

‘Oh my gosh I’m going to have to undress’: potential barriers to greater ethnic diversity in the physiotherapy profession in the United Kingdom

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Abstract

Objective To explore the views and experiences of South Asian participants in relation to the potential barriers to increasing ethnic diversity of the physiotherapy profession.

Design A qualitative research design was utilised, drawing on ethnographic traditions and including ethnographic interviews. The interviews were transcribed and the data were analysed using thematic analysis.

Setting A venue of the participant’s own choosing in the North west of England.

Participants

- Five, Muslim female parents; who came to the UK from Pakistan.
- Two black and minority ethnic (BME) undergraduate physiotherapy students; one female and one male. They described their ethnicity as: British Indian and British Pakistani.
- Three BME female physiotherapy clinicians. They described their ethnicity as Indian and British Pakistani.

Findings From analysis of the data generated, three subthemes emerged in relation to the overarching theme; potential barriers: decreased knowledge of physiotherapy; issue of status; tension between cultures.

Conclusions It appears that a lack of knowledge may impact negatively on BME potential students considering physiotherapy as a possible career. The status of the profession was found to be an important factor in career choice. However, a lack of knowledge led many to consider physiotherapy to be less prestigious than other healthcare professions. Finally, a lack of sensitivity with the information given during the selection process caused some participants anxiety and to question physiotherapy as a career choice. Due consideration should be given to these potential barriers to address the underrepresentation of BME groups in physiotherapy.

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Keywords: South Asian; Black and minority ethnic groups; Barriers; Physiotherapy; Qualitative

Introduction

The physiotherapy profession has traditionally been seen as a female, white, middle class profession [1,2]. However, whilst there may have been changes in its profile in relation to gender and social class, physiotherapists from black and minority ethnic (BME) groups remain underrepresented [2]. According to the 2011 Census, 14% of the national population are from BME groups [3]. However, the intake of BME

students onto physiotherapy courses nationally in 2010/2011 was just 10% [4]. This is significantly below the UK average of 18% of BME students studying on university programmes in that same year [5]. Moreover, physiotherapists from BME backgrounds account for only 5% of the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy’s membership [6].

The *NHS Plan* [7] highlights the need to recruit and retain BME allied health professionals. It is argued that a workforce which is reflective of the population it serves will bring with it greater cultural knowledge, and so, the more likely the workforce will be able to understand and meet the needs of the local community [7,8]. It is then of some concern that in Britain, the physiotherapy profession does not reflect the ethnic and cultural diversity of the population it serves.

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Therefore, it is important to understand the perspectives of BME parents, who are influential in a young person's career choice [8], and to explore the experiences of physiotherapy students and clinicians from BME groups. This will help us to understand why potential BME students might or might not be interested in a career in physiotherapy and why they remain underrepresented in the profession today. However, there is a dearth of literature that has investigated this issue. Greenwood and Bithell [8,9] investigated factors influencing attitudes to careers in physiotherapy amongst BME and white UK school and college students in the South East of England. This research builds on these findings by exploring the views and experiences of South Asian parents and physiotherapy students and clinicians in North west England.

Aim

To explore the views and experiences of BME participants, particularly South Asian participants, in relation to the potential barriers to increasing ethnic diversity of the physiotherapy profession.

Method

Sample

A purposive sample of parents, physiotherapy students and clinicians from BME groups were recruited from North west England [10]. Participants were excluded if they were unable to give informed consent. A gatekeeper was used to access the sample [11]. Recruitment of participants continued until data saturation was achieved [12]. In total, 10 participants took part in this research (Table 1).

Study design

A qualitative research design was utilised [10], which drew on ethnographic traditions and included ethnographic interviews [12]. The author carried out all interviews at a venue of the participant's own choosing. An interpreter was required for four of the five interviews with parents.

The interview questions related to the aim of this study. A topic guide was used to guide data generation. It began with collecting a biography of the participant's ethnicity and

religion in order to provide context for the interview. It then included open-ended questions about the participant's views and experiences of the potential barriers to increasing ethnic diversity within the physiotherapy profession. Subsequent questions were conversational in nature and drew on what the participant had mentioned in their reply, whilst remaining focused on the research aim [12].

Ethics

An application to the NHS Research Ethics Committee and the University Faculty Ethics Committee detailing how the author intended to ensure that ethical issues would be addressed and adhered to was submitted, and ethical approval was granted.

Data analysis

The interviews were transcribed and the data were analysed using thematic analysis which organises the data into broad themes [13]. Data analysis was conducted in several stages, involving: immersion in the data; transcribing the interviews; and reading and rereading the interview transcripts. The data was then organised into meaningful segments to identify any patterns, from which, codes were developed [14]. Codes were combined, reviewed and refined to form an overarching theme: potential barriers [13]. Three subthemes emerged in relation to this: decreased knowledge of physiotherapy; issue of status; tension between cultures.

Findings and discussion

The three subthemes have been illuminated by excerpts from the interviews. Pseudonyms have been used to ensure the participant's anonymity.

Decreased knowledge of physiotherapy

Amongst South Asian participants who had come to the UK as migrants, there was a lack of knowledge about physiotherapy, which was felt to be due to it being a relatively new profession in their country of birth:

“If you say you are a physiotherapist, “oh you are a massager” or something like that . . . yes, 90% have the same thinking . . . you know this physiotherapy is very modern . . . So in rural areas [of Pakistan] physiotherapy is nil. But in big cities, there is some physiotherapy awareness.”

(Yasmin, South Asian parent)

This lack of knowledge came through strongly in all parent interviews. Thus, where parental approval is considered to be important to prospective student's choice of career [9], parents need to know more about a physiotherapist's role to enable them to make an informed decision.

Moreover, earlier research found that there was a general lack of knowledge of physiotherapy amongst BME UK students, particularly those of Asian heritage, with

Table 1
Characteristics of participants.

- Five, Muslim female parents who came to the UK from Pakistan. One participant was a parent of an undergraduate physiotherapy student; the other four participants were parents of college-aged students (16 to 18 years old) and students on other undergraduate programmes.
- Two BME undergraduate physiotherapy students; one female and one male, from two Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). They described their ethnicity as British Indian, and British Pakistani.
- Three BME female physiotherapy clinicians who were working in three hospital trusts. They described their ethnicity as Indian, and British Pakistani.

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