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Review of Forensic Psychiatry, Race and Culture

Suman Fernando, David Ndegwa and Melba Wilson. Routledge 1998. No Price Given. 286 pages

Coming in the wake of the damning judgements to have emerged from the Stephen Lawrence inquiry this is a timely book which should provoke fundamental reassessment of the role of the mental health professions (as well as the judiciary) in medicalising and criminalising distressed behaviour in black people - particularly where issues of dangerous are concerned. I found this a natural companion volume to Mary Boyle's book on Schizophrenia and Roland Littlewood and Maurice Lipsedge's consideration of the relationship between Psychiatry and ethnic minorities in *Aliens and Alienists*. As a series these can be read not just as a sound critique but a cry to reframe much of what passes for mental disorder as a psychology of protest. Many similar themes appear - the inadequacy and lack of validity of a diagnostic system heavily contaminated by the cultural values of the white male middle class, and the importance of historical factors in understanding the current impasse in psychiatric thinking are particularly prominent. The book is divided into four sections - the first provides the historical and theoretical background for the thesis that change is urgently required into the treatment of people whose behaviour carries them into the twin minefields of the criminal justice system and the mental health system. The second addresses clinical issues notably in the diagnosis and treatment of depression and schizophrenia in Afro-Caribbeans and argues that the over representation of black people amongst those diagnosed with schizophrenia is a consequence not of black people's distress but a form of racism which expects and finds this type of mental disorder in black patients. This part of the book raises the question whether psychiatrists are in fact fit to assess normal and abnormal feelings and emotions in black people. The final sections (three and four) examine the possibilities for change - exploring the interface between institutional structures and the private realities, attitudes and myths which support them. A fine book sure to provoke thought and worth a place on the book shelf.

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