following is a preliminary overview of the module:

Week 1: Introduction: understanding ‘madness’ in the 20th century
Week 2: Working with primary sources – visit to the Wellcome Library
Week 3: Madness in the body – moral panic and degeneration
Week 4: Hysteria and neurasthenia – gendering madness
Week 5: Trauma and the emotions in wartime
Week 6: ‘Mother’s little helper’ – anxiety, depression and big pharma
Week 7: So, what is schizophrenia? Politics, race and diagnoses
Week 8: Mad, bad, or both? The psychopath as social danger
Week 9: Sex, drugs and social control – pathologising desire
Week 10: Round up and student essay presentations

Assessment is based on a 5,000 word essay addressing one of the seminar questions or a topic of your choosing.