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Depression In Japan: Psychiatric Cures For A Society In Distress



Synopsis

Since the 1990s, suicide in recession-plagued Japan has soared, and rates of depression have both increased and received greater public attention. In a nation that has traditionally been uncomfortable addressing mental illness, what factors have allowed for the rising medicalization of depression and suicide? Investigating these profound changes from historical, clinical, and sociolegal perspectives, *Depression in Japan* explores how depression has become a national disease and entered the Japanese lexicon, how psychiatry has responded to the nation's ailing social order, and how, in a remarkable transformation, psychiatry has overcome the longstanding resistance to its intrusion in Japanese life. Questioning claims made by Japanese psychiatrists that depression hardly existed in premodern Japan, Junko Kitanaka shows that Japanese medicine did indeed have a language for talking about depression which was conceived of as an illness where psychological suffering was intimately connected to physiological and social distress. The author looks at how Japanese psychiatrists now use the discourse of depression to persuade patients that they are victims of biological and social forces beyond their control; analyzes how this language has been adopted in legal discourse surrounding "overwork suicide"; and considers how, in contrast to the West, this language curiously emphasizes the suffering of men rather than women. Examining patients' narratives, Kitanaka demonstrates how psychiatry constructs a gendering of depression, one that is closely tied to local politics and questions of legitimate social suffering. Drawing upon extensive research in psychiatric institutions in Tokyo and the surrounding region, *Depression in Japan* uncovers the emergence of psychiatry as a force for social transformation in Japan.

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Customer Reviews

Kitanaka has written a very stimulating and successful book. I approached this work as someone with a background in Japanese studies and an interest in the history of psychotherapy. Based on her wide reading and research, extending not only to specialized sources but also to familiar authors such as A. Hochschild, P. Kramer, and even S. Sontag, Kitanaka paints an extraordinarily rich and varied picture of how Japan's psychiatrists have addressed the problem of depression over the past few generations. Her basic thesis -- that the local profession has reconceptualized "the notion of individual biological vulnerability" [to depression] "in terms of social causality" (p.180) -- is stated clearly and developed at length. But this scarcely begins to suggest the many layers of analysis and fascinating speculation on offer here. For example, Kitanaka is **really** good not just at historical explanation, but also at comparison between different countries, which is never as easy to pull off as it seems. One could voice a few smallish reservations. Kitanaka cites works by year only, not page number, making it impossible to track down her references in detail. The writing is excellent but minor infelicities in English creep in every once in a while (I think she uses "overwork" sometimes when she means "overtime"). More importantly, I think Kitanaka underestimates the importance of Japan's pharmaceutical industry and its ties to doctors, which has an important bearing on her story. But these concerns hardly detract from a terrific book. I very much hope to be able to read more work of this kind from Kitanaka in the future (how about a historical analysis of Japan's resistance to psychotherapy for "mere" neurosis?).

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