

Fernando's Abstract

Race and culture issues in mental health and some thoughts on ethnic identity

'Race' and cultural issues in mental health services (largely based on British statistics), such as the high rates of compulsory treatment given to black people, disproportionate rates at which 'schizophrenia' is diagnosed among some minority groups, and relative exclusion of people seen as being 'minority ethnic' from talking therapies are well known. This paper discusses what the underlying problems may be by considering the long history of racist ideologies and practices in psychiatry; the culture of psychiatry and western psychology; and current processes of diagnosis and assessment in mental health services.

Fixed personal identity has a high profile in western psychology but the reality for most people in modern multicultural societies is of flexible and changeable identities. Strong ethnic identity is an advantage for protecting self-esteem and personal wellbeing but 'too much ethnicity' may have negative effects on social cohesion and respect for other people ('other-esteem'). Ethnic monitoring of mental health services is useful for locating possible group inequities; but ethnic categories should not be personalised to designate personal identity.

Suman Fernando is Sri Lankan by origin but has been living in UK most of his life. He was a consultant psychiatrist in the (British) National Health Service for many years before becoming an academic. He is now attached to the European Centre for Migration & Social Care at the University of Kent at Canterbury (UK) and currently Honorary Visiting Professor at Department of Applied Social Sciences, London Metropolitan University, London (UK).

Since his seminal book in 1988, *Race and Culture in Psychiatry*, Suman has written or edited five others, the latest (in 2010) being the third edition of *Mental Health, Race and Culture* – a book that is used extensively in training of mental health professionals in the UK. Latterly, Suman has been involved in a project of research and capacity building in Sri Lanka within the Trauma & Global Health (TGH) Program co-ordinated by McGill (Montreal); drawing on this and his extensive study of cultural diversity in the understanding of mental health and wellbeing, Suman has co-written a significant publication ('Challenges in Developing Community Mental Health Services in Sri Lanka') on how services should be developed in low income countries in Asia.

For many years, Suman has been in the forefront of groups in the UK resisting oppressive legislation restricting rights of people diagnosed with 'mental illness' and in lobbying for change in psychiatric practice and the way mental health services are structured. Also he has been involved in developing community services for black and minority ethnic people in London (UK), and in providing critical advice on service development generally. Suman has visited Canada many times to give lectures and was involved over ten years ago in developing *Across Boundaries*, a mental health centre for ethno-racial communities in Toronto. Further details of Suman's background and work as well as copies of several of his papers are available on his website <http://www.sumanfernando.com>.