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Student perspectives on barriers to performance for Black & Minority Ethnic graduate-entry medical students: a qualitative study in a West Midlands Medical School

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Manuscripts

1 Student perspectives on barriers to performance for Black &
2 Minority Ethnic graduate-entry medical students: a qualitative study
3 in a West Midlands Medical School
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ABSTRACT

Objective: To explore graduate-entry medical students experiences of undergraduate training in the context of academic underperformance of medical students from ethnic minority backgrounds

Design: Qualitative study using semi-structured focus groups

Setting: A West Midlands Medical School

Participants: 24 graduate-entry MBChB students were recruited using volunteer and snowball sampling; all students self-identified as being from black and minority ethnic (BME) backgrounds

Results: BME students reported facing a range of difficulties, throughout their undergraduate medical training, that they felt impeded their learning and performance. Their relationships with staff and clinicians, though also identified as facilitators to learning, were also perceived to have hindered progress, as many students felt that a lack of BME representation and lack of understanding of cultural differences among staff impacted their experience. Students also reported a lack of trust in the institution's ability to support BME students, with many not seeking support. Students' narratives indicated that they had to mask their identity to fit in amongst their peers and to avoid negative stereotyping. Although rare, students faced overt racism from their peers and from patients. Many students reported feelings of isolation, reduced self-confidence and low self-esteem.

Conclusion: BME students in this study reported experiencing relationship issues with other students, academic and clinical staff, lack of trust in the institution and some racist events. Although it is not clear from this small study of one institution whether these findings would be replicated in other institutions, they nevertheless highlight important issues to be considered by the institution concerned and other institutions. These findings suggest that future interventions should consider improving peer relationships and student-staff relationships and implementing institutional changes to diversify student and staff populations. Guidance on tackling racism as well as adequate training in anti-racism, culture and diversity for both students and staff is likely to be key.

ARTICLE SUMMARY

Strengths and limitations of this study

- This is the first study to explore graduate-entry BME medical students' experiences of medical education. It provides valuable insights into the causes of black and minority ethnic UK

1 undergraduates' lower performance in medical assessments and provides a basis on which
2 interventions to reduce the differential attainment can be developed and evaluated.
3

- 4 • This study has a small sample but multiple cohorts participated in this study; broadening the
5 scope of narrated experiences and the variety of views.
6
- 7 • The focus group methodology allowed candid responses and group discussion facilitated
8 recollection of experiences but some participants may have felt inhibited to share personal
9 experiences and therefore some sensitive topics may have been underdiscussed.
10
- 11 • It must be taken into consideration that the emergent themes from the data were dependent on
12 chosen sample. Other themes may, therefore, have arisen if different or more participants had
13 taken part in the study.
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INTRODUCTION

In higher education, students from Black & Minority Ethnic (BME) backgrounds in the United Kingdom have been reported to underperform academically compared with their white counterparts.¹ Medicine is no different; a number of studies in the UK have reported underperformance at undergraduate and postgraduate level by BME medical students and trained doctors.^{2 3 4} Similar findings have been reported in the United States⁵ and the Netherlands.⁶ This persistent difference in performance between ethnic groups is known as the differential attainment gap and poses a huge issue for medical education and the medical profession. Evidence suggests that this attainment gap exists throughout various undergraduate and postgraduate medical assessments including machine-marked written examinations and objective structured clinical examinations.^{4 7-9} Although the differential attainment gap has been widely documented, the reasons for it remain unclear.^{2 10 11}

Current literature findings suggest that ethnic stereotypes may contribute to BME medical students' underperformance, yet overt discrimination has not been evidenced.¹² Furthermore, a longitudinal study and analysis of UK medical students concluded that the ethnic differences in performance were not due to psychological or demographic factors.³ A 2017 independent review panel at Cardiff University, also highlighted that BME medical students have a different student experience to their white counterparts.¹³ The lack of BME staff within Medical Schools; difficulty in "fitting in" and racial stereotyping have all emerged as themes experienced by BME students.^{12 13}

Previous studies^{3 4 7} have focused on undergraduate medical students on five or six-year programmes. To the best of our knowledge, none have specifically explored graduate-entry undergraduate medical students' experiences nor the potential causes of the differential attainment gap in graduate-entry medicine (GEM). The UK introduction of 4-year GEM courses began in 2000, following the 1997 UK Medical Workforce Standing Advisory Committee recommendation to diversify the medical student population.¹⁴ As GEM currently accounts for approximately 10% of all UK medical programmes¹⁴, it is important to report the differential attainment gap amongst GEM courses and examine the experiences of graduate-entry BME medical students as part of a portfolio of research into differential attainment among medical students.

This study therefore aims to build upon previous research, examining the potential reasons for underperformance by graduate-entry medical students; exploring their experiences of undergraduate medical training and their perceptions of barriers and facilitators to performance. It is hoped that this study will assist universities to address any possible inequalities found and inform the development of academic and student support strategies for BME students.

METHODS

Design

A qualitative approach was undertaken to gain understanding of medical students' experiences and their perspectives on barriers to performance. Data were gathered in focus groups throughout November 2018, using a semi-structured interview schedule. Two encrypted audio recorders were utilised for data capture. Focus group participants received a maximum of two emails including one email reminder.

Sampling strategy and recruitment

The sampling frame was all students in each of the four cohorts of the MBChB course at a West Midlands Medical School; all chosen because of their varying experience of medical training as well as academic examinations. The sampling frame was used to recruit participants who self-identified as BME. This group encompassed, but was not limited to, those who identified as being from African, Asian, Arab or Caribbean descent. Participants were eligible to participate if they were either in the clinical phases of the MBChB (Years 2-4) or resitting the pre-clinical phase of training (Year 1). Other Year 1 students were excluded from participating as they had only been on the course for two months and therefore had limited experience of the MBChB course.

Participants were recruited in four main ways: administrative staff emailed invitations to all medical students asking for eligible volunteers to register their interest to participate; invitations to express interest in taking part were posted on the official University MBChB Facebook cohort group pages; participants in the early focus groups encouraged other eligible students to register their interest to participate; and participants were encouraged to bring any eligible students with them on the day. All students with an interest in the study were provided with a participation information leaflet and a consent form. Twenty-six students registered interest and accepted the invitation to participate. Four focus groups were then scheduled throughout November 2018, based on participant availability. Owing to last minute timetable changes, two participants were unable to attend any of the focus group sessions.

Ethical approval

Ethical approval was obtained from the University's Biomedical and Scientific Research Ethics Subcommittee in August 2018.

The study involved collection & analysis of the special category of ethnicity. To ensure confidentiality, data security and compliance with the General Data Protection Regulations, all data were anonymised and held only by NM. All participants confirmed on their consent form that they agreed to keep confidential the identities of focus group participants and to maintain the confidentiality of the information discussed during the focus group.

Data collection methods

NM moderated each focus group. At each group, participants were randomly assigned a number and were subsequently asked to self-report their ethnicity using the 2011 UK census categories.¹⁵

Many participants were acquainted with each other through enrolment on the MBChB course. At the outset of each focus group, participants were briefed on the purpose and the commonality of each group, thus creating a comfortable, permissive environment; encouraging participants to talk freely.¹⁶

Throughout the discussion, first-hand narratives were encouraged, and participants were prompted to clarify and expand their answers. Participants were encouraged to respond to others' contributions and discuss similar or contrasting accounts if appropriate. Focus groups ranged from sixty minutes to 3 hours (average 111 minutes).

No attempt was made to exclude friends, with the aim that some collective recollection of events may be captured and on the basis that participants would be more likely to raise sensitive topics if accompanied by friends.¹⁶

Data processing and analysis

The data was audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim using Microsoft Word and Olympus Sonority v.1.4.7.

Thematic analysis¹⁷ was adopted using Braun and Clarke's six phase framework, shown in Table 1.¹⁸ The research team read all transcripts individually to allow/increase familiarisation with the data. QSR NVivo v.12¹⁹ software was used to assist with categorisation and management of the data. Following thorough review of all transcripts, a number of themes were identified from the data. The team discussed the findings and agreed an initial coding framework. NM coded the first three transcripts independently using the initial coding framework, which were then refined after further discussion. Following further review, a final coding framework was adopted, which was subsequently used to code the entire data set.

Step 1	Become familiar with the data
--------	-------------------------------

Step 2	Generate initial codes
Step 3	Search for themes
Step 4	Review themes
Step 5	Define themes
Step 6	Write-up

Table 1: Braun & Clarke's six-phase framework for doing a thematic analysis

RESULTS

Participants

Twenty-four medical students participated in the study. Participant demographics are shown in figure

1.

Figure 1 Participant demographics by characteristic. **A:** Participants by age group; **B:** Participants by gender; **C:** Participants by ethnicity.

Perceived barriers to performance

All narratives highlighted students' views on barriers and facilitators to performance during undergraduate medical training. The data was categorised into three main causal themes:

- **Importance of relationships** – exploring the relationships amongst students and their peers and amongst students and staff. This was particularly important as poor relationships affect the learning experience and lead to disengagement, lack of motivation and withdrawal.²⁰
- **Institution and learning** – examining how the students interact with the institution and their learning opportunities, such as factors which may generate limitations and barriers to learning and attainment e.g. patient encounters and poor interactions with clinicians.
- **Psychosocial and identity** – psychological, societal and cultural factors that affect students' learning experience, engagement and attainment; particularly stereotyping and racism and cultural differences.

Within the three main themes, seven subthemes were identified that were perceived to cause barriers to performance (figure 2).

Figure 2 The main themes (top level) and subthemes (bottom level) describing the difficulties faced by BME graduate-entry medical students at a West Midlands Medical School that were perceived as barriers to performance. The subtheme 'relationships with staff and clinicians' was linked with two main themes 'importance of relationships' and 'institution and learning' as illustrated above. The subtheme 'experiences of racism' was linked to two subthemes within the main theme 'importance of relationships' and one subtheme in 'institution and learning' as illustrated by the dotted lines.

Relationship with peers: finding allies, isolation and social networks

Peers and staff were identified as both positive and negative influences on performance. Peers were allies who provided solidarity, as well as academic and emotional support. The majority of participants had a diverse range of friends, however, many noted that their closest friends at medical school were other students from a BME background:

My friendship group mostly consists of people of colour. I don't know if it's something I generally gravitate towards. They are also people who look or dress similarly to me.

Female, Asian Pakistani

I find that because we're all minorities, you [...] stick together and the more you get to know each other it's like we're actually quite different but [...] there is no one else that you relate to really so you just kind of stick with them.

Female, Black African

Participants explained they were drawn towards finding allies in other ethnic minority students, despite not necessarily having common interests or hobbies. Such alliances helped some students to overcome their feelings of isolation and a few students said they gained confidence by having these friendship groups:

where I'm from back home [...] my school was like all ethnic minorities so I was only friends with people that did the same things that I did, like the same things I did, whereas here it's more like you want to stick with people are similar to you, even though you don't necessarily like the same things you do, it's just because you have that common ground; the basis of what you both are is similar so you relate to each other more and than with a [White] person, just because you are an ethnic minority.

Female, Black African

[...] in my first year, in my Friday [group] sessions, I've had no ethnic minorities, so I tend to be by myself just because I didn't feel I had someone, like an ally [...] but this year, it's like I have a few more people [...] and it kind of gives you a boost [...]

Female, Black African

Many also remarked they felt more comfortable amongst other ethnic minorities as they shared a common understanding, specifically, in appreciating cultural differences and acknowledging bias or discrimination often encountered by minority groups:

I'm not really sure how to explain it but [...] there are certain things I may have faced in my life, which other ethnic minorities would understand and those who aren't an ethnic minority wouldn't really get because it's

1 *not something they've experienced. Maybe it's something they've heard about but not necessarily something*
2 *they've felt themselves.*

3
4 Female, Black Caribbean
5
6

7 Most BME students reported feeling isolated, explaining that each cohort consisted of predominately
8 white students. Students felt that they were not represented within the student body. Many who
9 came from multicultural cities such as London and Birmingham, found it difficult to adapt and
10 struggled to fit in what they perceived to be a predominantly white student population. Many
11 participants also reported that they did not feel "good enough" to be at medical school:
12
13
14

15
16
17 *[...] I constantly feel like I don't deserve to be here [...] a lot of the time I feel so different [...] I have that*
18 *constant feeling that I don't deserve to be here [...] because I don't fit in with what your typical medic does*
19 *or what their background is [...]*

20
21 Female, Black African
22
23

24 *[...]I did feel a little bit lesser than my non-ethnic minority counterparts. I felt like, oh maybe, I don't deserve*
25 *to be here as much as they do [...] It was something that played on my mind a little bit.*

26
27 Female, Black Caribbean
28
29

30 Several students felt a sense of invisibility amongst their white peers as they commented that many
31 white peers confused them with other ethnic minority students. Additionally, participants explained
32 that many white students often did not learn the correct pronunciation of their names, often trying
33 to shorten or anglicize it without their permission. Many found this very frustrating and impeding to
34 building new relationships with their peers:
35
36
37
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39
40
41 *Yeah, I'm not sure when people are talking to me if they know who they're actually talking to*

42 Female, Asian Indian
43
44

45 *I just hate it so much because like my name is, it's not even hard. It's literally, you say it the way it's spelt but*
46 *no one can get it. I feel like no one personally makes the effort to get it and it's like I refuse to let them shorten*
47 *my name until I know you can get it because I feel like, it's just like a basic sign of respect to just get it. It's*
48 *just so frustrating because it's like, it's not even hard.*

49
50
51 Female, Black African
52
53

54 Many participants described the importance of utilising social networks to increase academic
55 performance highlighting that social networks provided access to clinical learning opportunities as
56 well as a number of learning resources. Both were regarded as essential to learning and increasing
57
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1 performance. Students remarked that they felt disadvantaged as they were less likely to acquire
2 resources available to their white counterparts that facilitated learning and achievement:
3

4
5 *It does make a huge difference. It's sad but it does make a difference [...] having those links, those*
6 *connections, being in the right Facebook groups [...] helped me a lot.*
7

8
9 Female, Black African
10

11 *I've never been someone to really heavily depend on friends when it comes to like exams or whatever, but*
12 *I've realised since starting med school if I didn't have friends with me, I probably would not be in this position.*
13

14
15 Female, Asian Indian
16

17
18 *If you're not in the right friendship groups or Facebook groups, you've got less access to peer resources [...]*
19 *Being BME and isolated, you're more likely to be disadvantaged.*
20

21
22 Female, Black African
23

24 Relationship with staff and clinicians

25
26 Relationships with medical school staff and clinicians were perceived as important to learning and
27 performance. At best, clinicians developed students' knowledge, clinical skills and confidence by
28 providing extra learning opportunities and giving constructive feedback. Participants reported that
29 overall, they received good teaching from clinical staff, though, all said that they noted a better
30 experience with clinicians from BME backgrounds:
31

32
33 *I've had bedside teaching from a member of staff who is from a similar background to me. I think sometimes*
34 *if they are from a similar background, they work you harder and they are more critical, which is good as it's*
35 *more helpful. They have a higher expectation of you as they set the bar slightly higher which is interesting.*
36

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40
41
42 Female, Asian Pakistani
43

44
45 *I find it quite the opposite because most of the senior Consultants at the hospital are Asian men and they are*
46 *very paternal towards me which I'm very grateful for. Like if that's the only privilege I had, then I'm taking*
47 *it. So, they've been very nice, they've been very nurturing, they've given me all the attention I need which is*
48 *a lot. [...] they've been praising me [...] which has been motivating and you feel less other in the hospital*
49 *setting.*
50

51
52 Female, Asian Bangladeshi
53

54
55 In contrast, many participants felt that most staff based in the medical school did not appreciate the
56 cultural differences amongst students, reporting that several lecturers made culturally insensitive or
57 inappropriate comments. Some students said that more effort should be made to ensure staff
58
59
60

1 members were culturally trained, though, one participant felt cultural training would not suffice to
2 fully understand the challenges they faced:
3

4
5 *[...] as much as you want to say cultural training will make a difference, unless you're from an ethnic minority*
6 *background, [...] you're not gonna empathise with the situations.*
7

8
9 Female, Asian Bangladeshi
10

11
12 Also highlighted was the lack of BME representation amongst medical school staff. Representation
13 was considered important as many felt isolated amongst their peers. One participant said they were
14 less likely to report difficulties or seek support from medical school staff due to the lack of BME staff:
15

16
17
18 *More representation is needed, not just Black [lecturers] but Asian and Arab as well. I think that would be*
19 *quite good.*
20

21
22 Female, Black African
23

24
25 *At the Medical School [...] there's not enough people in the echelons of the faculty staff who [...] I can relate*
26 *to, so I don't think there's anyone necessarily that I would go for support [...]*
27

28
29 Female, Asian Bangladeshi
30

31 Lack of trust with the institution

32
33 Many participants felt that the institution did not appreciate or understand the challenges they faced
34 throughout their undergraduate career. Students were not clear on the procedures for reporting racial
35 incidents or concerns and none were able to identify a specific member of staff who they felt confident
36 in investigating such matters. This lack of structural guidance was often perceived as the medical
37 school not caring about the difficulties faced by BME students and so students were less likely to
38 report any incidents to the institution:
39

40
41
42 *It's again - what's going to be done about it? And then it's kind of like it's a word of mouth type thing so ok,*
43 *I've said that this person has said this, but ok you then talk to that person and the person says no I didn't say*
44 *that, I said something else and then what?*
45

46
47
48
49
50 Female, Black Caribbean
51

52
53 *[...] so conversations I've had with other people of ethnic minority backgrounds is that they feel like faculty*
54 *staff here, don't have enough cultural training either so they won't really understand the impact of say the*
55 *n-word or other statements which have been made towards ethnic minority students or about ethnic*
56 *minority students. So, they are not [going to], or they won't be able to support us in that way basically.*
57

58
59 Female, Asian Bangladeshi
60

Patient experiences

Experiences with patients were perceived as facilitators to learning as students were able to apply their theoretical knowledge to clinical practice. Participants reported that most patients were open to BME students practising their clinical skills with them. In contrast, some patient experiences were perceived as impeding learning and performance as they dented students' confidence and exposed them to biases. Overt racism was occasionally reported by participants and many reported experiencing microaggressions as well as witnessing microaggressions against others:

So, the first ever patient I spoke to at med school was an elderly lady and she wouldn't talk to me because I was "foreign". Erm, which was really embarrassing because I was asking her questions from a pro forma that we were given and she was telling me that I was being offensive to her [...] and she made such a big massive palaver about it and then when my white male colleague went and spoke to her, she was happy as Larry, answering all questions even though they were exactly word for word the same questions that I was asking [...] I [then] went home that day and cried because I thought that's what my experience of medicine is going to be throughout my career.

Female, Asian Bangladeshi

I was at a hospital on a ward where there were a lot of older white patients and I took about 3 histories and every one of those patients asked me where I was really from. I then had to explain to them that I was born here and they were like "wow, you were really born here" and then it got to the point where I joked with one of the patients and told them that I was born in my parents' home country and my mother gave birth to me in a hut. I was so angry and fed up of having to explain that I'm from here.

Female, Black African

Last year, a patient said "I passed for White" [...] They said it in a way where they thought they came across positive – like being White is positive. Erm, and it's only when they heard my name, they were like "Oh" [...] then they automatically linked me to a certain religion. [...] I was shocked.

Male, Asian Pakistani

Sense of self, identity masking and stereotypes

Most participants described having to change or hide their natural personalities in order to conform to the social groups at medical school. As participants felt that each cohort predominantly consisted of white students, there was sense of responsibility among BME students to represent their ethnic group in a positive light. They also commented on the perceived need to monitor and moderate their accents, their expression of emotions and the content of their speech:

[...] you feel like they're going to base all of their opinions on you, so sometimes you have to sort of water down some of the opinions you have or [...] you have to kind of force yourself to make yourself more

1 agreeable to people just because you're aware that [...] they are basing their opinion of Muslim people on
2 me [...]

3
4 Female, Asian Bangladeshi
5

6 You just [...] don't know how people are going to take you [...] a lot of the time it is like [...] you're the voice
7 of the people [...] so what they see with you is what they want assume for everyone and it might be that
8 they've met someone else that is like you, maybe they didn't have a good experience. I don't want to create
9 something they'll causes them to think oh this is how [...] Black people are.
10
11

12 Female, Black African
13
14
15

16 Many students talked about the pressure of knowing that they may be subject to negative
17 stereotyping, whereby over-generalised negative beliefs about their ethnic group may be applied to
18 them. One student explained that she actively tried to avoid negative stereotyping. Some students
19 said they were subject to stereotyping and remarked that incorrect assumptions were frequently
20 made about them. Participants reported that wrong assumptions negatively affected their
21 relationships with peers and staff, implying that stereotyping could impede good educational
22 relationships with peers and medical school staff:
23
24
25
26
27
28

29 *Also, I found someone here described me as intimidating which [...] throughout my entire life, I've never been
30 called intimidating, people would say that I'm soft [...] until I came here, I've never been called intimidating.*

31
32 Female, Black Caribbean
33
34

35 *That's actually one of my biggest fears because I know myself. I'm not intimidating but I know that people
36 tend to [label you as intimidating] when you're passionate [...] so I always try to be extra nice just to avoid
37 that because I think it's quite hurtful to call someone intimidating.*
38
39

40 Female, Black African
41
42

43 *I think especially as a woman from an ethnic background, if you're vocal, if you're passionate, [...], you can
44 be sort of labelled as aggressive or intimidating.*
45

46 Female, Black Caribbean
47
48
49

50 Even though BME students recognised that they may be subject to stereotyping, several remarked
51 that there was little they could do to either influence or change the biases or discrimination which
52 they may face.
53
54

55
56 A few participants highlighted the common misperception of South Asian medical students,
57 particularly those of Indian heritage, often held by clinicians and the public. Students stated that
58 people assumed that their choice to study medicine was to conform to their parents' wishes rather
59
60

1 than internal motivation and they were not sure whether such perceptions had affected their
2 performance but acknowledged that this was a stereotype that they frequently thought about and
3 tried to dissociate with:
4

5
6
7 *'Cause you're Asian, people [are] like you're doing Medicine because your parents forced you to.*

8
9 Female, Asian Indian
10

11
12 *I don't know if I'd say it's affected my performance but it's something you feel like you have to*
13 *defend. Like "Oh no, I actually want to do it" as opposed to my parents have sent me here. It's not*
14 *how it works.*

15
16
17 Female, Asian Indian
18

19 Cultural differences

20
21 Cultural differences added to BME students' sense of alienation with several describing how important
22 culture is to their sense of identity:
23

24
25
26 *[...] just as much as I take pride in the fact that I was born here [...], educated here, worked here, [...] made*
27 *friends here, studying here, will be successful here, at the same time I have connections to other parts of the*
28 *world and that connection is a part of the reason why I have this identity [...]*

29
30
31 Male, Arab
32

33
34 Cultural differences may also hinder relationships with their peers as BME students often encountered
35 different social experiences to their white counterparts. Many participants reported that medical
36 school social events were not environments in which they felt comfortable in and therefore were less
37 likely to socialise with their peers:
38

39
40
41 *I often find that the social events are often held in settings that I don't feel comfortable in because I don't*
42 *drink alcohol and the majority of the medical school culture is often associated with alcohol. I wish that more*
43 *events were more inclusive.*

44
45
46
47 Female, Black African
48

49
50
51 *[...] you wanna make friends and like if everybody is going out, [or] doing something that you don't really*
52 *feel hundred percent [about doing], you can't like get involved [...] to the max, it does kind of feel a little bit*
53 *isolating [...]*

54
55 Female, Black African
56
57
58
59
60

Experiences of racism

As evidenced throughout the narratives described previously, many BME students commonly experienced racism throughout their undergraduate training. Reports of overt racism were rare but nonetheless occurred. More common however, were daily experiences of microaggressions which impacted on their overall student experiences and lowered their self-confidence:

[...] one particular member of that [CBL] group [...] always undermined what I said. I don't know why, maybe he felt I wasn't as well-spoken, but I did get the impression that he didn't believe me because I'm of a different background to him or a different colour to him. For example, if I answered a question, he would totally disregard what I would say but then someone who was of the same colour as him would repeat the exact same thing as I said 2 minutes later and then he'll be "yes, yes, I agree with you". Another example would be, he would constantly check things, go on the internet, to see if I'm correct and I found that quite disheartening because he would only do this to me or my other classmate who was of colour.

Female, Black African

DISCUSSION

Statement of principal findings

In this small study of BME students' perspectives on barriers and facilitators to performance, most participants reported barriers that they felt impeded their learning and performance. Relationships with peers were considered important to learning, but participants found it difficult to fit in and felt isolated amongst their white peers. Difficulties in developing good relationships with peers were perceived to result partly from cultural differences, racism and bias. The perceived small number of BME students in each cohort also added to the difficulty of students forming relationships with their peers. Many participants' narratives indicated that they masked their identity in order to fit in and to avoid negative stereotyping. There was a general lack of trust in the institution's ability to support BME students, which led to some students' reluctance to access medical school support systems. Most students did not seek help from the institution, and many looked to their peers for support instead. Students highlighted the need to have clear, structural guidance on matters relating to BME students, such as how to report racial incidents. Relationships with staff and clinicians were also considered crucial to learning and performance. Participants narrated good teaching experiences in clinical environments, especially from clinicians from BME backgrounds. In contrast, several participants highlighted the lack of BME representation as well as the lack of cultural awareness amongst university staff. Patient experiences were widely considered as excellent learning opportunities, though at times exposed BME students to racism.

Strengths and weaknesses of the study

There are several strengths of this qualitative study. It is the first to explore the experiences of BME graduate-entry medical students. It provides further insights into the causes of the differential attainment gap; building upon previous research.^{2-4 10-13 20-22} The use of a qualitative design elicited in-depth and detailed narratives on participants' experiences. The use of focus groups encouraged candid responses and group discussion facilitated recollection and sharing of experiences. Multiple cohorts were also included within study, which elicited narrated experiences from students in each year of the GEM programme. In this group setting however, some participants may have felt inhibited to share personal experiences and therefore some sensitive topics may have been under-discussed. The themes which emerged from the data were dependent on the chosen sample, therefore, other themes may have arisen if different or more participants had taken part in the study. Furthermore, it is possible that participants may have had specific reasons for taking part, which could have influenced the thematic analysis. This was a small study of one institution thus it is not clear whether these findings would be replicated in other institutions.

Strengths and weaknesses in relation to other studies discussing important differences in results

Some of the findings from this study are concordant with those from other studies. The importance of relationships with staff and clinicians noted in this study has been highlighted as a barrier to performance in previous medical education research.²¹ Other studies have also identified that such relationships can be impeded by stereotyping as well as ethnic differences.^{12,22} Although there is some evidence to suggest that stereotype threat impedes performance of ethnic minority students,^{12,21} it has been relatively understudied in undergraduate medical education. Other studies have also identified that medical students tend to seek friendships and support from others in their own cultural group.^{22,23} Social networks and social capital in medical education have also been linked to student attainment, and put forward as explanations for the attainment gap.²¹⁻²³ While social networks based on ethnicity were noted in this study, participants also sought support from others in the wider BME group. The finding that relationships with other BME students were forced, in that the need to find allies among other BME students led to relationships that would not necessarily have occurred in other settings has not been identified in previous studies. These differences could be due to the small numbers of specific ethnic groups within each cohort at this West Midlands Medical School but nevertheless raise issues about the availability of support for BME students in cohorts with relatively small numbers of BME students. The finding that learning resources were not always shared with BME students by their white counterparts has been found in a study of students on a five-year programme.²² Students who were excluded from or exclude themselves from social networks with high levels of social capital missed out on resources important for success and attainment in medicine, particularly resources passed on from academics, clinicians and highly achieving students. Racism, including microaggressions, in international medical schools is well-known²⁴⁻²⁶ but previous research has not, to the best of our knowledge, considered the effects on UK BME medical students and their performance. Other studies have shown that individuals who experience racial microaggressions are more likely to exhibit negative mental health symptoms²⁷, suggesting associations between BME students' experiences of racism, their mental health and their successive performance. Identity masking, as reported in this study, is a well-known psychological phenomenon²⁸⁻³⁰ but it has not been studied in relation to BME students in medical education.

Meaning and possible explanations and implications

Medical students need an academic environment that will enable them to foster good working relationships with their peers, which can be difficult due to the fast-paced nature of the GEM course. The widespread belief that medical school staff had a lack of cultural awareness does not mean that staff were necessarily discriminatory or biased; however, our findings suggests that more may need to be done to increase awareness of culture, diversity and unconscious bias, as well as implementing anti-racist pedagogy within the medical curriculum.³¹ Increasing BME representation among medical

1 staff is likely to help students feel more supported and may also improve cultural understanding and
2 tolerance as well as increase self-confidence of BME students. This study also suggests that students
3 felt isolated and looked to their BME peers for support. Homophily, that is, the tendency for people
4 to form friendships with others similar to them, may be a possible explanation.^{22 23} It may explain, at
5 least in part, why BME students reported finding allies among other BME students and felt isolated
6 among a large cohort of white medical students, who themselves may be forming friendships with
7 people from similar ethnic groups. Woolf et al²³ has suggested that there may be 'hidden medical
8 schools' when medical students form social networks based on ethnicity and that these can impact on
9 student attainment. The widespread perception in this study that the cohorts were predominately
10 white does not mean that this was indeed the case; however, more could be done to ensure that each
11 cohort comprises of a wide range of students from different socio-economic, ethnic, cultural and
12 educational backgrounds. Social isolation could affect BME students' wellbeing and subsequently
13 performance. Such isolation could be due to a variety of reasons, but improving all students' cultural
14 competence may be an important way to improve student relationships. Findings from this and other
15 studies suggests that medical schools should review their diversity and anti-racism training for staff
16 and students. Institutions are in a position to ensure that BME students are well integrated amongst
17 their peers and need to consider how they can increase opportunities to create friendships among all
18 ethnic groups. While the responsibility for this lies with the institution, the BME student population
19 and networks could also be important to fostering a sense of community and increase the awareness
20 of diversity and culture within the medical school. A lack of structural guidance on the procedures for
21 reporting racial incidents or concerns was noted in this study and could dissuade students from
22 seeking student support thus affecting their wellbeing. Guidance on reporting and tackling racism
23 therefore needs to be developed. With narrations of experiences of racism throughout encounters
24 with peers, staff and patients, all medical students could be given the skills and encouragement to
25 challenge racism through bystander intervention training to minimise such occurrences.

26 **Unanswered questions and future research**

27 Further research is needed to determine the prevalence of the barriers identified in this research at
28 this West Midlands Medical School as well as other UK GEM courses. The student experiences of UK
29 BME graduate-entry medical students needs to be analysed and further researched as they are
30 different in terms of the demographics and life experiences to those on five-year programmes.
31 Research into medical schools' institutional processes for promoting diversity and cultural
32 competence among all students needs to be carried out. The findings reported in this paper provide
33 some suggestions for interventions, but these need to be developed, trialled and rigorously evaluated.

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3

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19 content. All authors approved of the final version to be published. N Morrison is the guarantor.
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29

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31 **Participants consent:** All participants gave informed consent.
32
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49 omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as originally planned (and, if relevant, registered)
50 have been explained.
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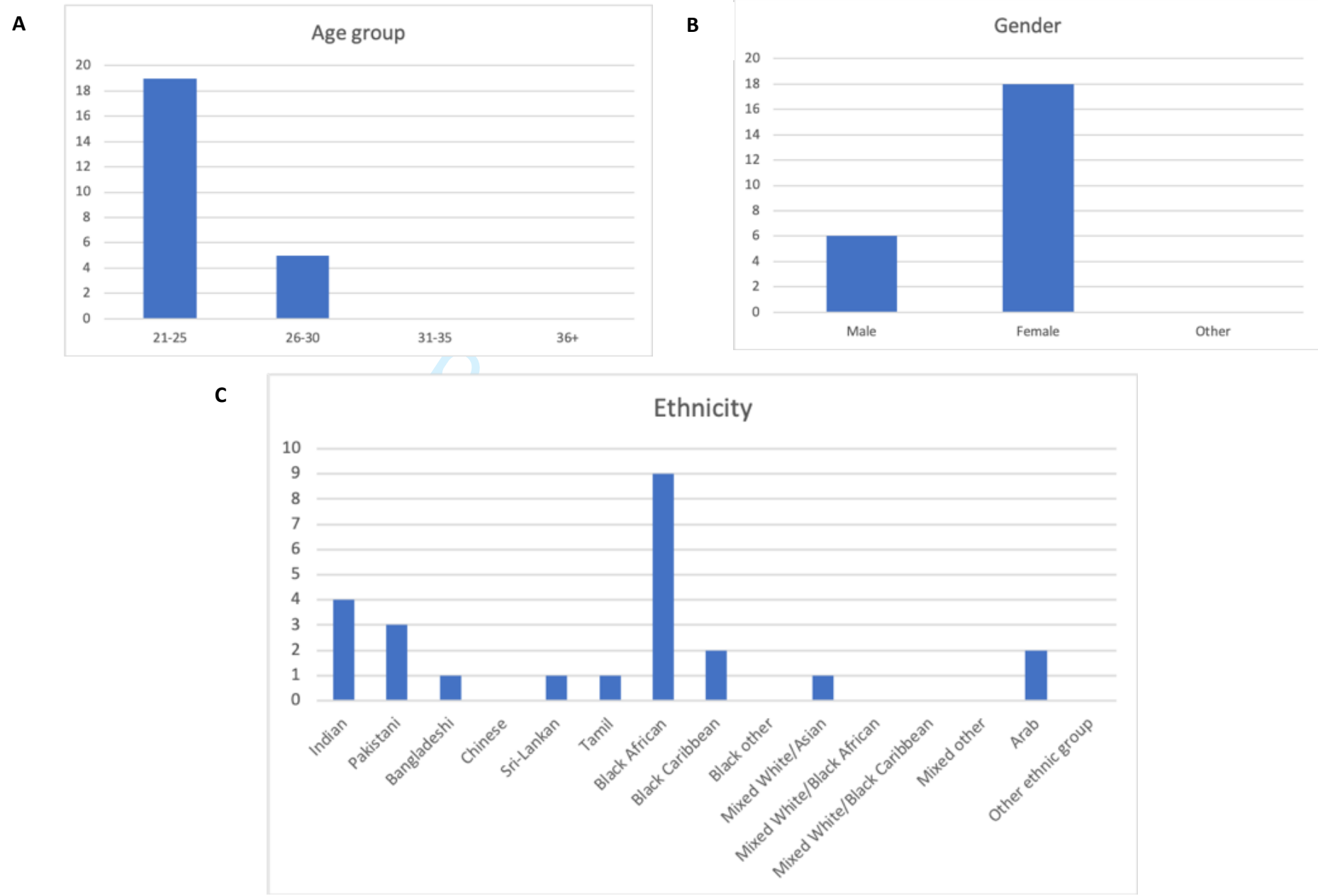


Figure 1 Participant demographics by characteristic. **A:** Participants by age group; **B:** Participants by gender; **C:** Participants by ethnicity.

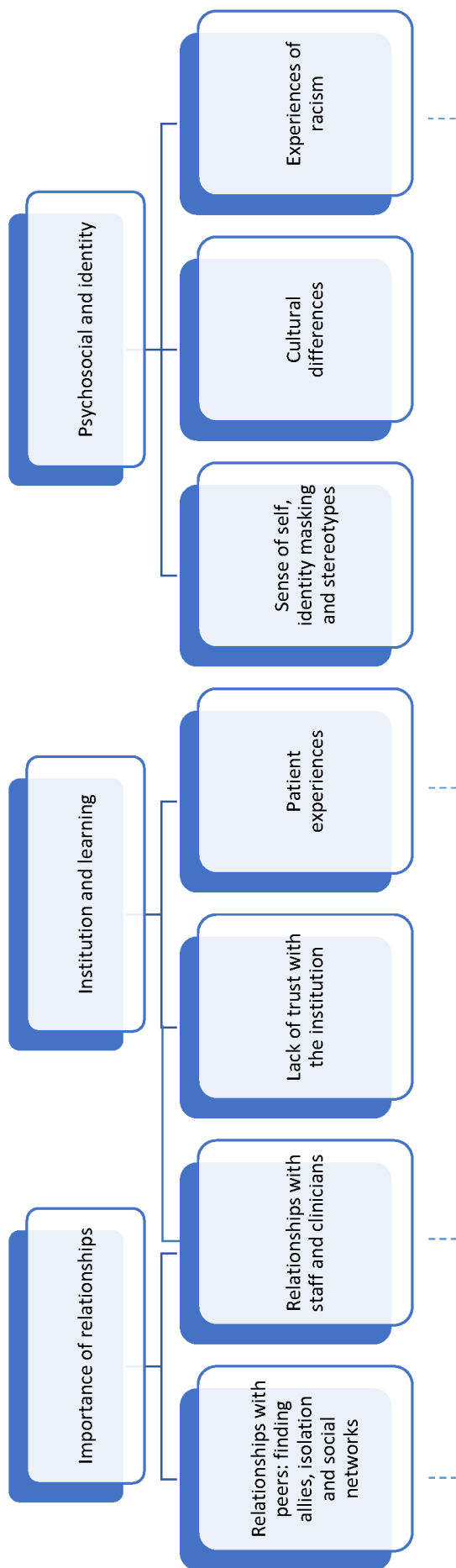


Figure 2 The main themes (top level) and subthemes (bottom level) describing the difficulties faced by BME graduate-entry medical students at a West Midlands Medical School that were perceived as barriers to performance. The subtheme 'relationships with staff and clinicians' was linked with two main themes 'importance of relationships' and 'institution and learning' as illustrated above. The subtheme 'experiences of racism' was linked to two subthemes within the main theme 'importance of relationships' and one subtheme in 'institution and learning' as illustrated by the dotted lines.

Reporting checklist for qualitative study.

Based on the SRQR guidelines.

Instructions to authors

Complete this checklist by entering the page numbers from your manuscript where readers will find each of the items listed below.

Your article may not currently address all the items on the checklist. Please modify your text to include the missing information. If you are certain that an item does not apply, please write "n/a" and provide a short explanation.

Upload your completed checklist as an extra file when you submit to a journal.

In your methods section, say that you used the SRQR reporting guidelines, and cite them as:

O'Brien BC, Harris IB, Beckman TJ, Reed DA, Cook DA. Standards for reporting qualitative research: a synthesis of recommendations. *Acad Med.* 2014;89(9):1245-1251.

	Reporting Item	Page Number
Title		
	#1 Concise description of the nature and topic of the study identifying the study as qualitative or indicating the approach (e.g. ethnography, grounded theory) or data collection methods (e.g. interview, focus group) is recommended	1
Abstract		
	#2 Summary of the key elements of the study using the abstract format of the intended publication; typically includes background, purpose, methods, results and conclusions	2
Introduction		
Problem formulation	#3 Description and significance of the problem / phenomenon studied: review of relevant theory and empirical work; problem statement	4
Purpose or research question	#4 Purpose of the study and specific objectives or questions	4

1 **Methods**

2			
3	Qualitative approach and	#5	Qualitative approach (e.g. ethnography, grounded theory, case
4	research paradigm		study, phenomenology, narrative research) and guiding theory if
5			appropriate; identifying the research paradigm (e.g.
6			postpositivist, constructivist / interpretivist) is also
7			recommended; rationale. The rationale should briefly discuss
8			the justification for choosing that theory, approach, method or
9			technique rather than other options available; the assumptions
10			and limitations implicit in those choices and how those choices
11			influence study conclusions and transferability. As appropriate
12			the rationale for several items might be discussed together.
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19	Researcher characteristics	#6	Researchers' characteristics that may influence the research,
20	and reflexivity		including personal attributes, qualifications / experience,
21			relationship with participants, assumptions and / or
22			presuppositions; potential or actual interaction between
23			researchers' characteristics and the research questions, approach,
24			methods, results and / or transferability
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29	Context	#7	Setting / site and salient contextual factors; rationale
30			
31	Sampling strategy	#8	How and why research participants, documents, or events were
32			selected; criteria for deciding when no further sampling was
33			necessary (e.g. sampling saturation); rationale
34			
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37	Ethical issues pertaining to	#9	Documentation of approval by an appropriate ethics review
38	human subjects		board and participant consent, or explanation for lack thereof;
39			other confidentiality and data security issues
40			
41			
42	Data collection methods	#10	Types of data collected; details of data collection procedures
43			including (as appropriate) start and stop dates of data collection
44			and analysis, iterative process, triangulation of sources /
45			methods, and modification of procedures in response to
46			evolving study findings; rationale
47			
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50	Data collection instruments	#11	Description of instruments (e.g. interview guides,
51	and technologies		questionnaires) and devices (e.g. audio recorders) used for data
52			collection; if / how the instruments(s) changed over the course
53			of the study
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57	Units of study	#12	Number and relevant characteristics of participants, documents,
58			or events included in the study; level of participation (could be
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reported in results)

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3	Data processing	#13	6
4		Methods for processing data prior to and during analysis,	
5		including transcription, data entry, data management and	
6		security, verification of data integrity, data coding, and	
7		anonymisation / deidentification of excerpts	
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9	Data analysis	#14	6
10		Process by which inferences, themes, etc. were identified and	
11		developed, including the researchers involved in data analysis;	
12		usually references a specific paradigm or approach; rationale	
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14	Techniques to enhance	#15	6
15	trustworthiness	Techniques to enhance trustworthiness and credibility of data	
16		analysis (e.g. member checking, audit trail, triangulation);	
17		rationale	
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20	Results/findings		
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22	Syntheses and	#16	7-14
23	interpretation	Main findings (e.g. interpretations, inferences, and themes);	
24		might include development of a theory or model, or integration	
25		with prior research or theory	
26			
27	Links to empirical data	#17	7-14
28		Evidence (e.g. quotes, field notes, text excerpts, photographs) to	
29		substantiate analytic findings	
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31	Discussion		
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34	Intergration with prior	#18	15-17
35	work, implications,	Short summary of main findings; explanation of how findings	
36	transferability and	and conclusions connect to, support, elaborate on, or challenge	
37	contribution(s) to the field	conclusions of earlier scholarship; discussion of scope of	
38		application / generalizability; identification of unique	
39		contributions(s) to scholarship in a discipline or field	
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42	Limitations	#19	15-16
43		Trustworthiness and limitations of findings	
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45	Other		
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47	Conflicts of interest	#20	18
48		Potential sources of influence of perceived influence on study	
49		conduct and conclusions; how these were managed	
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51	Funding	#21	18
52		Sources of funding and other support; role of funders in data	
53		collection, interpretation and reporting	

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BMJ Open

Student perspectives on barriers to performance for Black and Minority Ethnic graduate-entry medical students: a qualitative study in a West Midlands medical school

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Primary Subject Heading:	Medical education and training
Secondary Subject Heading:	Qualitative research
Keywords:	MEDICAL EDUCATION & TRAINING, QUALITATIVE RESEARCH, undergraduate, diversity, ethnicity, Minority Groups

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1 Student perspectives on barriers to performance for Black and
2 Minority Ethnic graduate-entry medical students: a qualitative study
3 in a West Midlands medical school
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35 **Subject area:** Research

36 **Keywords:** undergraduate, medical education, qualitative research, diversity, ethnicity
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39 **MeSH terms:**

40 Cultural diversity

41 Focus Groups

42 Education, Medical, Undergraduate

43 Humans

44 Minority Groups

45 Learning

46 Qualitative Research

47 Racism

48 Students, Medical

49 Schools, Medical

50 Stereotyping

51 United Kingdom
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57 **Word count:** 6056
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ABSTRACT

Objective: To explore graduate-entry medical students experiences of undergraduate training in the context of academic underperformance of medical students from ethnic minority backgrounds.

Design: Qualitative study using semi-structured focus groups

Setting: A West Midlands medical school

Participants: 24 graduate-entry MBChB students were recruited using volunteer and snowball sampling; all students self-identified as being from Black and Minority ethnic (BME) backgrounds.

Results: BME students reported facing a range of difficulties, throughout their undergraduate medical training, that they felt impeded their learning and performance. Their relationships with staff and clinicians, though also identified as facilitators to learning, were also perceived to have hindered progress, as many students felt that a lack of BME representation and lack of understanding of cultural differences among staff impacted their experience. Students also reported a lack of trust in the institution's ability to support BME students, with many not seeking support. Students' narratives indicated that they had to mask their identity to fit in amongst their peers and to avoid negative stereotyping. Although rare, students faced overt racism from their peers and from patients. Many students reported feelings of isolation, reduced self-confidence and low self-esteem.

Conclusion: BME students in this study reported experiencing relationship issues with other students, academic and clinical staff, lack of trust in the institution and some racist events. Although it is not clear from this small study of one institution whether these findings would be replicated in other institutions, they nevertheless highlight important issues to be considered by the institution concerned and other institutions. These findings suggest that all stakeholders of graduate-entry undergraduate medical education should reflect on the current institutional practices intended to improve student-peer and student-staff relationships. Reviewing current proposals intended to diversify student and staff populations as well as evaluating guidance on tackling racism is likely to be beneficial.

ARTICLE SUMMARY

Strengths and limitations of this study

- This is the first study to explore graduate-entry BME medical students' experiences of medical education. It provides valuable insights into the causes of Black and Minority Ethnic UK

1 undergraduates' lower performance in medical assessments and provides a basis on which
2 interventions to reduce the differential attainment can be developed and evaluated.
3

- 4 • This study has a small sample but multiple cohorts participated in this study; broadening the
5 scope of narrated experiences and the variety of views.
6
- 7 • The focus group methodology allowed candid responses and group discussion facilitated
8 recollection of experiences but some participants may have felt inhibited to share personal
9 experiences and therefore some sensitive topics may have been underdiscussed.
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- 11 • It must be taken into consideration that the emergent themes from the data were dependent on
12 the chosen sample; other themes may have arisen if different or more participants had taken
13 part in the study.
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For peer review only

INTRODUCTION

In higher education, students from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) backgrounds in the United Kingdom (UK) have been reported to underperform academically compared with their White counterparts.¹ Medicine is no different; a number of studies in the UK have reported underperformance at undergraduate and postgraduate level by BME medical students and trained doctors.^{2 3 4} Similar findings have been reported in the United States⁵ and the Netherlands.⁶ This persistent difference in performance between ethnic groups is known as the differential attainment gap and poses a huge issue for medical education and the medical profession. Evidence suggests that this attainment gap exists throughout various undergraduate and postgraduate medical assessments including machine-marked written examinations and objective structured clinical examinations.^{4 7-9} Although the differential attainment gap has been widely documented, the reasons for it remain unclear.^{2 10 11}

Current literature findings suggest that ethnic stereotypes may contribute to BME medical students' underperformance, yet overt discrimination has not been evidenced.¹² Furthermore, a longitudinal study and analysis of UK medical students concluded that the ethnic differences in performance were not due to psychological or demographic factors.³ A 2017 independent review panel at Cardiff University, also highlighted that BME medical students have a different student experience to their White counterparts.¹³ The lack of BME staff within medical schools; difficulty in "fitting in" and racial stereotyping have all emerged as themes experienced by BME students.^{12 13}

Previous studies^{3 4 7} have focused on undergraduate medical students on five or six-year programmes. To the best of our knowledge, no published studies have specifically explored the potential causes of the differential attainment gap in graduate-entry medicine (GEM). The UK introduction of 4-year GEM courses began in 2000, following the 1997 UK Medical Workforce Standing Advisory Committee recommendation to diversify the medical student population.¹⁴ As GEM currently accounts for approximately 10% of all UK medical programmes¹⁴, it is important to report the differential attainment gap amongst GEM courses and examine the experiences of BME graduate-entry medical students as part of a portfolio of research into differential attainment among medical students.

This paper reports data on a study of graduate-entry medical students in a West Midlands Medical School. Preliminary unpublished data¹⁵ suggests that for students in this medical school, over the last four years across all assessment formats, all cohorts at some point show statistically significant differences in attainment between BME and White students, with BME students having lower average percentage point scores than White students. This study therefore aims to build upon previous

1 research, examining the potential reasons for underperformance by BME graduate-entry medical
2 students; exploring their experiences of undergraduate medical training and their perceptions of
3 barriers and facilitators to performance.
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8 METHODS

10 Design

11 A social constructivist¹⁶ approach using qualitative methods was adopted to gain understanding of
12 medical students' experiences and their perspectives on barriers to performance. Data were gathered
13 in focus groups throughout November 2018, using a semi-structured interview schedule. Two
14 encrypted audio recorders were utilised for data capture. Focus group participants received a
15 maximum of two emails including one email reminder.
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23 Sampling strategy and recruitment

24 The sampling frame was all students in each of the four cohorts of the MBChB course at a West
25 Midlands Medical School; all chosen because of their varying experience of medical training as well as
26 academic examinations. The sampling frame was used to recruit participants who self-identified as
27 BME. This group encompassed, but was not limited to, those who identified as being from African,
28 Asian, Arab or Caribbean descent. Participants were eligible to participate if they were either in the
29 clinical phases of the MBChB (Years 2-4) or resitting the pre-clinical phase of training (Year 1). Other
30 Year 1 students were excluded from participating as they had only been on the course for two months
31 and therefore had limited experience of the MBChB course.
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40 Participants were recruited in four main ways: administrative staff emailed invitations to all medical
41 students asking for eligible volunteers to register their interest to participate; invitations to express
42 interest in taking part were posted on the official University MBChB Facebook cohort group pages;
43 participants in the early focus groups encouraged other eligible students to register their interest to
44 participate; and participants were encouraged to bring any eligible students with them on the day. All
45 students with an interest in the study were provided with a participation information leaflet and a
46 consent form. Twenty-six students registered interest and accepted the invitation to participate. Four
47 focus groups, each of 4-7 multi-cohort students, were then scheduled throughout November 2018,
48 based on participant availability. Focus groups took place in a private room at the University. Owing
49 to last minute timetable changes, two volunteers were unable to attend any of the focus group
50 sessions.
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Ethical approval

Ethical approval was obtained from The University of Warwick Biomedical and Scientific Research Ethics Sub-Committee in August 2018.

The study involved collection and analysis of the special category of ethnicity. To ensure confidentiality, data security and compliance with the General Data Protection Regulations, all data were anonymised and held only by NM. All participants confirmed on their consent form that they agreed to keep confidential the identities of focus group participants and to maintain the confidentiality of the information discussed during the focus group.

Data collection methods

NM (Black British, female, graduate-entry undergraduate medical student with quantitative and qualitative research methods training) moderated each focus group. At each group, participants were randomly assigned a number to ease anonymisation during transcription. Participants were subsequently asked to self-report their ethnicity using the 2011 UK census categories.¹⁷

Many participants were acquainted with each other through enrolment on the MBChB course. At the outset of each focus group, participants were briefed on the purpose of each group, thus creating a comfortable, permissive environment; encouraging participants to talk freely.¹⁸

Throughout the discussion, first-hand narratives were encouraged, and participants were prompted to clarify and expand their answers. Participants were encouraged to respond to others' contributions and discuss similar or contrasting accounts if appropriate. Focus groups ranged from sixty minutes to three hours (average 111 minutes).

No attempt was made to exclude friends, with the aim that some collective recollection of events may be captured and on the basis that participants would be more likely to raise sensitive topics if accompanied by friends.¹⁸

Data processing and analysis

Data was audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim using Microsoft Word and Olympus Sonority v.1.4.7.

Thematic analysis¹⁹ was adopted using Braun and Clarke's six phase framework, shown in Table 1.²⁰ NM, MM (Associate Professor in Health Sciences) and CMB (Associate Professor in Health Sciences) read all transcripts individually to allow/increase familiarisation with the data. QSR NVivo v.12²¹

software was used to assist with categorisation and management of the data. Following thorough review of all transcripts, inductive codes were generated and agreed by the team. A number of themes were identified from the coded data. The team discussed the findings and collectively agreed an initial coding framework. NM coded the first three transcripts independently using the initial coding framework, which was then refined after further discussion. Following further review, a final coding framework was adopted, which was subsequently used to code the entire data set. The Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research (SRQR) guidelines were adopted.²²

Step 1	Become familiar with the data
Step 2	Generate initial codes
Step 3	Search for themes
Step 4	Review themes
Step 5	Define themes
Step 6	Write-up

Table 1: Braun & Clarke's six-phase framework for doing a thematic analysis

RESULTS

Participants

Twenty-four medical students participated in the study. Participant demographics are shown in figure 1. Participants held a minimum of an upper second-class honours undergraduate degree (or overseas equivalent). Any participant with a lower second-class undergraduate degree held either a Master's or a Doctoral qualification. Twenty-three out of the twenty-four participants were UK home students schooled in the UK.

Figure 1 Participant demographics by characteristic. **A:** Participants by age group; **B:** Participants by gender; **C:** Participants by ethnicity.

Perceived barriers to performance

All narratives highlighted students' views on barriers and facilitators to performance during undergraduate medical training. The data was categorised into three main causal themes:

- **Importance of relationships** – exploring the relationships amongst students and their peers and amongst students and staff. This was particularly important as poor relationships affect the learning experience and lead to disengagement, lack of motivation and withdrawal.²³
- **Institution and learning** – examining how the students interact with the institution and their learning opportunities, such as factors which may generate limitations and barriers to learning and attainment e.g. patient encounters and poor interactions with clinicians.

- **Psychosocial and identity** – psychological, societal and cultural factors that affect students' learning experience, engagement and attainment; particularly stereotyping and racism and cultural differences.

Within the three main themes, seven subthemes were identified that were perceived to cause barriers to performance (figure 2).

Figure 2 The main themes (top level) and subthemes (bottom level) describing the difficulties faced by BME graduate-entry medical students at a West Midlands medical school that were perceived as barriers to performance. The subtheme 'relationships with staff and clinicians' was linked with two main themes 'importance of relationships' and 'institution and learning' as illustrated above. The subtheme 'experiences of racism' was linked to two subthemes within the main theme 'importance of relationships' and one subtheme in 'institution and learning' as illustrated by the dotted lines.

Relationship with peers: finding allies, isolation and social networks

Peers and staff were identified as both positive and negative influences on performance. Peers were allies who provided solidarity, as well as academic and emotional support. The majority of participants had a diverse range of friends, however, many noted that their closest friends at medical school were other students from a BME background:

My friendship group mostly consists of people of colour. I don't know if it's something I generally gravitate towards. They are also people who look or dress similarly to me.

Female, Asian Pakistani

I find that because we're all minorities, you [...] stick together and the more you get to know each other it's like we're actually quite different but [...] there is no one else that you relate to really so you just kind of stick with them.

Female, Black African

Participants explained they were drawn towards finding allies in other ethnic minority students, despite not necessarily having common interests or hobbies. Such alliances helped some students to overcome their feelings of isolation and a few students said they gained confidence by having these friendship groups:

where I'm from back home [...] my school was like all ethnic minorities so I was only friends with people that did the same things that I did, like the same things I did, whereas here it's more like you want to stick with people are similar to you, even though you don't necessarily like the same things you do, it's just because you have that common ground; the basis of what you both are is similar so you relate to each other more and than with a [White] person, just because you are an ethnic minority.

Female, Black African

1 *[...] in my first year, in my Friday [group] sessions, I've had no ethnic minorities, so I tend to be by myself just*
2 *because I didn't feel I had someone, like an ally [...] but this year, it's like I have a few more people [...] and*
3 *it kind of gives you a boost [...]*

4
5 Female, Black African
6
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8 Many also remarked they felt more comfortable amongst other ethnic minorities as they shared a
9 common understanding, specifically, in appreciating cultural differences and acknowledging bias or
10 discrimination often encountered by minority groups:
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15 *I'm not really sure how to explain it but [...] there are certain things I may have faced in my life, which other*
16 *ethnic minorities would understand and those who aren't an ethnic minority wouldn't really get because it's*
17 *not something they've experienced. Maybe it's something they've heard about but not necessarily something*
18 *they've felt themselves.*

19
20
21 Female, Black Caribbean
22
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24 Most BME students reported feeling isolated, explaining that each cohort consisted of predominantly
25 White students. Students felt that they were not represented within the student body. Many who
26 came from multicultural cities such as London and Birmingham, found it difficult to adapt and
27 struggled to fit in what they perceived to be a predominantly White student population. Many
28 participants also reported that they did not feel "good enough" to be at medical school:
29
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31

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33
34 *[...] I constantly feel like I don't deserve to be here [...] a lot of the time I feel so different [...] I have that*
35 *constant feeling that I don't deserve to be here [...] because I don't fit in with what your typical medic does*
36 *or what their background is [...]*

37
38
39 Female, Black African
40
41

42 *[...] I did feel a little bit lesser than my non-ethnic minority counterparts. I felt like, oh maybe, I don't deserve*
43 *to be here as much as they do [...] It was something that played on my mind a little bit.*

44
45 Female, Black Caribbean
46
47

48 Several students felt a sense of invisibility amongst their White peers as they commented that many
49 White peers confused them with other ethnic minority students. Additionally, participants explained
50 that many White students often did not learn the correct pronunciation of their names, often trying
51 to shorten or anglicize it without their permission. Many found this very frustrating and impeding to
52 building new relationships with their peers:
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58 *Yeah, I'm not sure when people are talking to me if they know who they're actually talking to*

59 Female, Asian Indian
60

1
2 *I just hate it so much because like my name is, it's not even hard. It's literally, you say it the way it's spelt but*
3 *no one can get it. I feel like no one personally makes the effort to get it and it's like I refuse to let them shorten*
4 *my name until I know you can get it because I feel like, it's just like a basic sign of respect to just get it. It's*
5 *just so frustrating because it's like, it's not even hard.*

6
7
8 Female, Black African
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10
11 Many participants described the importance of utilising social networks to increase academic
12 performance highlighting that social networks provided access to clinical learning opportunities as
13 well as a number of learning resources. Both were regarded as essential to learning and increasing
14 performance. Students remarked that they felt disadvantaged as they were less likely to acquire
15 resources available to their White counterparts that facilitated learning and achievement:
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21 *It does make a huge difference. It's sad but it does make a difference [...] having those links, those*
22 *connections, being in the right Facebook groups [...] helped me a lot.*

23
24
25 Female, Black African
26

27
28 *I've never been someone to really heavily depend on friends when it comes to like exams or whatever, but*
29 *I've realised since starting med school if I didn't have friends with me, I probably would not be in this position.*

30
31 Female, Asian Indian
32

33
34
35 *If you're not in the right friendship groups or Facebook groups, you've got less access to peer resources [...]*
36 *Being BME and isolated, you're more likely to be disadvantaged.*

37
38 Female, Black African
39

40 41 Relationship with staff and clinicians

42
43 Relationships with medical school staff and clinicians were perceived as important to learning and
44 performance. At best, clinicians developed students' knowledge, clinical skills and confidence by
45 providing extra learning opportunities and giving constructive feedback. Participants reported that
46 overall, they received good teaching from clinical staff, though, all said that they noted a better
47 experience with clinicians from BME backgrounds:
48
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53 *I've had bedside teaching from a member of staff who is from a similar background to me. I think sometimes*
54 *if they are from a similar background, they work you harder and they are more critical, which is good as it's*
55 *more helpful. They have a higher expectation of you as they set the bar slightly higher which is interesting.*

56
57
58 Female, Asian Pakistani
59
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1 I find it quite the opposite because most of the senior Consultants at the hospital are Asian men and they are
2 very paternal towards me which I'm very grateful for. Like if that's the only privilege I had, then I'm taking
3 it. So, they've been very nice, they've been very nurturing, they've given me all the attention I need which is
4 a lot. [...] they've been praising me [...] which has been motivating and you feel less other in the hospital
5 setting.
6
7

8 Female, Asian Bangladeshi
9

10
11 In contrast, many participants felt that most staff based in the medical school did not appreciate the
12 cultural differences amongst students, reporting that several lecturers made culturally insensitive or
13 inappropriate comments. Some students said that more effort should be made to ensure staff
14 members were culturally trained, though, one participant felt cultural training would not suffice to
15 fully understand the challenges they faced:
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21 [...] as much as you want to say cultural training will make a difference, unless you're from an ethnic minority
22 background, [...] you're not gonna empathise with the situations.
23

24 Female, Asian Bangladeshi
25

26
27 Also highlighted was the lack of BME representation amongst medical school staff. Representation
28 was considered important as many felt isolated amongst their peers. One participant said they were
29 less likely to report difficulties or seek support from medical school staff due to the lack of BME staff:
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34 More representation is needed, not just Black [lecturers] but Asian and Arab as well. I think that would be
35 quite good.
36

37 Female, Black African
38

39
40 At the medical school [...] there's not enough people in the echelons of the faculty staff who [...] I can relate
41 to, so I don't think there's anyone necessarily that I would go for support [...]
42
43

44 Female, Asian Bangladeshi
45

46 Lack of trust with the institution

47
48 Many participants felt that the institution did not appreciate or understand the challenges they faced
49 throughout their undergraduate career. Students were not clear on the procedures for reporting racial
50 incidents or concerns and none were able to identify a specific member of staff who they felt confident
51 in investigating such matters. This lack of structural guidance was often perceived as the medical
52 school not caring about the difficulties faced by BME students and so students were less likely to
53 report any incidents to the institution:
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1 *It's again - what's going to be done about it? And then it's kind of like it's a word of mouth type thing so ok,*
2 *I've said that this person has said this, but ok you then talk to that person and the person says no I didn't say*
3 *that, I said something else and then what?*

4
5 Female, Black Caribbean
6
7

8 *[...] so conversations I've had with other people of ethnic minority backgrounds is that they feel like faculty*
9 *staff here, don't have enough cultural training either so they won't really understand the impact of say the*
10 *n-word or other statements which have been made towards ethnic minority students or about ethnic*
11 *minority students. So, they are not [going to], or they won't be able to support us in that way basically.*

12
13
14 Female, Asian Bangladeshi
15
16

17 Patient experiences

18
19 Experiences with patients were perceived as facilitators to learning as students were able to apply
20 their theoretical knowledge to clinical practice. Participants reported that most patients were open to
21 BME students practising their clinical skills with them. In contrast, some patient experiences were
22 perceived as impeding learning and performance as they dented students' confidence and exposed
23 them to biases. Overt racism was occasionally reported by participants and many reported
24 experiencing microaggressions as well as witnessing microaggressions against others:
25
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31 *So, the first ever patient I spoke to at med school was an elderly lady and she wouldn't talk to me because I*
32 *was "foreign". Erm, which was really embarrassing because I was asking her questions from a pro forma*
33 *that we were given and she was telling me that I was being offensive to her [...] and she made such a big*
34 *massive palaver about it and then when my White male colleague went and spoke to her, she was happy as*
35 *Larry, answering all questions even though they were exactly word for word the same questions that I was*
36 *asking [...] I [then] went home that day and cried because I thought that's what my experience of medicine*
37 *is going to be throughout my career.*

38
39
40
41
42 Female, Asian Bangladeshi
43
44

45 *I was at a hospital on a ward where there were a lot of older White patients and I took about 3 histories and*
46 *every one of those patients asked me where I was really from. I then had to explain to them that I was born*
47 *here and they were like "wow, you were really born here" and then it got to the point where I joked with one*
48 *of the patients and told them that I was born in my parents' home country and my mother gave birth to me*
49 *in a hut. I was so angry and fed up of having to explain that I'm from here.*

50
51
52
53 Female, Black African
54

55 *Last year, a patient said "I passed for White" [...] They said it in a way where they thought they came across*
56 *positive – like being White is positive. Erm, and it's only when they heard my name, they were like "Oh" [...] then they automatically linked me to a certain religion. [...] I was shocked.*

57
58
59
60 Male, Asian Pakistani

Sense of self, identity masking and stereotypes

Most participants described having to change or hide their natural personalities in order to conform to the social groups at medical school. As participants felt that each cohort predominantly consisted of White students, there was sense of responsibility among BME students to represent their ethnic group in a positive light. They also commented on the perceived need to monitor and moderate their accents, their expression of emotions and the content of their speech:

[...] you feel like they're going to base all of their opinions on you, so sometimes you have to sort of water down some of the opinions you have or [...] you have to kind of force yourself to make yourself more agreeable to people just because you're aware that [...] they are basing their opinion of Muslim people on me [...]

Female, Asian Bangladeshi

You just [...] don't know how people are going to take you [...] a lot of the time it is like [...] you're the voice of the people [...] so what they see with you is what they want assume for everyone and it might be that they've met someone else that is like you, [and] maybe they didn't have a good experience. I don't want to create something they'll causes them to think oh this is how [...] Black people are.

Female, Black African

Many students talked about the pressure of knowing that they may be subject to negative stereotyping, whereby over-generalised negative beliefs about their ethnic group may be applied to them. One student explained that she actively tried to avoid negative stereotyping. Some students said they were subject to stereotyping and remarked that incorrect assumptions were frequently made about them. Participants reported that wrong assumptions negatively affected their relationships with peers and staff, implying that stereotyping could impede good educational relationships with peers and medical school staff:

Also, I found someone here described me as intimidating which [...] throughout my entire life, I've never been called intimidating, people would say that I'm soft [...] until I came here, I've never been called intimidating.

Female, Black Caribbean

That's actually one of my biggest fears because I know myself. I'm not intimidating but I know that people tend to [label you as intimidating] when you're passionate [...] so I always try to be extra nice just to avoid that because I think it's quite hurtful to call someone intimidating.

Female, Black African

1 *I think especially as a woman from an ethnic background, if you're vocal, if you're passionate, [...], you can*
2 *be sort of labelled as aggressive or intimidating.*

3
4 Female, Black Caribbean
5
6

7 Even though BME students recognised that they may be subject to stereotyping, several remarked
8 that there was little they could do to either influence or change the biases or discrimination which
9 they may face.
10
11

12
13 A few participants highlighted the common misperception of South Asian medical students,
14 particularly those of Indian heritage, often held by clinicians and the public. Students stated that
15 people assumed that their choice to study medicine was to conform to their parents' wishes rather
16 than internal motivation and they were not sure whether such perceptions had affected their
17 performance but acknowledged that this was a stereotype that they frequently thought about and
18 tried to dissociate with:
19
20
21
22
23

24
25 *'Cause you're Asian, people [are] like you're doing Medicine because your parents forced you to.*

26
27 Female, Asian Indian
28
29

30 *I don't know if I'd say it's affected my performance but it's something you feel like you have to*
31 *defend. Like "Oh no, I actually want to do it" as opposed to my parents have sent me here. It's not*
32 *how it works.*
33
34

35 Female, Asian Indian
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38 Cultural differences

39 Cultural differences added to BME students' sense of alienation with several describing how important
40 culture is to their sense of identity:
41
42

43
44 *[...] just as much as I take pride in the fact that I was born here [...], educated here, worked here, [...] made*
45 *friends here, studying here, will be successful here, at the same time I have connections to other parts of the*
46 *world and that connection is a part of the reason why I have this identity [...]*
47
48

49 Male, Arab
50
51

52 Cultural differences may also hinder relationships with their peers as BME students often encountered
53 different social experiences to their White counterparts. Many participants reported that medical
54 school social events were not environments in which they felt comfortable in and therefore were less
55 likely to socialise with their peers:
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1 I often find that the social events are often held in settings that I don't feel comfortable in because I don't
2 drink alcohol and the majority of the medical school culture is often associated with alcohol. I wish that more
3 events were more inclusive.
4

5 Female, Black African
6
7

8 [...] you wanna make friends and like if everybody is going out, [or] doing something that you don't really
9 feel hundred percent [about doing], you can't like get involved [...] to the max, it does kind of feel a little bit
10 isolating [...]
11

12 Female, Black African
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14
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16 Experiences of racism

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18 As evidenced throughout the narratives described previously, many BME students commonly
19 experienced racism throughout their undergraduate training. Reports of overt racism were rare but
20 nonetheless occurred. More common however, were daily experiences of microaggressions which
21 impacted on their overall student experiences and lowered their self-confidence:
22
23
24

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26
27 [...] one particular member of that [CBL] group [...] always undermined what I said. I don't know why, maybe
28 he felt I wasn't as well-spoken, but I did get the impression that he didn't believe me because I'm of a different
29 background to him or a different colour to him. For example, if I answered a question, he would totally
30 disregard what I would say but then someone who was of the same colour as him would repeat the exact
31 same thing as I said 2 minutes later and then he'll be "yes, yes, I agree with you". Another example would
32 be, he would constantly check things, go on the internet, to see if I'm correct and I found that quite
33 disheartening because he would only do this to me or my other classmate who was of colour.
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38 Female, Black African
39
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41 DISCUSSION

42 Statement of principal findings

43
44 In this small study of BME students' perspectives on barriers and facilitators to performance, most
45 participants reported barriers that they felt impeded their learning and performance. Relationships
46 with peers were considered important to learning, but participants found it difficult to fit in and felt
47 isolated amongst their White peers. Difficulties in developing good relationships with peers were
48 perceived to result partly from cultural differences, racism and bias. The perceived small number of
49 BME students in each cohort also added to the difficulty of students forming relationships with their
50 peers. Many participants' narratives indicated that they masked their identity in order to fit in and to
51 avoid negative stereotyping. There was a general lack of trust in the institution's ability to support
52 BME students, which led to some students' reluctance to access medical school support systems. Most
53 students did not seek help from the institution, and many looked to their peers for support instead.
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1 Students highlighted the need to have clear, structural guidance on matters relating to BME students,
2 such as how to report racial incidents. Relationships with staff and clinicians were also considered
3 crucial to learning and performance. Participants narrated good teaching experiences in clinical
4 environments, especially from clinicians from BME backgrounds. Several participants highlighted the
5 lack of BME representation amongst medical school staff as well as the lack of cultural awareness.
6 Patient experiences were widely considered as excellent learning opportunities, though at times
7 exposed BME students to racism.
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14 **Strengths and weaknesses of the study**

15 There are several strengths of this qualitative study. It is the first to explore the experiences of BME
16 graduate-entry medical students. It provides further insights into the causes of the differential
17 attainment gap; building upon previous research.^{2-4 10-13 23-25} The use of a qualitative design elicited in-
18 depth and detailed narratives on participants' experiences. The use of focus groups encouraged
19 candid responses and group discussion facilitated recollection and sharing of experiences. Multiple
20 cohorts were also included within this study, which elicited narrated experiences from students in
21 each year of the GEM programme. In this group setting, some participants may have felt inhibited to
22 share personal experiences, while others may have amplified their experiences, and therefore some
23 sensitive topics may have been under-discussed. The themes which emerged from the data were
24 dependent on the chosen sample, therefore, other themes may have arisen if different or more
25 participants had taken part in the study. Furthermore, it is possible that participants may have had
26 specific reasons for taking part, which could have influenced the themes that arose in the focus
27 groups. The ethnicity and gender of the researcher as well as the researcher's position as a fellow
28 medical student may have affected participants' discussion of certain topics. Participants' perception
29 of the researcher may have aided participants to feel more comfortable in discussing the taboo of
30 ethnicity²⁶, enabling discussion of personal and sensitive topics. On the other hand, some participants
31 may have found it difficult to discuss some topics in greater depth with a fellow student. Whilst the
32 impact is not quantifiable, and no participant stated that they did not wish to speak further on a
33 subject due to NM's characteristics, it is nevertheless a possibility. It is also possible that the
34 researcher's own experiences of medical education may have influenced the interpretation of the
35 data. For most qualitative studies, generalisability is an inherent difficulty.^{12 27} As this was a small study
36 of one institution, it is not clear whether these findings would be replicated in other institutions. The
37 aim of this study was not to provide generalisations, but to provide a preliminary exploration of the
38 topic, with a view to promote reflection by academic staff, clinicians, students and other stakeholders,
39 and inform future research. It is important to acknowledge that BME students in this study were not
40 an homogenous group: as individuals, they had unique identities as well as different ethnic, cultural,
41 socio-economic and educational backgrounds. This study was not able to examine how these intersect
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1 to shape individual students' experiences of medical education. Nevertheless, the intersectionality
2 between ethnicity, gender, education and disability has been shown to shape attainment in
3 medicine.^{28 29}
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7 **Strengths and weaknesses in relation to other studies discussing important differences in results**

9 Some of the findings from this study are concordant with those from other studies. The importance
10 of relationships with staff and clinicians noted in this study has been highlighted as a barrier to
11 performance in previous medical education research.²⁴ Other studies have also identified that such
12 relationships can be impeded by stereotyping as well as ethnic differences.^{12 25} Although there is some
13 evidence to suggest that stereotype threat impedes performance of ethnic minority students,^{12 25} it
14 has been relatively understudied in undergraduate medical education. Other studies have also
15 identified that medical students tend to seek friendships and support from others in their own cultural
16 group.^{25 30} Social networks and social capital in medical education have also been linked to student
17 attainment, and put forward as possible reasons for the attainment gap.^{24 25 30} While social networks
18 based on ethnicity were noted in this study, participants also sought support from others in the wider
19 BME group. The finding that most BME students described the need to find allies among other BME
20 students which led to relationships that would not necessarily have occurred in other settings has not
21 been identified in previous studies. These differences could be due to the small numbers of specific
22 ethnic groups within each cohort at this West Midlands medical school but nevertheless raise issues
23 about the availability of support for BME students in cohorts with relatively small numbers of BME
24 students. The finding that learning resources were not always shared with BME students by their
25 White counterparts has been found in a study of students on a five-year programme.²⁵ Students who
26 were excluded from or exclude themselves from social networks with high levels of social capital
27 missed out on resources important for success and attainment in medicine, particularly resources
28 passed on from academics, clinicians and highly achieving students. Racism, including
29 microaggressions, in international medical schools is well-known³¹⁻³³ but previous research has not, to
30 the best of our knowledge, considered the effects on UK BME medical students and their performance.
31 Other studies have shown that individuals who experience racial microaggressions are more likely to
32 exhibit negative mental health symptoms³⁴, suggesting associations between BME students'
33 experiences of racism, their mental health and their successive performance. Identity masking, as
34 reported in this study, is a well-known psychological phenomenon³⁵⁻³⁷ but it has not been studied in
35 relation to BME students in medical education.
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56 **Meaning and possible explanations and implications**

57 Medical students need an academic environment that will enable them to foster good working
58 relationships with their peers, which can be difficult due to the fast-paced nature of the GEM course.
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1 The widespread belief that medical school staff had a lack of cultural awareness does not mean that
2 staff were necessarily discriminatory or biased; however, our findings suggest that more may need to
3 be done to increase awareness of culture, diversity and unconscious bias, as well as implementing
4 anti-racist pedagogy within the medical curriculum.³⁸ Increasing BME representation among medical
5 school staff is likely to help students feel more supported and may also improve cultural
6 understanding and tolerance as well as increase self-confidence of BME students. This study also
7 suggests that students felt isolated and looked to their BME peers for support. Homophily, that is, the
8 tendency for people to form friendships with others similar to them, may be a possible explanation.
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25 30 It may explain, at least in part, why BME students reported finding allies among other BME
students and felt isolated among a large cohort of White medical students, who themselves may be
forming friendships with people from similar ethnic groups. Woolf et al³⁰ has suggested that there
may be 'hidden medical schools' when medical students form social networks based on ethnicity and
that these can impact on student attainment. The widespread perception in this study that the cohorts
were predominately White does not mean that this was indeed the case; however, more could be
done to ensure that each cohort comprises of a wide range of students from different socio-economic,
ethnic, cultural and educational backgrounds. The importance of high-quality student support
programmes that provide 'safe havens' for students experiencing culturally and socially alienating
environments, and that foster social inclusiveness have been identified as key to academic success.³⁹
Institutions are in a position to ensure that BME students are well-integrated amongst their peers and
need to consider how they can increase opportunities to create friendships among all ethnic groups.
While the responsibility for this lies with the institution, the BME student population and networks
could also be important to fostering a sense of community; increasing the awareness of diversity and
culture within the medical school. A lack of structural guidance on the procedures for reporting racial
incidents or concerns was noted in this study and could dissuade students from seeking student
support thus affecting their wellbeing. Guidance on reporting and tackling racism therefore needs to
be developed. Furthermore, this and other studies suggests that medical schools should also review
their diversity and anti-racism training for staff and students. Kumagai et al⁴⁰ suggests that this should
go beyond knowledge competency training to the fostering of a critical awareness of the self and
others in relation to racism and other forms of discrimination within healthcare.

51 **Unanswered questions and future research**

52 Further research is needed to determine the prevalence of the barriers identified in this research at
53 this West Midlands medical school as well as other UK GEM courses. The student experiences of UK
54 BME graduate-entry medical students needs to be analysed and further researched as they are
55 different in terms of the demographics and life experiences to those on five-year programmes.
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Research into medical schools' institutional processes for promoting diversity and critical consciousness among all students needs to be carried out.

For peer review only

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32 **Participants consent:** All participants gave informed consent.
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36 **No Patient and Public Involvement:** This research was done without patient involvement. Patients
37 were not invited to comment on the study design and were not consulted to interpret the results.
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39 accuracy.
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44 **Data sharing statement:** No additional data are available as data are held in safe haven.
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52 account of the study being reported; that no important aspects of the study have been omitted; and
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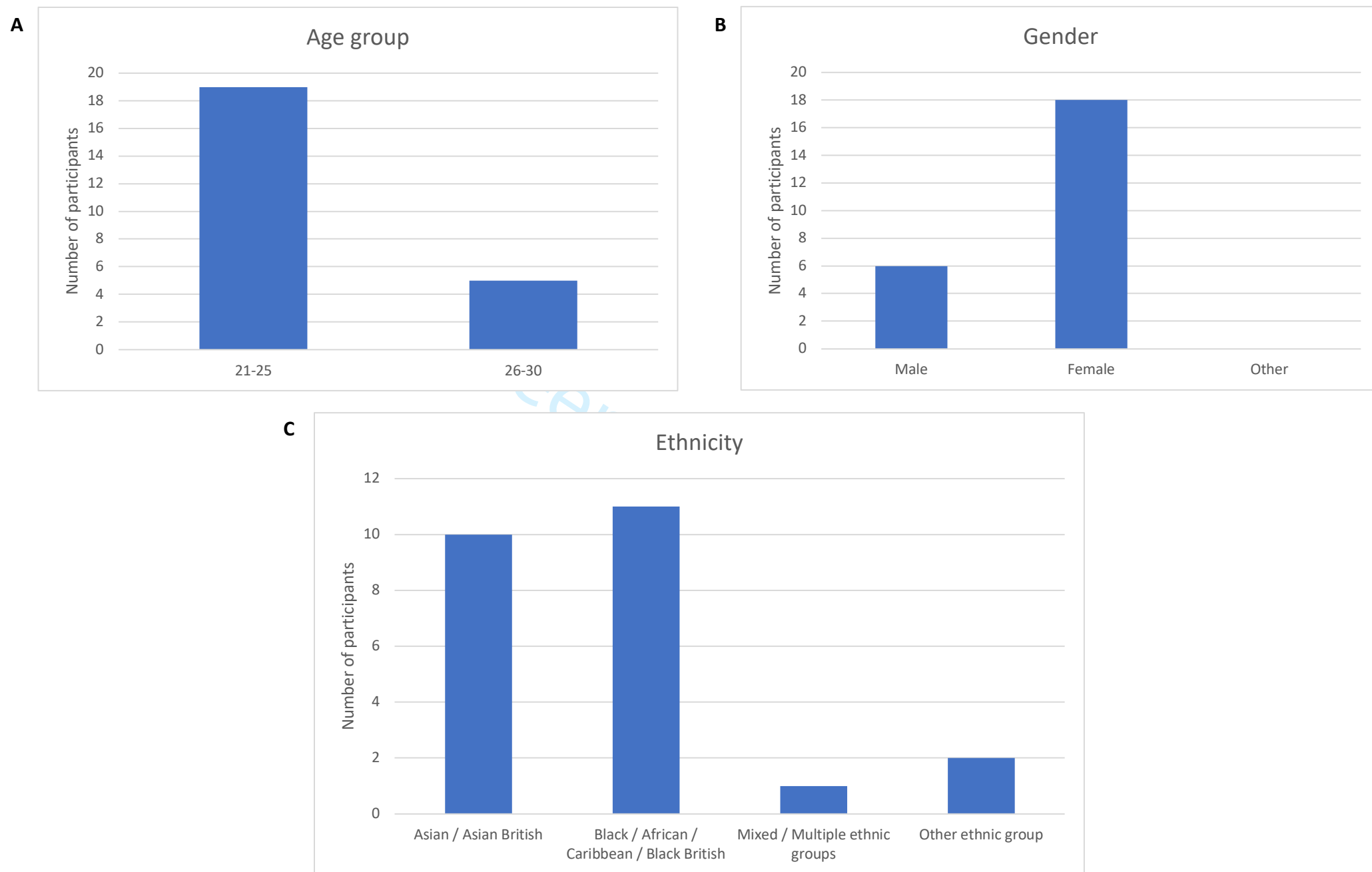


Figure 1 Participant demographics by characteristic. **A:** Participants by age group; **B:** Participants by gender; **C:** Participants by ethnicity.

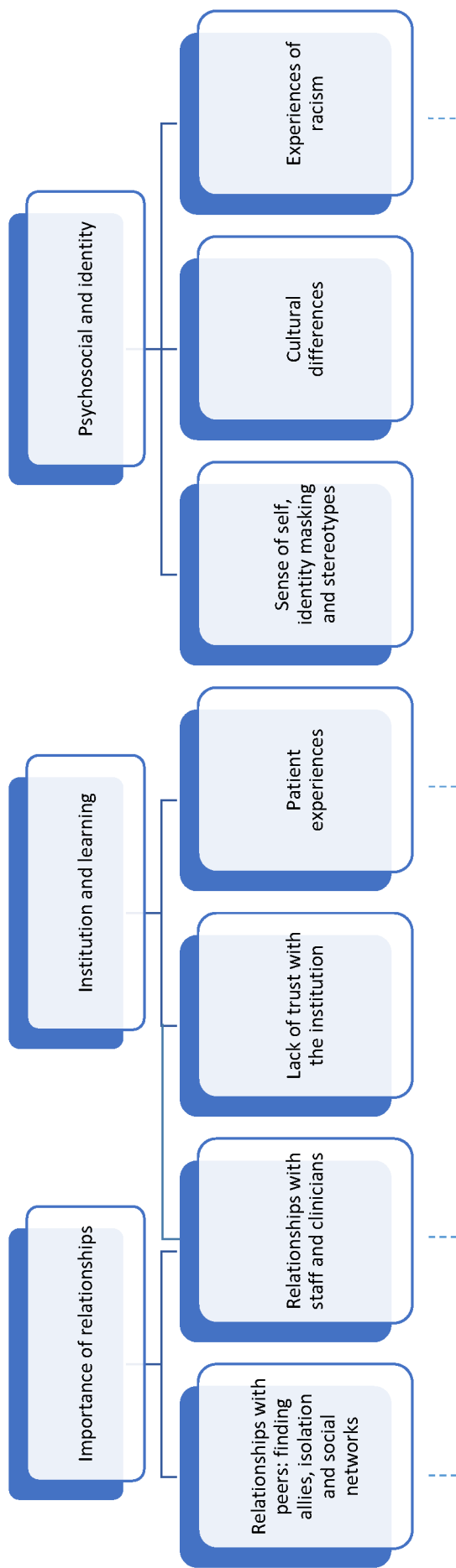


Figure 2 The main themes (top level) and subthemes (bottom level) describing the difficulties faced by BME graduate-entry medical students at a West Midlands Medical School that were perceived as barriers to performance. The subtheme 'relationships with staff and clinicians' was linked with two main themes 'importance of relationships' and 'institution and learning' as illustrated above. The subtheme 'experiences of racism' was linked to two subthemes within the main theme 'importance of relationships' and one subtheme in 'institution and learning' as illustrated by the dotted lines.

Reporting checklist for qualitative study.

Based on the SRQR guidelines.

Instructions to authors

Complete this checklist by entering the page numbers from your manuscript where readers will find each of the items listed below.

Your article may not currently address all the items on the checklist. Please modify your text to include the missing information. If you are certain that an item does not apply, please write "n/a" and provide a short explanation.

Upload your completed checklist as an extra file when you submit to a journal.

In your methods section, say that you used the SRQR reporting guidelines, and cite them as:

O'Brien BC, Harris IB, Beckman TJ, Reed DA, Cook DA. Standards for reporting qualitative research: a synthesis of recommendations. *Acad Med.* 2014;89(9):1245-1251.

	Reporting Item	Page Number
Title		
	#1 Concise description of the nature and topic of the study identifying the study as qualitative or indicating the approach (e.g. ethnography, grounded theory) or data collection methods (e.g. interview, focus group) is recommended	1
Abstract		
	#2 Summary of the key elements of the study using the abstract format of the intended publication; typically includes background, purpose, methods, results and conclusions	2
Introduction		
Problem formulation	#3 Description and significance of the problem / phenomenon studied: review of relevant theory and empirical work; problem statement	4-5
Purpose or research question	#4 Purpose of the study and specific objectives or questions	4-5

1 **Methods**

2			
3	Qualitative approach and	#5	Qualitative approach (e.g. ethnography, grounded theory, case
4	research paradigm		study, phenomenology, narrative research) and guiding theory if
5			appropriate; identifying the research paradigm (e.g.
6			postpositivist, constructivist / interpretivist) is also
7			recommended; rationale. The rationale should briefly discuss
8			the justification for choosing that theory, approach, method or
9			technique rather than other options available; the assumptions
10			and limitations implicit in those choices and how those choices
11			influence study conclusions and transferability. As appropriate
12			the rationale for several items might be discussed together.
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19	Researcher characteristics	#6	Researchers' characteristics that may influence the research,
20	and reflexivity		including personal attributes, qualifications / experience,
21			relationship with participants, assumptions and / or
22			presuppositions; potential or actual interaction between
23			researchers' characteristics and the research questions, approach,
24			methods, results and / or transferability
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29	Context	#7	Setting / site and salient contextual factors; rationale
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31	Sampling strategy	#8	How and why research participants, documents, or events were
32			selected; criteria for deciding when no further sampling was
33			necessary (e.g. sampling saturation); rationale
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36			
37	Ethical issues pertaining to	#9	Documentation of approval by an appropriate ethics review
38	human subjects		board and participant consent, or explanation for lack thereof;
39			other confidentiality and data security issues
40			
41			
42	Data collection methods	#10	Types of data collected; details of data collection procedures
43			including (as appropriate) start and stop dates of data collection
44			and analysis, iterative process, triangulation of sources /
45			methods, and modification of procedures in response to
46			evolving study findings; rationale
47			
48			
49			
50	Data collection instruments	#11	Description of instruments (e.g. interview guides,
51	and technologies		questionnaires) and devices (e.g. audio recorders) used for data
52			collection; if / how the instruments(s) changed over the course
53			of the study
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57	Units of study	#12	Number and relevant characteristics of participants, documents,
58			or events included in the study; level of participation (could be
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reported in results)

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3	Data processing	#13	Methods for processing data prior to and during analysis, 6-7
4			including transcription, data entry, data management and
5			security, verification of data integrity, data coding, and
6			anonymisation / deidentification of excerpts
7			
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9	Data analysis	#14	Process by which inferences, themes, etc. were identified and 6-7
10			developed, including the researchers involved in data analysis;
11			usually references a specific paradigm or approach; rationale
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14	Techniques to enhance	#15	Techniques to enhance trustworthiness and credibility of data 6-7
15	trustworthiness		analysis (e.g. member checking, audit trail, triangulation);
16			rationale
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20	Results/findings		
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22	Syntheses and	#16	Main findings (e.g. interpretations, inferences, and themes); 7-15
23	interpretation		might include development of a theory or model, or integration
24			with prior research or theory
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27	Links to empirical data	#17	Evidence (e.g. quotes, field notes, text excerpts, photographs) to 7-15
28			substantiate analytic findings
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31	Discussion		
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34	Intergration with prior	#18	Short summary of main findings; explanation of how findings 15-18
35	work, implications,		and conclusions connect to, support, elaborate on, or challenge
36	transferability and		conclusions of earlier scholarship; discussion of scope of
37	contribution(s) to the field		application / generalizability; identification of unique
38			contributions(s) to scholarship in a discipline or field
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42	Limitations	#19	Trustworthiness and limitations of findings 16-17
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44	Other		
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46	Conflicts of interest	#20	Potential sources of influence of perceived influence on study 19
47			conduct and conclusions; how these were managed
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50	Funding	#21	Sources of funding and other support; role of funders in data 19
51			collection, interpretation and reporting
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BMJ Open

Student perspectives on barriers to performance for Black and Minority Ethnic graduate-entry medical students: a qualitative study in a West Midlands medical school

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Primary Subject Heading:	Medical education and training
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Keywords:	MEDICAL EDUCATION & TRAINING, QUALITATIVE RESEARCH, undergraduate, diversity, ethnicity, Minority Groups

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2 Minority Ethnic graduate-entry medical students: a qualitative study
3 in a West Midlands medical school
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35 **Subject area:** Research

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39 **MeSH terms:**

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42 Education, Medical, Undergraduate

43 Humans

44 Minority Groups

45 Learning

46 Qualitative Research

47 Racism

48 Students, Medical

49 Schools, Medical

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57 **Word count:** 6186
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ABSTRACT

Objective: To explore graduate-entry medical students experiences of undergraduate training in the context of academic underperformance of medical students from ethnic minority backgrounds.

Design: Qualitative study using semi-structured focus groups

Setting: A West Midlands medical school

Participants: 24 graduate-entry MBChB students were recruited using volunteer and snowball sampling; all students self-identified as being from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) backgrounds.

Results: BME students reported facing a range of difficulties, throughout their undergraduate medical training, that they felt impeded their learning and performance. Their relationships with staff and clinicians, though also identified as facilitators to learning, were also perceived to have hindered progress, as many students felt that a lack of BME representation and lack of understanding of cultural differences among staff impacted their experience. Students also reported a lack of trust in the institution's ability to support BME students, with many not seeking support. Students' narratives indicated that they had to mask their identity to fit in amongst their peers and to avoid negative stereotyping. Although rare, students faced overt racism from their peers and from patients. Many students reported feelings of isolation, reduced self-confidence and low self-esteem.

Conclusion: BME students in this study reported experiencing relationship issues with other students, academic and clinical staff, lack of trust in the institution and some racist events. Although it is not clear from this small study of one institution whether these findings would be replicated in other institutions, they nevertheless highlight important issues to be considered by the institution concerned and other institutions. These findings suggest that all stakeholders of graduate-entry undergraduate medical education should reflect on the current institutional practices intended to improve student-peer and student-staff relationships. Reviewing current proposals intended to diversify student and staff populations as well as evaluating guidance on tackling racism is likely to be beneficial.

ARTICLE SUMMARY

Strengths and limitations of this study

- This is the first study to explore graduate-entry BME medical students' experiences of medical education. It provides valuable insights into the causes of Black and Minority Ethnic UK

1 undergraduates' lower performance in medical assessments and provides a basis on which
2 interventions to reduce the differential attainment can be developed and evaluated.
3

- 4 • This study has a small sample but multiple cohorts participated in this study; broadening the
5 scope of narrated experiences and the variety of views.
6
- 7 • The focus group methodology allowed candid responses and group discussion facilitated
8 recollection of experiences but some participants may have felt inhibited to share personal
9 experiences and therefore some sensitive topics may have been underdiscussed.
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- 11 • It must be taken into consideration that the emergent themes from the data were dependent on
12 the chosen sample; other themes may have arisen if different or more participants had taken
13 part in the study.
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For peer review only

INTRODUCTION

In higher education, students from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) backgrounds in the United Kingdom (UK) have been reported to underperform academically compared with their White counterparts.¹ Medicine is no different; a number of studies in the UK have reported underperformance at undergraduate and postgraduate level by BME medical students and trained doctors.^{2 3 4} Similar findings have been reported in the United States⁵ and the Netherlands.⁶ This persistent difference in performance between ethnic groups is known as the differential attainment gap and poses a huge issue for medical education and the medical profession. Evidence suggests that this attainment gap exists throughout various undergraduate and postgraduate medical assessments including machine-marked written examinations and objective structured clinical examinations.^{4 7-9} Although the differential attainment gap has been widely documented, the reasons for it remain unclear.^{2 10 11}

Current literature findings suggest that ethnic stereotypes may contribute to BME medical students' underperformance, yet overt discrimination has not been evidenced.¹² Furthermore, a longitudinal study and analysis of UK medical students concluded that the ethnic differences in performance were not due to psychological or demographic factors.³ A 2017 independent review panel at Cardiff University, also highlighted that BME medical students have a different student experience to their White counterparts.¹³ The lack of BME staff within medical schools; difficulty in "fitting in" and racial stereotyping have all emerged as themes experienced by BME students.^{12 13}

Previous studies^{3 4 7} have focused on undergraduate medical students on five or six-year programmes. To the best of our knowledge, no published studies have specifically explored the potential causes of the differential attainment gap in graduate-entry medicine (GEM). The UK introduction of 4-year GEM courses began in 2000, following the 1997 UK Medical Workforce Standing Advisory Committee recommendation to diversify the medical student population.¹⁴ As GEM currently accounts for approximately 10% of all UK medical programmes¹⁴, it is important to report the differential attainment gap amongst GEM courses and examine the experiences of BME graduate-entry medical students as part of a portfolio of research into differential attainment among medical students.

This paper reports data on a study of graduate-entry medical students in a West Midlands Medical School. Internal MBChB assessment data¹⁵ suggests that for students in this medical school, over the last four years across all assessment formats, all cohorts at some point show statistically significant differences in attainment between BME and White students, with BME students having lower average percentage point scores than White students. This study therefore aims to build upon previous

1 research, examining the potential reasons for underperformance by BME graduate-entry medical
2 students; exploring their experiences of undergraduate medical training and their perceptions of
3 barriers and facilitators to performance.
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8 METHODS

10 Design

11 A social constructivist¹⁶ approach using qualitative methods was adopted to gain understanding of
12 medical students' experiences and their perspectives on barriers to performance. Data were gathered
13 in focus groups throughout November 2018, using a semi-structured interview schedule. Two
14 encrypted audio recorders were utilised for data capture. Focus group participants received a
15 maximum of two emails including one email reminder.
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23 Sampling strategy and recruitment

24 The sampling frame was all students in each of the four cohorts of the MBChB course at a West
25 Midlands Medical School; all chosen because of their varying experience of medical training as well as
26 academic examinations. The sampling frame was used to recruit participants who self-identified as
27 BME. This group encompassed, but was not limited to, those who identified as being from African,
28 Asian, Arab or Caribbean descent. Participants were eligible to participate if they were either in the
29 clinical phases of the MBChB (Years 2-4) or resitting the pre-clinical phase of training (Year 1). Other
30 Year 1 students were excluded from participating as they had only been on the course for two months
31 and therefore had limited experience of the MBChB course.
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40 Participants were recruited in four main ways: administrative staff emailed invitations to all medical
41 students asking for eligible volunteers to register their interest to participate; invitations to express
42 interest in taking part were posted on the official University MBChB Facebook cohort group pages;
43 participants in the early focus groups encouraged other eligible students to register their interest to
44 participate; and participants were encouraged to bring any eligible students with them on the day. All
45 students with an interest in the study were provided with a participation information leaflet and a
46 consent form. Twenty-six students registered interest and accepted the invitation to participate. Four
47 focus groups, each of 4-7 multi-cohort students, were then scheduled throughout November 2018,
48 based on participant availability. Focus groups took place in a private room at the University. Owing
49 to last minute timetable changes, two volunteers were unable to attend any of the focus group
50 sessions.
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Ethical approval

Ethical approval was obtained from The University of Warwick Biomedical and Scientific Research Ethics Sub-Committee in August 2018.

The study involved collection and analysis of the special category of ethnicity. To ensure confidentiality, data security and compliance with the General Data Protection Regulations, all data were anonymised and held only by NM. All participants confirmed on their consent form that they agreed to keep confidential the identities of focus group participants and to maintain the confidentiality of the information discussed during the focus group.

Data collection methods

NM (Black British, female, graduate-entry undergraduate medical student with quantitative and qualitative research methods training) moderated each focus group. At each group, participants were randomly assigned a number to ease anonymisation during transcription. Participants were subsequently asked to self-report their ethnicity using the 2011 UK census categories.¹⁷

Many participants were acquainted with each other through enrolment on the MBChB course. At the outset of each focus group, participants were briefed on the purpose of each group, thus creating a comfortable, permissive environment; encouraging participants to talk freely.¹⁸

Throughout the discussion, first-hand narratives were encouraged, and participants were prompted to clarify and expand their answers. Participants were encouraged to respond to others' contributions and discuss similar or contrasting accounts if appropriate. Focus groups ranged from sixty minutes to three hours (average 111 minutes).

No attempt was made to exclude friends, with the aim that some collective recollection of events may be captured and on the basis that participants would be more likely to raise sensitive topics if accompanied by friends.¹⁸

Data processing and analysis

Data was audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim using Microsoft Word and Olympus Sonority v.1.4.7.

Thematic analysis¹⁹ was adopted using Braun and Clarke's six phase framework, shown in Table 1.²⁰ NM, MM (Associate Professor in Health Sciences) and CMB (Associate Professor in Health Sciences) read all transcripts individually to allow/increase familiarisation with the data. QSR NVivo v.12²¹

software was used to assist with categorisation and management of the data. Following thorough review of all transcripts, inductive codes were generated and agreed by the team. A number of themes were identified from the coded data. The team discussed the findings and collectively agreed an initial coding framework. NM coded the first three transcripts independently using the initial coding framework, which was then refined after further discussion. Following further review, a final coding framework was adopted, which was subsequently used to code the entire data set. The Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research (SRQR) guidelines were adopted.²²

Step 1	Become familiar with the data
Step 2	Generate initial codes
Step 3	Search for themes
Step 4	Review themes
Step 5	Define themes
Step 6	Write-up

Table 1: Braun & Clarke's six-phase framework for doing a thematic analysis

Patient and Public Involvement

This research was done without patient involvement. Patients were not invited to comment on the study design and were not consulted to interpret the results. Patients were not invited to contribute to the writing or editing of this document for readability or accuracy.

RESULTS

Participants

Twenty-four medical students participated in the study. Participant demographics are shown in figure 1. Participants held a minimum of an upper second-class honours undergraduate degree (or overseas equivalent). Any participant with a lower second-class undergraduate degree held either a Master's or a Doctoral qualification. Twenty-three out of the twenty-four participants were UK home students schooled in the UK.

Figure 1 Participant demographics by characteristic. **A:** Participants by age group; **B:** Participants by gender; **C:** Participants by ethnicity.

Perceived barriers to performance

All narratives highlighted students' views on barriers and facilitators to performance during undergraduate medical training. The data was categorised into three main causal themes:

- **Importance of relationships** – exploring the relationships amongst students and their peers and amongst students and staff. This was particularly important as poor relationships affect the learning experience and lead to disengagement, lack of motivation and withdrawal.²³

- **Institution and learning** – examining how the students interact with the institution and their learning opportunities, such as factors which may generate limitations and barriers to learning and attainment e.g. patient encounters and poor interactions with clinicians.
- **Psychosocial and identity** – psychological, societal and cultural factors that affect students' learning experience, engagement and attainment; particularly stereotyping and racism and cultural differences.

Within the three main themes, seven subthemes were identified that were perceived to cause barriers to performance (figure 2).

Figure 2 The main themes (top level) and subthemes (bottom level) describing the difficulties faced by BME graduate-entry medical students at a West Midlands medical school that were perceived as barriers to performance. The subtheme 'relationships with staff and clinicians' was linked with two main themes 'importance of relationships' and 'institution and learning' as illustrated above. The subtheme 'experiences of racism' was linked to two subthemes within the main theme 'importance of relationships' and one subtheme in 'institution and learning' as illustrated by the dotted lines.

Relationship with peers: finding allies, isolation and social networks

Peers and staff were identified as both positive and negative influences on performance. Peers were allies who provided solidarity, as well as academic and emotional support. The majority of participants had a diverse range of friends, however, many noted that their closest friends at medical school were other students from a BME background:

My friendship group mostly consists of people of colour. I don't know if it's something I generally gravitate towards. They are also people who look or dress similarly to me.

Female, Asian Pakistani

I find that because we're all minorities, you [...] stick together and the more you get to know each other it's like we're actually quite different but [...] there is no one else that you relate to really so you just kind of stick with them.

Female, Black African

Participants explained they were drawn towards finding allies in other ethnic minority students, despite not necessarily having common interests or hobbies. Such alliances helped some students to overcome their feelings of isolation and a few students said they gained confidence by having these friendship groups:

1 where I'm from back home [...] my school was like all ethnic minorities so I was only friends with people that
2 did the same things that I did, like the same things I did, whereas here it's more like you want to stick with
3 people are similar to you, even though you don't necessarily like the same things you do, it's just because
4 you have that common ground; the basis of what you both are is similar so you relate to each other more
5 and than with a [White] person, just because you are an ethnic minority.
6
7

8 Female, Black African
9

10
11 [...] in my first year, in my Friday [group] sessions, I've had no ethnic minorities, so I tend to be by myself just
12 because I didn't feel I had someone, like an ally [...] but this year, it's like I have a few more people [...] and
13 it kind of gives you a boost [...]
14
15

16 Female, Black African
17
18

19 Many also remarked they felt more comfortable amongst other ethnic minorities as they shared a
20 common understanding, specifically, in appreciating cultural differences and acknowledging bias or
21 discrimination often encountered by minority groups:
22
23

24
25
26 I'm not really sure how to explain it but [...] there are certain things I may have faced in my life, which other
27 ethnic minorities would understand and those who aren't an ethnic minority wouldn't really get because it's
28 not something they've experienced. Maybe it's something they've heard about but not necessarily something
29 they've felt themselves.
30
31

32 Female, Black Caribbean
33
34

35 Most BME students reported feeling isolated, explaining that each cohort consisted of predominantly
36 White students. Students felt that they were not represented within the student body. Many who
37 came from multicultural cities such as London and Birmingham, found it difficult to adapt and
38 struggled to fit in what they perceived to be a predominantly White student population. Many
39 participants also reported that they did not feel "good enough" to be at medical school:
40
41
42

43
44
45 [...] I constantly feel like I don't deserve to be here [...] a lot of the time I feel so different [...] I have that
46 constant feeling that I don't deserve to be here [...] because I don't fit in with what your typical medic does
47 or what their background is [...]
48
49

50 Female, Black African
51
52

53 [...] I did feel a little bit lesser than my non-ethnic minority counterparts. I felt like, oh maybe, I don't deserve
54 to be here as much as they do [...] It was something that played on my mind a little bit.
55
56

57 Female, Black Caribbean
58
59

60 Several students felt a sense of invisibility amongst their White peers as they commented that many
White peers confused them with other ethnic minority students. Additionally, participants explained

1 that many White students often did not learn the correct pronunciation of their names, often trying
2 to shorten or anglicize it without their permission. Many found this very frustrating and impeding to
3 building new relationships with their peers:
4

5
6
7 *Yeah, I'm not sure when people are talking to me if they know who they're actually talking to*

8
9 Female, Asian Indian
10

11
12 *I just hate it so much because like my name is, it's not even hard. It's literally, you say it the way it's spelt but*
13 *no one can get it. I feel like no one personally makes the effort to get it and it's like I refuse to let them shorten*
14 *my name until I know you can get it because I feel like, it's just like a basic sign of respect to just get it. It's*
15 *just so frustrating because it's like, it's not even hard.*

16
17
18 Female, Black African
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20
21 Many participants described the importance of utilising social networks to increase academic
22 performance highlighting that social networks provided access to clinical learning opportunities as
23 well as a number of learning resources. Both were regarded as essential to learning and increasing
24 performance. Students remarked that they felt disadvantaged as they were less likely to acquire
25 resources available to their White counterparts that facilitated learning and achievement:
26
27

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30
31 *It does make a huge difference. It's sad but it does make a difference [...] having those links, those*
32 *connections, being in the right Facebook groups [...] helped me a lot.*

33
34 Female, Black African
35

36
37 *I've never been someone to really heavily depend on friends when it comes to like exams or whatever, but*
38 *I've realised since starting med school if I didn't have friends with me, I probably would not be in this position.*

39
40 Female, Asian Indian
41

42
43
44
45 *If you're not in the right friendship groups or Facebook groups, you've got less access to peer resources [...]*
46 *Being BME and isolated, you're more likely to be disadvantaged.*

47
48 Female, Black African
49

50 Relationship with staff and clinicians

51
52 Relationships with medical school staff and clinicians were perceived as important to learning and
53 performance. At best, clinicians developed students' knowledge, clinical skills and confidence by
54 providing extra learning opportunities and giving constructive feedback. Participants reported that
55 overall, they received good teaching from clinical staff, though, all said that they noted a better
56 experience with clinicians from BME backgrounds:
57
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60

1
2 *I've had bedside teaching from a member of staff who is from a similar background to me. I think sometimes*
3 *if they are from a similar background, they work you harder and they are more critical, which is good as it's*
4 *more helpful. They have a higher expectation of you as they set the bar slightly higher which is interesting.*

5
6
7 Female, Asian Pakistani
8
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10 *I find it quite the opposite because most of the senior Consultants at the hospital are Asian men and they are*
11 *very paternal towards me which I'm very grateful for. Like if that's the only privilege I had, then I'm taking*
12 *it. So, they've been very nice, they've been very nurturing, they've given me all the attention I need which is*
13 *a lot. [...] they've been praising me [...] which has been motivating and you feel less other in the hospital*
14 *setting.*

15
16
17 Female, Asian Bangladeshi
18
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20
21 In contrast, many participants felt that most staff based in the medical school did not appreciate the
22 cultural differences amongst students, reporting that several lecturers made culturally insensitive or
23 inappropriate comments. Some students said that more effort should be made to ensure staff
24 members were culturally trained, though, one participant felt cultural training would not suffice to
25 fully understand the challenges they faced:
26
27

28
29
30
31 *[...] as much as you want to say cultural training will make a difference, unless you're from an ethnic minority*
32 *background, [...] you're not gonna empathise with the situations.*

33
34 Female, Asian Bangladeshi
35
36

37 Also highlighted was the lack of BME representation amongst medical school staff. Representation
38 was considered important as many felt isolated amongst their peers. One participant said they were
39 less likely to report difficulties or seek support from medical school staff due to the lack of BME staff:
40
41

42
43 *More representation is needed, not just Black [lecturers] but Asian and Arab as well. I think that would be*
44 *quite good.*

45
46
47 Female, Black African
48
49

50 *At the medical school [...] there's not enough people in the echelons of the faculty staff who [...] I can relate*
51 *to, so I don't think there's anyone necessarily that I would go for support [...]*

52
53 Female, Asian Bangladeshi
54
55

56 Lack of trust with the institution

57
58 Many participants felt that the institution did not appreciate or understand the challenges they faced
59 throughout their undergraduate career. Students were not clear on the procedures for reporting racial
60

1 incidents or concerns and none were able to identify a specific member of staff who they felt confident
2 in investigating such matters. This lack of structural guidance was often perceived as the medical
3 school not caring about the difficulties faced by BME students and so students were less likely to
4 report any incidents to the institution:
5
6

7
8
9 *It's again - what's going to be done about it? And then it's kind of like it's a word of mouth type thing so ok,*
10 *I've said that this person has said this, but ok you then talk to that person and the person says no I didn't say*
11 *that, I said something else and then what?*

12
13
14 Female, Black Caribbean

15
16 *[...] so conversations I've had with other people of ethnic minority backgrounds is that they feel like faculty*
17 *staff here, don't have enough cultural training either so they won't really understand the impact of say the*
18 *n-word or other statements which have been made towards ethnic minority students or about ethnic*
19 *minority students. So, they are not [going to], or they won't be able to support us in that way basically.*

20
21
22
23 Female, Asian Bangladeshi

24 Patient experiences

25
26 Experiences with patients were perceived as facilitators to learning as students were able to apply
27 their theoretical knowledge to clinical practice. Participants reported that most patients were open to
28 BME students practising their clinical skills with them. In contrast, some patient experiences were
29 perceived as impeding learning and performance as they dented students' confidence and exposed
30 them to biases. Overt racism was occasionally reported by participants and many reported
31 experiencing microaggressions as well as witnessing microaggressions against others:
32
33

34
35
36 *So, the first ever patient I spoke to at med school was an elderly lady and she wouldn't talk to me because I*
37 *was "foreign". Erm, which was really embarrassing because I was asking her questions from a pro forma*
38 *that we were given and she was telling me that I was being offensive to her [...] and she made such a big*
39 *massive palaver about it and then when my White male colleague went and spoke to her, she was happy as*
40 *Larry, answering all questions even though they were exactly word for word the same questions that I was*
41 *asking [...] I [then] went home that day and cried because I thought that's what my experience of medicine*
42 *is going to be throughout my career.*

43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50 Female, Asian Bangladeshi

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52
53 *I was at a hospital on a ward where there were a lot of older White patients and I took about 3 histories and*
54 *every one of those patients asked me where I was really from. I then had to explain to them that I was born*
55 *here and they were like "wow, you were really born here" and then it got to the point where I joked with one*
56 *of the patients and told them that I was born in my parents' home country and my mother gave birth to me*
57 *in a hut. I was so angry and fed up of having to explain that I'm from here.*

Female, Black African

1
2
3 *Last year, a patient said “I passed for White” [...] They said it in a way where they thought they came across*
4 *positive – like being White is positive. Erm, and it’s only when they heard my name, they were like “Oh” [...]*
5 *then they automatically linked me to a certain religion. [...] I was shocked.*
6
7

Male, Asian Pakistani

11 Sense of self, identity masking and stereotypes

12
13 Most participants described having to change or hide their natural personalities in order to conform
14 to the social groups at medical school. As participants felt that each cohort predominantly consisted
15 of White students, there was sense of responsibility among BME students to represent their ethnic
16 group in a positive light. They also commented on the perceived need to monitor and moderate their
17 accents, their expression of emotions and the content of their speech:
18
19
20
21

22
23 *[...] you feel like they’re going to base all of their opinions on you, so sometimes you have to sort of water*
24 *down some of the opinions you have or [...] you have to kind of force yourself to make yourself more*
25 *agreeable to people just because you’re aware that [...] they are basing their opinion of Muslim people on*
26 *me [...]*
27
28

Female, Asian Bangladeshi

29
30
31
32 *You just [...] don’t know how people are going to take you [...] a lot of the time it is like [...] you’re the voice*
33 *of the people [...] so what they see with you is what they want assume for everyone and it might be that*
34 *they’ve met someone else that is like you, [and] maybe they didn’t have a good experience. I don’t want to*
35 *create something they’ll causes them to think oh this is how [...] Black people are.*
36
37
38

Female, Black African

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40
41
42 Many students talked about the pressure of knowing that they may be subject to negative
43 stereotyping, whereby over-generalised negative beliefs about their ethnic group may be applied to
44 them. One student explained that she actively tried to avoid negative stereotyping. Some students
45 said they were subject to stereotyping and remarked that incorrect assumptions were frequently
46 made about them. Participants reported that wrong assumptions negatively affected their
47 relationships with peers and staff, implying that stereotyping could impede good educational
48 relationships with peers and medical school staff:
49
50
51
52

53
54
55 *Also, I found someone here described me as intimidating which [...] throughout my entire life, I’ve never been*
56 *called intimidating, people would say that I’m soft [...] until I came here, I’ve never been called intimidating.*
57
58

Female, Black Caribbean

1 *That's actually one of my biggest fears because I know myself. I'm not intimidating but I know that people*
2 *tend to [label you as intimidating] when you're passionate [...] so I always try to be extra nice just to avoid*
3 *that because I think it's quite hurtful to call someone intimidating.*
4

5 Female, Black African
6
7

8 *I think especially as a woman from an ethnic background, if you're vocal, if you're passionate, [...], you can*
9 *be sort of labelled as aggressive or intimidating.*
10

11 Female, Black Caribbean
12
13

14 Even though BME students recognised that they may be subject to stereotyping, several remarked
15 that there was little they could do to either influence or change the biases or discrimination which
16 they may face.
17
18

19
20
21 A few participants highlighted the common misperception of South Asian medical students,
22 particularly those of Indian heritage, often held by clinicians and the public. Students stated that
23 people assumed that their choice to study medicine was to conform to their parents' wishes rather
24 than internal motivation and they were not sure whether such perceptions had affected their
25 performance but acknowledged that this was a stereotype that they frequently thought about and
26 tried to dissociate with:
27
28
29
30

31
32
33 *'Cause you're Asian, people [are] like you're doing Medicine because your parents forced you to.*
34

35 Female, Asian Indian
36
37

38 *I don't know if I'd say it's affected my performance but it's something you feel like you have to*
39 *defend. Like "Oh no, I actually want to do it" as opposed to my parents have sent me here. It's not*
40 *how it works.*
41
42

43 Female, Asian Indian
44

45 Cultural differences

46

47 Cultural differences added to BME students' sense of alienation with several describing how important
48 culture is to their sense of identity:
49
50

51
52 *[...] just as much as I take pride in the fact that I was born here [...], educated here, worked here, [...] made*
53 *friends here, studying here, will be successful here, at the same time I have connections to other parts of the*
54 *world and that connection is a part of the reason why I have this identity [...]*
55
56

57 Male, Arab
58
59
60

1 Cultural differences may also hinder relationships with their peers as BME students often encountered
2 different social experiences to their White counterparts. Many participants reported that medical
3 school social events were not environments in which they felt comfortable in and therefore were less
4 likely to socialise with their peers:
5
6

7
8
9 *I often find that the social events are often held in settings that I don't feel comfortable in because I don't*
10 *drink alcohol and the majority of the medical school culture is often associated with alcohol. I wish that more*
11 *events were more inclusive.*
12

13 Female, Black African
14

15
16 *[...] you wanna make friends and like if everybody is going out, [or] doing something that you don't really*
17 *feel hundred percent [about doing], you can't like get involved [...] to the max, it does kind of feel a little bit*
18 *isolating [...]*
19

20
21 Female, Black African
22

23 Experiences of racism

24
25 As evidenced throughout the narratives described previously, many BME students commonly
26 experienced racism throughout their undergraduate training. Reports of overt racism were rare but
27 nonetheless occurred. More common however, were daily experiences of microaggressions which
28 impacted on their overall student experiences and lowered their self-confidence:
29
30

31
32 *[...] one particular member of that [CBL] group [...] always undermined what I said. I don't know why, maybe*
33 *he felt I wasn't as well-spoken, but I did get the impression that he didn't believe me because I'm of a different*
34 *background to him or a different colour to him. For example, if I answered a question, he would totally*
35 *disregard what I would say but then someone who was of the same colour as him would repeat the exact*
36 *same thing as I said 2 minutes later and then he'll be "yes, yes, I agree with you". Another example would*
37 *be, he would constantly check things, go on the internet, to see if I'm correct and I found that quite*
38 *disheartening because he would only do this to me or my other classmate who was of colour.*
39
40
41
42
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44
45

46 Female, Black African
47
48

49 DISCUSSION

50 Statement of principal findings

51
52 In this small study of BME students' perspectives on barriers and facilitators to performance, most
53 participants reported barriers that they felt impeded their learning and performance. Relationships
54 with peers were considered important to learning, but participants found it difficult to fit in and felt
55 isolated amongst their White peers. Difficulties in developing good relationships with peers were
56 perceived to result partly from cultural differences, racism and bias. The perceived small number of
57
58
59
60

1 BME students in each cohort also added to the difficulty of students forming relationships with their
2 peers. Many participants' narratives indicated that they masked their identity in order to fit in and to
3 avoid negative stereotyping. There was a general lack of trust in the institution's ability to support
4 BME students, which led to some students' reluctance to access medical school support systems. Most
5 students did not seek help from the institution, and many looked to their peers for support instead.
6 Students highlighted the need to have clear, structural guidance on matters relating to BME students,
7 such as how to report racial incidents. Relationships with staff and clinicians were also considered
8 crucial to learning and performance. Participants narrated good teaching experiences in clinical
9 environments, especially from clinicians from BME backgrounds. Several participants highlighted the
10 lack of BME representation amongst medical school staff as well as the lack of cultural awareness.
11 Patient experiences were widely considered as excellent learning opportunities, though at times
12 exposed BME students to racism.

21 **Strengths and weaknesses of the study**

22 There are several strengths of this qualitative study. It is the first to explore the experiences of BME
23 graduate-entry medical students. It provides further insights into the causes of the differential
24 attainment gap; building upon previous research.^{2-4 10-13 23-25} The use of a qualitative design elicited in-
25 depth and detailed narratives on participants' experiences. The use of focus groups encouraged
26 candid responses and group discussion facilitated recollection and sharing of experiences. Multiple
27 cohorts were also included within this study, which elicited narrated experiences from students in
28 each year of the GEM programme. In this group setting, some participants may have felt inhibited to
29 share personal experiences, while others may have amplified their experiences, and therefore some
30 sensitive topics may have been under-discussed. The themes which emerged from the data were
31 dependent on the chosen sample, therefore, other themes may have arisen if different or more
32 participants had taken part in the study. Furthermore, it is possible that participants may have had
33 specific reasons for taking part, which could have influenced the themes that arose in the focus
34 groups. The ethnicity and gender of the researcher as well as the researcher's position as a fellow
35 medical student may have affected participants' discussion of certain topics. Participants' perception
36 of the researcher may have aided participants to feel more comfortable in discussing the taboo of
37 ethnicity²⁶, enabling discussion of personal and sensitive topics. On the other hand, some participants
38 may have found it difficult to discuss some topics in greater depth with a fellow student. Whilst the
39 impact is not quantifiable, and no participant stated that they did not wish to speak further on a
40 subject due to NM's characteristics, it is nevertheless a possibility. It is also possible that the
41 researcher's own experiences of medical education may have influenced the interpretation of the
42 data. For most qualitative studies, generalisability is an inherent difficulty.^{12 27} As this was a small study
43 of one institution, it is not clear whether these findings would be replicated in other institutions. The
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1 aim of this study was not to provide generalisations, but to provide a preliminary exploration of the
2 topic, with a view to promote reflection by academic staff, clinicians, students and other stakeholders,
3 and inform future research. It is important to acknowledge that BME students in this study were not
4 an homogenous group: as individuals, they had unique identities as well as different ethnic, cultural,
5 socio-economic and educational backgrounds. This study was not able to examine how these intersect
6 to shape individual students' experiences of medical education. Nevertheless, the intersectionality
7 between ethnicity, gender, education and disability has been shown to shape attainment in
8 medicine.^{28 29}

15 **Strengths and weaknesses in relation to other studies discussing important differences in results**

16 Some of the findings from this study are concordant with those from other studies. The importance
17 of relationships with staff and clinicians noted in this study has been highlighted as a barrier to
18 performance in previous medical education research.²⁴ Other studies have also identified that such
19 relationships can be impeded by stereotyping as well as ethnic differences.^{12 25} Although there is some
20 evidence to suggest that stereotype threat impedes performance of ethnic minority students,^{12 25} it
21 has been relatively understudied in undergraduate medical education. Other studies have also
22 identified that medical students tend to seek friendships and support from others in their own cultural
23 group.^{25 30} Social networks and social capital in medical education have also been linked to student
24 attainment, and put forward as possible reasons for the attainment gap.^{24 25 30} While social networks
25 based on ethnicity were noted in this study, participants also sought support from others in the wider
26 BME group. The finding that most BME students described the need to find allies among other BME
27 students which led to relationships that would not necessarily have occurred in other settings has not
28 been identified in previous studies. These differences could be due to the small numbers of specific
29 ethnic groups within each cohort at this West Midlands medical school but nevertheless raise issues
30 about the availability of support for BME students in cohorts with relatively small numbers of BME
31 students. The finding that learning resources were not always shared with BME students by their
32 White counterparts has been found in a study of students on a five-year programme.²⁵ Students who
33 were excluded from or exclude themselves from social networks with high levels of social capital
34 missed out on resources important for success and attainment in medicine, particularly resources
35 passed on from academics, clinicians and highly achieving students. Racism, including
36 microaggressions, in international medical schools is well-known³¹⁻³³ but previous research has not, to
37 the best of our knowledge, considered the effects on UK BME medical students and their performance.
38 Other studies have shown that individuals who experience racial microaggressions are more likely to
39 exhibit negative mental health symptoms³⁴, suggesting associations between BME students'
40 experiences of racism, their mental health and their successive performance. Identity masking, as
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1 reported in this study, is a well-known psychological phenomenon³⁵⁻³⁷ but it has not been studied in
2 relation to BME students in medical education.
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5 **Meaning and possible explanations and implications**

6 Medical students need an academic environment that will enable them to foster good working
7 relationships with their peers, which can be difficult due to the fast-paced nature of the GEM course.
8 The widespread belief that medical school staff had a lack of cultural awareness does not mean that
9 staff were necessarily discriminatory or biased; however, our findings suggest that more may need to
10 be done to increase awareness of culture, diversity and unconscious bias, as well as implementing
11 anti-racist pedagogy within the medical curriculum.³⁸ Increasing BME representation among medical
12 school staff is likely to help students feel more supported and may also improve cultural
13 understanding and tolerance as well as increase self-confidence of BME students. This study also
14 suggests that students felt isolated and looked to their BME peers for support. Homophily, that is, the
15 tendency for people to form friendships with others similar to them, may be a possible explanation.
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17 ^{25 30} It may explain, at least in part, why BME students reported finding allies among other BME
18 students and felt isolated among a large cohort of White medical students, who themselves may be
19 forming friendships with people from similar ethnic groups. Woolf et al³⁰ has suggested that there
20 may be 'hidden medical schools' when medical students form social networks based on ethnicity and
21 that these can impact on student attainment. The widespread perception in this study that the cohorts
22 were predominately White does not mean that this was indeed the case; however, more could be
23 done to ensure that each cohort comprises of a wide range of students from different socio-economic,
24 ethnic, cultural and educational backgrounds. The importance of high-quality student support
25 programmes that provide 'safe havens' for students experiencing culturally and socially alienating
26 environments, and that foster social inclusiveness have been identified as key to academic success.³⁹
27 Institutions are in a position to ensure that BME students are well-integrated amongst their peers and
28 need to consider how they can increase opportunities to create friendships among all ethnic groups.
29 While the responsibility for this lies with the institution, the BME student population and networks
30 could also be important to fostering a sense of community; increasing the awareness of diversity and
31 culture within the medical school. A lack of structural guidance on the procedures for reporting racial
32 incidents or concerns was noted in this study and could dissuade students from seeking student
33 support thus affecting their wellbeing. Guidance on reporting and tackling racism therefore needs to
34 be developed. Furthermore, this and other studies suggests that medical schools should also review
35 their diversity and anti-racism training for staff and students. Kumagai et al⁴⁰ suggests that this should
36 go beyond knowledge competency training to the fostering of a critical awareness of the self and
37 others in relation to racism and other forms of discrimination within healthcare.
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Unanswered questions and future research

Further research is needed to determine the prevalence of the barriers identified in this research at this West Midlands medical school as well as other UK GEM courses. The student experiences of UK BME graduate-entry medical students needs to be analysed and further researched as they are different in terms of the demographics and life experiences to those on five-year programmes. Research into medical schools' institutional processes for promoting diversity and critical consciousness among all students needs to be carried out.

CONCLUSION

This is the first study exploring BME students' perspectives on barriers and facilitators to performance on a GEM course in the UK. BME students in this study reported experiencing relationship issues with their peers, academic and clinical staff, lack of trust in the institution and some racist events. Although it is not clear from this study whether these findings would be replicated in other institutions, they nevertheless highlight important issues to be considered by all stakeholders of graduate-entry undergraduate medical education.

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8 work in the previous three years; no other relationships or activities that could appear to have
9 influenced the submitted work."*
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15 **Author contributions:** NM conceived of the research project which was further developed with MM
16 and CMB. NM, CMB and MM designed the research project. NM analysed the data under the
17 supervision of MM and CMB. NM, with MM and CMB interpreted the data. NM wrote the first draft
18 of the article and all authors revised it critically for important intellectual content. NM and CMB
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20 guarantor.
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27 **Ethical approval:** Ethical approval was granted by The University of Warwick Biomedical and
28 Scientific Research Ethics Committee (REGO-2018-2244)
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32 **Participants consent:** All participants gave informed consent.
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36 **Data sharing statement:** No additional data are available as data are held in safe haven.
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42 **Transparency statement:** NM affirms that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent
43 account of the study being reported; that no important aspects of the study have been omitted; and
44 that any discrepancies from the study as originally planned (and, if relevant, registered) have been
45 explained.
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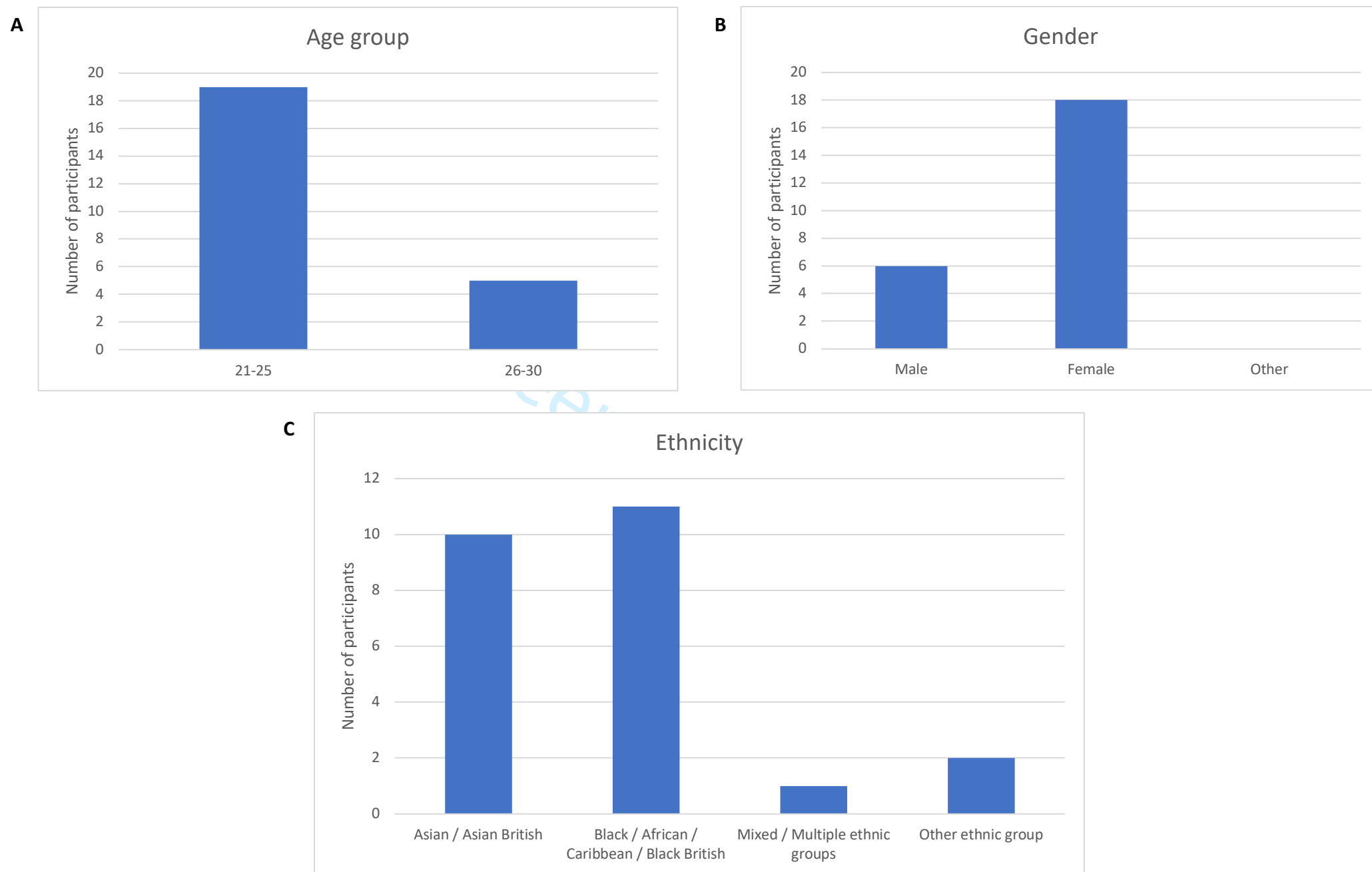


Figure 1 Participant demographics by characteristic. **A:** Participants by age group; **B:** Participants by gender; **C:** Participants by ethnicity.

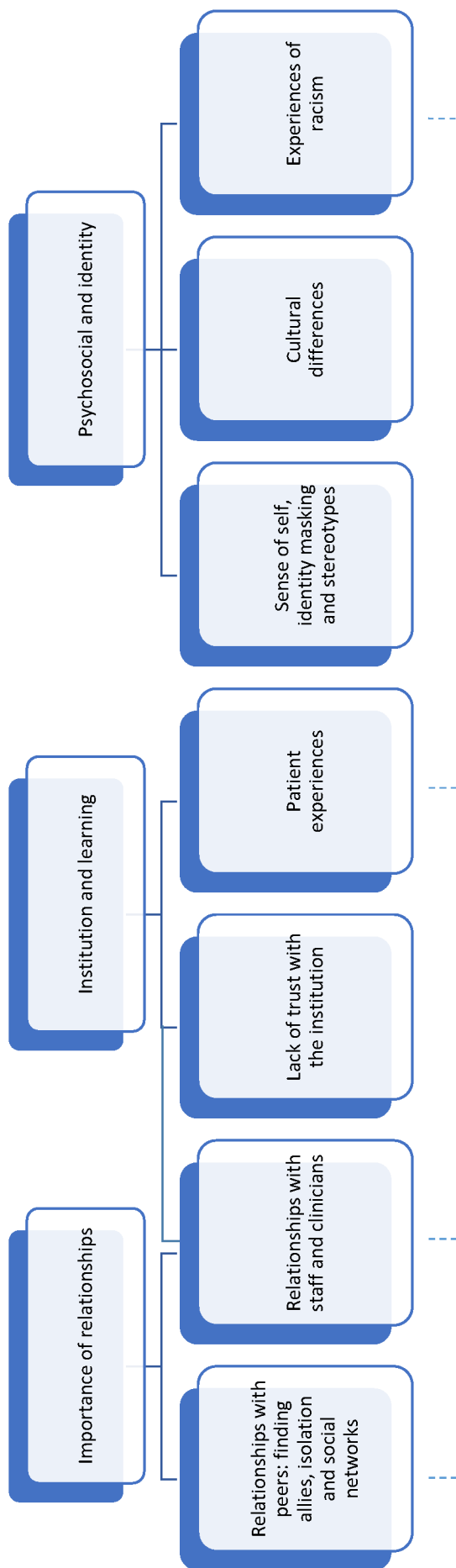


Figure 2 The main themes (top level) and subthemes (bottom level) describing the difficulties faced by BME graduate-entry medical students at a West Midlands Medical School that were perceived as barriers to performance. The subtheme 'relationships with staff and clinicians' was linked with two main themes 'importance of relationships' and 'institution and learning' as illustrated above. The subtheme 'experiences of racism' was linked to two subthemes within the main theme 'importance of relationships' and one subtheme in 'institution and learning' as illustrated by the dotted lines.

Reporting checklist for qualitative study.

Based on the SRQR guidelines.

Instructions to authors

Complete this checklist by entering the page numbers from your manuscript where readers will find each of the items listed below.

Your article may not currently address all the items on the checklist. Please modify your text to include the missing information. If you are certain that an item does not apply, please write "n/a" and provide a short explanation.

Upload your completed checklist as an extra file when you submit to a journal.

In your methods section, say that you used the SRQR reporting guidelines, and cite them as:

O'Brien BC, Harris IB, Beckman TJ, Reed DA, Cook DA. Standards for reporting qualitative research: a synthesis of recommendations. *Acad Med.* 2014;89(9):1245-1251.

	Reporting Item	Page Number
Title		
	#1 Concise description of the nature and topic of the study identifying the study as qualitative or indicating the approach (e.g. ethnography, grounded theory) or data collection methods (e.g. interview, focus group) is recommended	1
Abstract		
	#2 Summary of the key elements of the study using the abstract format of the intended publication; typically includes background, purpose, methods, results and conclusions	2
Introduction		
Problem formulation	#3 Description and significance of the problem / phenomenon studied: review of relevant theory and empirical work; problem statement	4-5
Purpose or research question	#4 Purpose of the study and specific objectives or questions	4-5

1 **Methods**

2			
3	Qualitative approach and	#5	Qualitative approach (e.g. ethnography, grounded theory, case
4	research paradigm		study, phenomenology, narrative research) and guiding theory if
5			appropriate; identifying the research paradigm (e.g.
6			postpositivist, constructivist / interpretivist) is also
7			recommended; rationale. The rationale should briefly discuss
8			the justification for choosing that theory, approach, method or
9			technique rather than other options available; the assumptions
10			and limitations implicit in those choices and how those choices
11			influence study conclusions and transferability. As appropriate
12			the rationale for several items might be discussed together.
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19	Researcher characteristics	#6	Researchers' characteristics that may influence the research,
20	and reflexivity		including personal attributes, qualifications / experience,
21			relationship with participants, assumptions and / or
22			presuppositions; potential or actual interaction between
23			researchers' characteristics and the research questions, approach,
24			methods, results and / or transferability
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29	Context	#7	Setting / site and salient contextual factors; rationale
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31	Sampling strategy	#8	How and why research participants, documents, or events were
32			selected; criteria for deciding when no further sampling was
33			necessary (e.g. sampling saturation); rationale
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37	Ethical issues pertaining to	#9	Documentation of approval by an appropriate ethics review
38	human subjects		board and participant consent, or explanation for lack thereof;
39			other confidentiality and data security issues
40			
41			
42	Data collection methods	#10	Types of data collected; details of data collection procedures
43			including (as appropriate) start and stop dates of data collection
44			and analysis, iterative process, triangulation of sources /
45			methods, and modification of procedures in response to
46			evolving study findings; rationale
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50	Data collection instruments	#11	Description of instruments (e.g. interview guides,
51	and technologies		questionnaires) and devices (e.g. audio recorders) used for data
52			collection; if / how the instruments(s) changed over the course
53			of the study
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57	Units of study	#12	Number and relevant characteristics of participants, documents,
58			or events included in the study; level of participation (could be
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reported in results)

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3	Data processing	#13	6-7
4		Methods for processing data prior to and during analysis,	
5		including transcription, data entry, data management and	
6		security, verification of data integrity, data coding, and	
7		anonymisation / deidentification of excerpts	
8			
9	Data analysis	#14	6-7
10		Process by which inferences, themes, etc. were identified and	
11		developed, including the researchers involved in data analysis;	
12		usually references a specific paradigm or approach; rationale	
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14	Techniques to enhance	#15	6-7
15	trustworthiness	Techniques to enhance trustworthiness and credibility of data	
16		analysis (e.g. member checking, audit trail, triangulation);	
17		rationale	
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20	Results/findings		
21			
22	Syntheses and	#16	7-15
23	interpretation	Main findings (e.g. interpretations, inferences, and themes);	
24		might include development of a theory or model, or integration	
25		with prior research or theory	
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27	Links to empirical data	#17	7-15
28		Evidence (e.g. quotes, field notes, text excerpts, photographs) to	
29		substantiate analytic findings	
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31	Discussion		
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34	Intergration with prior	#18	15-18
35	work, implications,	Short summary of main findings; explanation of how findings	
36	transferability and	and conclusions connect to, support, elaborate on, or challenge	
37	contribution(s) to the field	conclusions of earlier scholarship; discussion of scope of	
38		application / generalizability; identification of unique	
39		contributions(s) to scholarship in a discipline or field	
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42	Limitations	#19	16-17
43		Trustworthiness and limitations of findings	
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47	Conflicts of interest	#20	19
48		Potential sources of influence of perceived influence on study	
49		conduct and conclusions; how these were managed	
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51	Funding	#21	19
52		Sources of funding and other support; role of funders in data	
53		collection, interpretation and reporting	

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