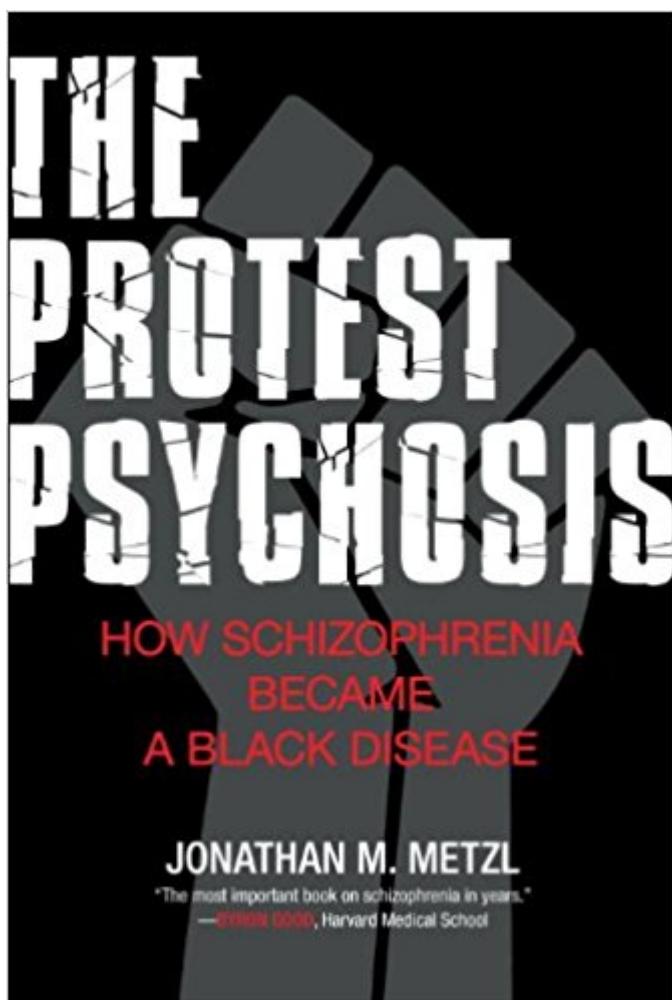


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# The Protest Psychosis: How Schizophrenia Became A Black Disease



## Synopsis

A powerful account of how cultural anxieties about race shaped American notions of mental illness. The civil rights era is largely remembered as a time of sit-ins, boycotts, and riots. But a very different civil rights history evolved at the Ionia State Hospital for the Criminally Insane in Ionia, Michigan. In *The Protest Psychosis*, psychiatrist and cultural critic Jonathan Metzl tells the shocking story of how schizophrenia became the diagnostic term overwhelmingly applied to African American protesters at Ionia—•for political reasons as well as clinical ones. Expertly sifting through a vast array of cultural documents, Metzl shows how associations between schizophrenia and blackness emerged during the tumultuous decades of the 1960s and 1970s—•and he provides a cautionary tale of how anxieties about race continue to impact doctor-patient interactions in our seemingly postracial America.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Metzl, a psychiatrist and Univ. of Michigan professor, uses the largely unknown story of Michigan's Ionia Mental Hospital to track the evolving definition of schizophrenia from the 1920s to the '70s, from an illness of "pastoral, feminine neurosis into one of urban, male psychosis" correlated with aggression. Metzl puts the imperfect science of diagnosis in historical context with admirable lucidity, moving into the present to examine how a tangle of medical errors and systemic racism that labels "threats to authority as mental illness" influences the diagnosis of black men with schizophrenia. He offers a laudably complex look at a complex and still poorly understood condition, expanding his discussion to include the impact of deinstitutionalization and the revision of the

Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-II) in the 1960s. The result is a sophisticated analysis of the mechanisms of racism in the mental health system and, by extension, the criminal justice system. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

In the 1960s, the psychiatric diagnosis of schizophrenia morphed from a malady suffered by sensitive white intellectuals to one of disaffected, angry black men. Psychiatric professor Metzl explores changes in the profession from the 1920s to today but focuses particularly on the 1960s, which saw violent protests against racial discrimination. Metzl details the social, political, and cultural influences behind debates within the profession about what constituted mental illness. Drawing on case studies from Michigan's now-defunct Asylum for Insane Criminals in Ionia, 130 miles from racially volatile Detroit, Metzl illustrates how schizophrenia became a racialized disease. He analyzes black cultural allusions to double consciousness, from W. E. B. DuBois to modern-day rappers who have adapted notions of schizophrenia in response to American racism or as a social diagnosis of white America itself. Metzl also examines shortcomings in American society and the psychiatric profession in particular, which resisted the notion that violent responses to racism might have been rational. An enlightening look at how those in power define aberrant behavior and evade self-analysis. --Vanessa Bush --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Excellent reference material for a layman and scholar seeking scholarship on the injustices facing Afro-Americans. The social structure of America is unveiled in this striking piece of literature. Two-thumbs up.

Thoroughly enjoyed this book. Great history and analysis.

Expertly documents how the pharmaceutical/ mental health-industrial complex criminalizes behavior. Good for those looking to see how mental health diagnoses serves to enforce a racist status quo and condemns people of color.

This book provides very revealing evidence about how societal issues influence mental health diagnoses. It shows how subjective the DSM diagnoses can be-- and how they reflect the fears and perceptions of society. The "old" diagnoses of schizophrenia had more to do with its negative

symptoms, like depression and social withdrawal-- whereas the newer diagnosis emphasizes violent and aggressive tendencies. The African American male-- during the civil rights struggle-- was viewed as an embodiment of those tendencies.

While this book brings up the important topic of institutions in America's history especially in the black community I found it fell short. Metzel does not seem able to fully develop many of the ideas he is trying to get across in the book leaving more questions than answers. However, I did think that it brought up a lot of important issues that were present in mental institutions in the past. However, he focuses on only one institution which I often felt was not necessarily a encompassing example of how all mental institutions seemed at the time. I think he started something for other authors to write on and set himself up for potentially future books yet did not feel that this book provided the amount of information where I remained interested the entire time and was often confused by his writing.

It's hard to recommend this book. From the beginning Metzl makes no bones about his controversial thesis. He then attempts to use a very limited number of primary sources to frame the argument. I give him credit for describing his investigative process with social science but even he admits such results, the substance from which his book is drawn, should be "taken with a grain of salt." Metzl's inclusion of fictional speculation, blended accounts, and factual narrative also dilute his point. In addition, by limiting himself to one mental institution (in Ionia, and a criminal one at that) it is hard to justify the sweeping claims his thesis sets up. An analysis of rap lyrics mentioning "schizophrenia," as a nod to its race-based past, also borders on the absurd. He cites Young Jeezy's "Standing Ovation." In the same sense I could take Jeezy's song "Trap or Die," and assert how his wordplay with "I got diarrhea flow..." ties to Mobutu's incontinence. As a psychiatry book it does have some interesting sections, such as drug ads with racial subliminal messages and the evolution of the DSM. As a history book it falls short of proving the believed schizophrenic pigeonholing.

As you probably know, African American men are disproportionately diagnosed with schizophrenia. But what you may not know is when this pattern emerged, or why. The Protest Psychosis tells that story. Up until the 1950s, the overwhelming majority of those diagnosed with schizophrenia were white. They were the delicate or eccentric -- poets, academics, middle-class women like Alice Wilson in The Protest Psychosis, "driven to insanity by the dual pressures of housework and motherhood." Then, in the mid-1960s, the Long Hot Summers hit urban America. Smoldering anger over racism and poverty erupted into rioting, fires, and harsh repression. In Detroit, a police raid on

a party triggered an uprising that left 43 dead, 1,189 injured, and more than 7,000 arrested. Convinced that they would never win civil rights through sit-down strikes, a nascent Black Power movement became increasingly militant. Coincidentally, just as this urban unrest was reaching its zenith, the American Psychiatric Association was busy revising its Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). Published in 1968, the DSM-II was touted as a more objective and scientific document than its 1952 predecessor. "However, the DSM-II was far from the objective, universal text that its authors envisioned," writes Metzl. "In unintentional and unexpected ways, the manual's diagnostic criteria -- and the criteria for schizophrenia most centrally -- reflected the social tensions of 1960s America. A diagnostic text meant to shift focus away from the specifics of culture instead became inexorably intertwined with the cultural politics, and above all the race politics, of a particular nation and a particular moment in time." The psychoanalytically imbued "schizophrenic reaction" of the DSM-I was an illness meriting pity and compassion rather than fear. In contrast, the DSM-II's more biologically oriented schizophrenia was menacing and required containment. In particular, the language that described the paranoid subtype foregrounded "masculinized hostility, violence, and aggression," implicitly pathologizing protest as mental illness. Almost overnight, the previous class of schizophrenics at Ionia State Hospital was relabeled with depressive disorders. As the formerly schizophrenic exited the hospital en masse in the wake of the Community Mental Health Centers Act of 1963, their places were taken by a new class of schizophrenics - volatile young Black men from inner-city Detroit. A mountain of archived charts from the defunct asylum at Ionia provided the raw material for *The Protest Psychosis*. In his four years of sifting through the treasure trove of data, Metzl found clear evidence of shifting racial and gender patterns in diagnosis. Because the DSM-II was published in the days before computers, clerk typists simply used hatch marks (/) to mark out the old diagnoses, leaving them clearly legible alongside the new. Randomly selecting a subset of charts of white women patients, Metzl found schizophrenic diagnoses crossed out, and replaced with labels such as Depressive Neurosis or Involitional Melancholia. In contrast, the charts of African American men saw Psychopathic Personality crossed out to make way for the DSM-II's schizophrenia, paranoid type. Neither set of patients had undergone a sudden metamorphosis. Their observable symptoms and behaviors, as documented by their chart notes, remained the same. The only thing that changed was the diagnostic manual. Occasionally, a deep thinker like Metzl comes along to dig through historical records and shine a spotlight on historical biases. Metzl's message is especially relevant today. As Ethan Watters explores in *A Crazy Like Us: The Globalization of the American Psyche*, American psychiatry is sweeping the globe like a virus, importing PTSD to Sri Lanka and Western-style depression to Japan. As Christopher Lane

describes in *Shyness: How Normal Behavior Became a Sickness*, diagnostic expansion is especially easy with psychiatric illnesses, because of their nebulous nature and subjective boundaries. Metzl, in a clear and lyrical style, proves once again that supposedly objective science is never truly pure. A lengthier, illustrated version of this review is available at the url [3.ly/Protest](http://3.ly/Protest), my Psychology Today site, *Witness*.

Although Metzl claims to critique how psychology as a field has unfairly diagnosed disproportionate numbers of Blacks with schizophrenia, he does not achieve his goal. The book focuses too much on describing the details of patient files and not enough on the discussion of what these documents mean in terms of larger trends in the field of psychology. By limiting his research primarily to the documents from a single institution, his book was unable to fully address the social or historical context that lead to African American men being disproportionately diagnosed with schizophrenia. Overall the book was poorly written and inadequately researched. Because it is one of the few books on the topic I would not dissuade someone truly interested in the topic from reading it, but I would not recommend it to a friend.

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