

Life Histories in Mind: Mental Ill Health and Learning Disability in Context

Manchester Metropolitan University

Tuesday 21st July 2026

(Plus, a second reserve day of Wednesday 22nd July, subject to demand)

The aim of this conference is to explore mental ill health and learning disabilities in the context of life and experiential histories. Early research in these areas focussed on biographies of relatively well-known medical practitioners, with details of their achievements in progressing the history of 'care' and treatment. Since the 1980s, scholars have attempted, with varying degrees of success, to prioritise the 'voices' of patients and service users with a view to capturing a more detailed and critical understanding of the past and present. As historical inquiry has moved into newer areas of analysis there is now a clearer understanding of the many individuals and groups, beyond those offered up by institutional and medical records, involved in treatment regimes. This includes the importance of life beyond the diagnosis. Allied to this has been the newer modes of storytelling that have arisen from online opportunities and creative partnerships between academics and specialists in other fields, including, artists, theatre practitioners, and heritage professionals. These efforts reflect the inter-and cross-disciplinary interest in life histories and the complexities of sharing them. Within this broad framework we invite abstracts that seek to reinvigorate the possibilities offered by life narratives (broadly defined) and their place within our understandings of mental health and illness and learning disability. We hope this will include original research utilising a range of sources and methodologies across a wide chronology, and from a range of disciplines.

As such, we welcome proposals on themes including, but not limited to:

- First-person testimonies of mental health and illness and learning disabilities.
- Recreating lives beyond the diagnosis.
- Creative and impactful partnerships and the (re)creation of life histories.
- Heritage and the challenges of displaying life stories,
- Inter- or cross-disciplinary approaches to life stories.
- Mad studies/history and life histories.
- Life history narratives and emotion.
- Life histories in the 21st Century.
- The opportunities and challenges of using newer sources and methodologies.
- Historical understandings of mental health and wellbeing
- The ethics of mental health/wellbeing and historical research.

Please send a c.300-word abstract and 5 keywords, along with a short biography of each author, to r.ball@mmu.ac.uk and r.ellis@mmu.ac.uk by the 15th January 2026.

We are pleased to announce that Professor Catharine Coleborne, University of Newcastle, Australia will present a keynote lecture as part of the programme.

The conference will be run in conjunction the Manchester Metropolitan University research groups: Histories of Race, Gender, Sexuality, and Identity Research Group (RGSi), the Manchester Centre for Public Histories and Heritage, and Cultures of Disability. We are grateful to RGSi for some initial funding but a conference fee for all delegates will be needed to cover additional costs.

Following the conference, we intend to submit a proposal for a special journal edition (TBC) and we hope delegates will be interested in publishing with us (subject to the usual peer review process).

Convenors

Dr Rebecca Ball is a lecturer in Modern British History at Manchester Metropolitan University. She adopts a microhistory research approach to further understand the everyday lives of British people (particularly the English working-class). Drawing upon autobiographical life narratives she explores the ordinary occurrences of life within a historical framework. Her recent book: *A Hundred Working-Class Lives 1900-1945* examines various aspects of history through the lens of experiential recollections. Her current research aims to explore both mental health in these autobiographical accounts but also other aspects of their wellbeing.

Rob Ellis is a Professor of Modern British History at Manchester Metropolitan University. His research focuses on the histories of mental ill-health and learning disabilities, and his publications include *London and its Asylums* (Palgrave, 2020) and the co-edited volume *Voices in the Histories of Madness* (Palgrave, 2021). As part of his role, Rob has worked on a wide range of impact, outreach and engagement projects with present-day service users, statutory and charitable care providers, heritage professionals, theatre practitioners and artists. He is currently working on a history of community care and is the lead on the *Asylum: Refugees and Mental Health* project which explores the experiences of Belgian refugees during the First World War.

Keynote

Prof Catharine Coleborne is a Visiting Professor of Mental Health History at Manchester Metropolitan University between June 2025 and May 2028. She is the co-Director of the Centre for Society, Health and Care Research at the University of Newcastle (Australia) and the Chief Investigator of the project 'Life Outside Institutions' with Dr Effie Karageorgos, a project focused on mental health aftercare in Australia between 1900 and 1960 (ARC Discovery Project).

