



Experiences of Marginalised Occupational Therapy Students in UK Higher Education



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Research Team

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Study Aim: To explore the experiences of marginalised occupational therapy students during their course, including on practice placements.

Methods: Participatory Action Research. Two lecturers and eight marginalised occupational therapy students worked as co-researchers to co-design interviews, a focus group, and an online survey. 26 marginalised occupational therapy students participated in these. We then engaged in data co-analysis, participatory filmmaking and a collective writing process.

Findings: We generated five themes from our data: 1) Experiences of microaggressions, extra effort and barriers; 2) Effects on health, wellbeing and course; 3) Empathy, understanding and knowledge; 4) Coping with experiences and imagining change; 5) Relationships are key.

Theme 1: Microaggressions, Extra Effort, and Barriers

Students frequently experienced racial, ableist, class-based, and transphobic microaggressions from staff, peers, and institutional systems. These led to feelings of isolation, invisibility, and the burden of having to work harder to be accepted, often within environments that lacked understanding or accessibility.

Theme 2: Health, Wellbeing, Grades, and Course Continuation

Discrimination and microaggressions harmed students' mental and physical health, especially during placements. This affected confidence, academic performance, and led some to consider leaving the course. Supportive placements improved outcomes, but systemic exclusion made many question their place in the profession.

Theme 3: Empathy, Knowledge, and Strengths of Marginalised Students

Lived experiences of marginalisation enhanced students' empathy, resilience, and reflective practice. Their cultural knowledge and multilingualism enriched learning and care. Students called for greater recognition of these strengths in education and practice.

Theme 4: Coping, Fitting In, and Imagining Change

To cope, students often masked their identities or stayed silent, especially on placement. Fear of judgement or repercussions discouraged speaking out. While peer support helped, many doubted whether real change was possible. Students proposed better training, dialogue, and safer reporting systems.

Theme 5: Relationships are key

Relationships are crucial. Personal Tutor support requires consistency and trust. Barriers exist - feeling unsupported or fearing that raising issues made it worse. Shared social identities improved rapport for racially minoritized students. Supportive team cultures and peer support are vital for enhancing learning, combating isolation, and fostering a sense of community and belonging.

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