

Video nasty

Kwame McKenzie is dismayed by psychiatry's entry in BBC 2's Video Diaries

When I saw the title, 'Mad, Bad or Sad' I guessed that this *Video Diary* was not going to be kind to psychiatrists. When I saw the press release – "Diagnosed as 'schizophrenic', her moving story reveals how, day by day, she and others like her are subject to the guesswork of psychiatrists and the ignorance of a society frightened by myth and folklore" – I feared the worst. By the time the programme was shown I was prepared for psychiatrists to get a slating and I was not disappointed.

It is hard to know what footage lies on the cutting room floor and whether the film could have been more balanced. But the video diary of Sharon who suffers from a mental illness showed psychiatrists in a particularly bad light.

The makers clearly wanted to make a point and proceeded to do so. In their opinion psychiatrists are secretive, do not understand their patients and prescribe bucket-loads of drugs which have side effects but are of doubtful benefit. Community care does not work, apart from through voluntary groups and other people with schizophrenia who attempt to support each other in the face of adversity.

They presented evidence to support their thesis; a camcorder had to be smuggled into the secure unit featured and we were told that no-one there would give an interview. In the only clip with a doctor in it Sharon was clearly being patronised. Worse still, Sharon was taking a depot injection which she did not think helped her and had a cupboard full of tablets – two types of antipsychotic, an antidepressant, temazepam and an anticholinergic. However, the Afro-Caribbean Mental Health resource from the voluntary sector was welcoming, useful and opened its doors to the camcorder, and Sharon's friends

supplied empathy, support and laughs. In the press release, the copywriter concludes: "a close group of friends, who understand each other and what lies behind their labels, offer the support 'care in the community' fails to deliver".

I would normally welcome the fact that mental health was getting TV time but I was unsure what the purpose of this video diary was or what effect it would have on the viewers. Having stated categorically that psychiatrists were bad, its only other storyline was that Sharon was trying to find out who her real parents were because this might help her "schizophrenia". But this theme was so thin and understated that it could not have been the main purpose of the documentary. I believe that the intention was to satiate voyeurism of the worst kind and let Jo and Joanna public see how a schizophrenic lives.

Still, even this could have been useful if there had been more emphasis and depth on Sharon as a person rather than Sharon as a schizophrenic. The programme could have painted a portrait of a woman who had been adopted and who happened to have a mental illness, allowing viewers to identify with her more and understand something of what it is like to live her life. But, because her mental illness was the focus, viewers were denied this chance and a feeling of otherness was enforced – even a Christmas party was used to underline that Sharon and her friends were outsiders who had only their own group for company.

I felt uneasy about the film – wondering how Sharon felt about it, whether it said what she wanted it to and who gained most – Sharon, the public or the BBC production team.

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