

Suman Fernando on multicultural aspects of recovery



We shall overcome!

We hear a lot about a new approach in mental health care: recovery. In a way it represents a significant move on from survival (of the psychiatric system) that service users of the 1980s were so concerned about. Recovery subsumes the pursuit of personal goals of hope, making sense of experiences, understanding and empowerment¹ – a sort of journey to regaining a sense of purpose and self after a major life disruption.² The model was imported from the USA via New Zealand. So how does it resonate with the cultural diversity of British society and the issues that black and minority ethnic communities struggle with inside and outside the mental health system? As far as I can judge, the recovery approach has not been exposed to transcultural examination, nor to evaluation in a context of the power politics and institutional racism in mental health systems.

In a multicultural context of British society, with a mental health system that is dominated by medical model psychiatry, a danger of not considering cultural diversity is that the recovery journey may mimic the reductionist approach of western medicine – so-called scientific thought. We may be limiting ourselves to seeing recovery as divided into the recovery of different, separate aspects of ourselves, our personal psyches (e.g. spiritual development), our social standing (e.g. dealing with stigma), our employment position (e.g. getting meaningful work) and so on.

Another danger of seeing recovery as a very personal journey is that it mimics the psychiatric model of recovering from a (personal) 'illness', usually through some intervention or therapy, rather than a social model of finding a way through complicated and difficult life situations that involve social systems, relationships and so on. A limited personal recovery is wide open for a takeover by the psychiatric system as being equal to 'getting better' from illness. And we see this happening before our eyes.

Another dimension to the recovery debate that we need to address is that in 21st century Britain the reality for many black service users is being stuck in the system with heavy diagnoses and sectioning (as dangerous people); their

journey from darkness into light, if it ever takes place, entails circumventing or overcoming many barriers of a social and political nature. It is not just a limited *personal* journey that they have to make in surviving and then becoming real people again. The journey for them is as much *social* as personal.

The journey for many black people to escape from the aftermath of a major life disruption requires a holistic approach and one that is inseparable from dealing with racism and discrimination

Finally, there is the issue of racism. For black people and others who are involved in a struggle against racism, not just in the mental health system but in many other aspects of life – judicial, educational and employment – the social journey has strong *political* dimensions. And black people can only take their political/social/personal journeys if allowed to do so by society or, more likely, if they manage to seize their own freedom from society. The barriers are real ones: mental health law has recently been tightened against them; attitudes in society often block their progress on the road; most professionals (black and white) connive in denying the impact of racism in the mental health system.

To summarise, the journey for many black people in a racist society to escape from the aftermath of a major life disruption requires a holistic approach and one that is inseparable from dealing with racism and discrimination in many aspects of their lives. In my view, recovery is far too mild a word to encompass such a journey towards a respectable and fulfilling life. The journey is better represented by a word such as 'liberation' or 'struggle' – a 'we shall overcome' approach.

1. Repper, J. and Perkins, R. (2003) *Social inclusion and recovery: A model for mental health practice*, London: Ballière Tindall.
2. Kloos, B. (2005) 'Creating new possibilities for promoting liberation, well-being, and recovery: Learning from experiences of psychiatric consumers/survivors', in G. Nelson and I. Prilleltensky (eds) *Community psychology: In pursuit of well-being and liberation*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.