

Dilemmas in Black Mental Health

From the 1950's and 1960's, when black people started to come to England in large numbers, there was an inevitable dilemma facing their psyche and well being, such as:

- Leaving home, security and loved ones
- An adventure to embrace of fear?
- The impact of racism and hostility on their mental well being

The contradiction of 'our mother country' encouraging us to come over, and the hostility faced when we are seen as taking the 'white mans' jobs.

By the 1960's, it was apparent that we were needed to fill in for the unsociable working hours such as cleaning, public transport and the lower rungs of the nursing ladders. At the same time the glass ceiling was very low for us and it proved to be made of unbreakable glass.

- Lack of promotion
- Hostile work environment
- Poorly paid jobs

We were beginning to see signs of a fragmented community in the sense of unsociable working hours affecting family life.

Expectations were at variance with outcomes such as:

- Poor performance at school, etc
- Parents who did not understand the system
- Expectations dashed and the professionals beginning to label us.

The Debate

Are we mad or bad?
Or are we both?

By the 1950's, black men were over represented in the penal and or psychiatric institutions. The question we have to ask is, were black men really committing more crimes or were we being dealt with more harshly?

The Bail Act covers certain criteria in which bail should be granted. Studies show that black men are more likely to be remanded in custody.

Racism? Does this have an effect on the psyche?

Are the negative experiences enough to drive us mad?

Is the lack of positive experiences weakening and debilitating our communities?

Is this making us more liable to be labelled than other communities?

I.e. poor education; bad housing conditions; lack of employment and other opportunities.

Note the preponderance of the diagnosis of schizophrenia in the black community.

Wrong diagnosis – the fear of the big bad black man.

Mental Health Act 1983

This was meant to be a progressive legislation that gave greater protection to all. What was meant to be a more humane option has proved to be a bouquet of barbed wire for many black men.

- Over representation
- Over medication
- Longer stays in locked wards

Black men who were feared seemed to be ‘madder’ and ‘badder’ than others. They were often described as ‘big’ but the description was interpreted as being ‘dangerous’.

The Way Forward

- Valuing and nurturing each other, creating our own centres of excellence
- Credible alternatives to hospital
- Education of all persons
- Awareness of rights

The Dilemma

Do we shy away from ‘help’ due to fear? I.e. deaths in custody?

Can you be sentenced ‘to be helped’?

How can you trust those who fear you and see you as ‘other’

Is the answer more ‘black professionals’

Can we trust a professional that can give varying diagnosis of the same patient? I.e. when the expert opinions contradict.

Conclusion

- The recognition that mental illness is about ‘mind and body’
- The challenging of those who have the power to label
- The power of racism
- Recognition that the goal posts often move
- Willingness to work in partnership
- Recognition that the above solutions must be as a result of us all working together.

‘EVIL THRIVES BECAUSE GOOD PEOPLE STAY SILENT’