Women’s Madness: Myth and Experience
or
Rejecting Raging Hormone Theories for Women’s Misery

Professor Jane Ussher,
School of Psychology, University of Western Sydney

We are consistently told that women are more “mad” than men, evidenced by women’s greater propensity to be diagnosed with a range of psychiatric disorders. Raging hormones are often positioned as to blame. However, competing psychological and socio-cultural models also adopt a realist epistemology and a discourse of medical naturalism, to position madness as a naturally occurring pathology within the woman, caused by cognitions, or life stress. Feminist critics argue that this medicalizes women’s misery, legitimises expert intervention, and negates discursive aspects of experience. However, the alternative model of social constructionism may appear to dismiss the “real” of women’s distress, and deny its intersubjective concomitants. Using premenstrual distress as a case example, it is argued that a critical-realistic epistemology allows us to acknowledge the material-discursive-intrapsychic concomitants of experiences constructed as madness, and the relational context of women’s distress, without privileging one level of analysis above the other, in order to understand women’s greater propensity to be diagnosed as “mad”.

Jane Ussher is Professor of Women’s Health Psychology, at the University of Western Sydney. She has published 122 refereed papers and book chapters, edits the Routledge ‘Women and Psychology’ book series, and is author of 5 books, including ‘The Psychology of the Female Body’, ‘Women’s Madness: Misogyny or Mental Illness?’, ‘Fantasies of Femininity: Reframing the Boundaries of Sex’, ‘Managing the Monstrous Feminine: Regulating the Reproductive Body’, and ‘Women’s Madness: Myth and Experience’.