IS OCCUPATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY A CAREER FOR EVERYONE?

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BLACK BUSINESS PSYCHOLOGY NETWORK

Contents

Introduction

The current report expresses the distinct lack of scrutiny of the diversity of occupational psychologist's careers. Having graduated over ten years ago with an MSc in Occupational Psychology, I have found it increasingly difficult to break into this lesser-known yet particularly valuable side of psychology.


This report will highlight the findings of a research study completed and presented at the 2019 Division of Occupational Psychology (DOP) conference's panel 'Racism at Work', chaired by Professor Binna Kandola in January of that year.

Popularity of Psychology as an undergraduate degree

Introduction

Psychology is currently one of the most popular undergraduate degree subjects, having grown by over 41% between 2007 and 2016 (HEFCE 2017). We do not currently know the percentage of those from racially minoritised groups and other diverse groups who are current members of the DOP (Division of Occupational Psychology) as the division no longer collects diversity data. This lack of awareness about the state of diversity in different aspects of the profession does a large dis-service to the growth, understanding and accessibility of the work of psychology in organisations.

Knowing the ethnic backgrounds of members and students will allow us to be alert to discrimination, diversity, progression and inclusion issues. As a profession that often advises and creates data measurement of such problems, it seems counter-intuitive that we do not measure this in our own field. Figures from the HEFCE highlight that the ethnic spread in undergraduate psychology and degree classification is as follows. Black and minority students comprised 17% compared to 73% of white students.

Psychology Students by Race 2011- 2015

9%
4%
8%
5%
73%

■ White ■ Black ▪ Asian ▪ Other ▪ Unknown
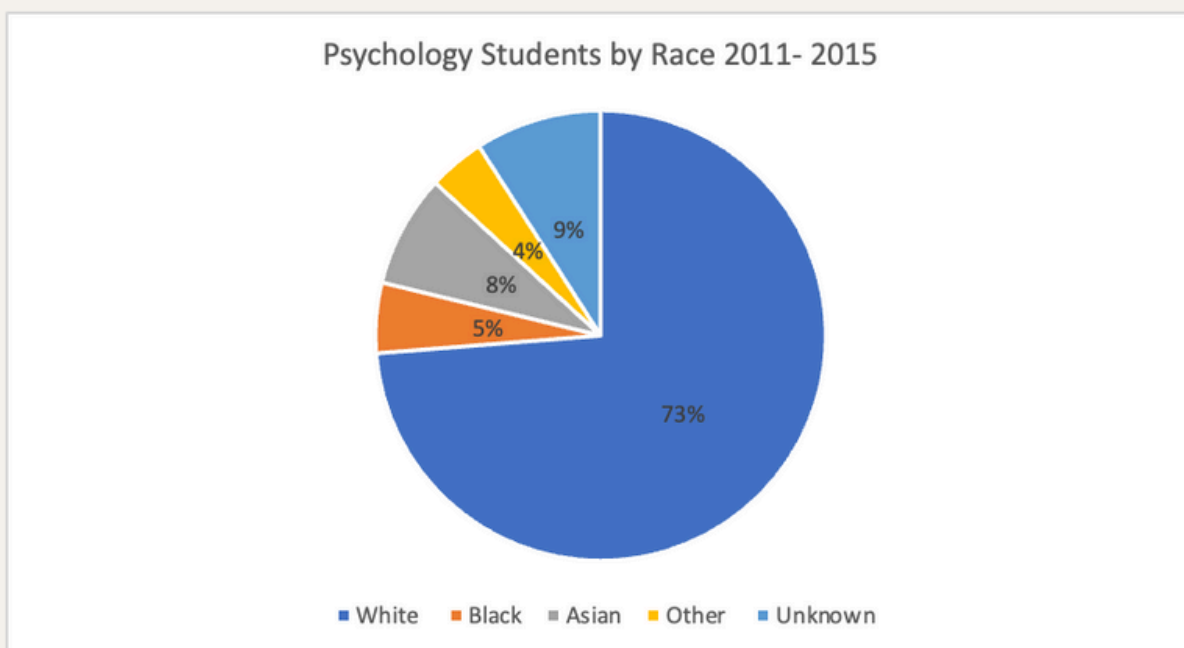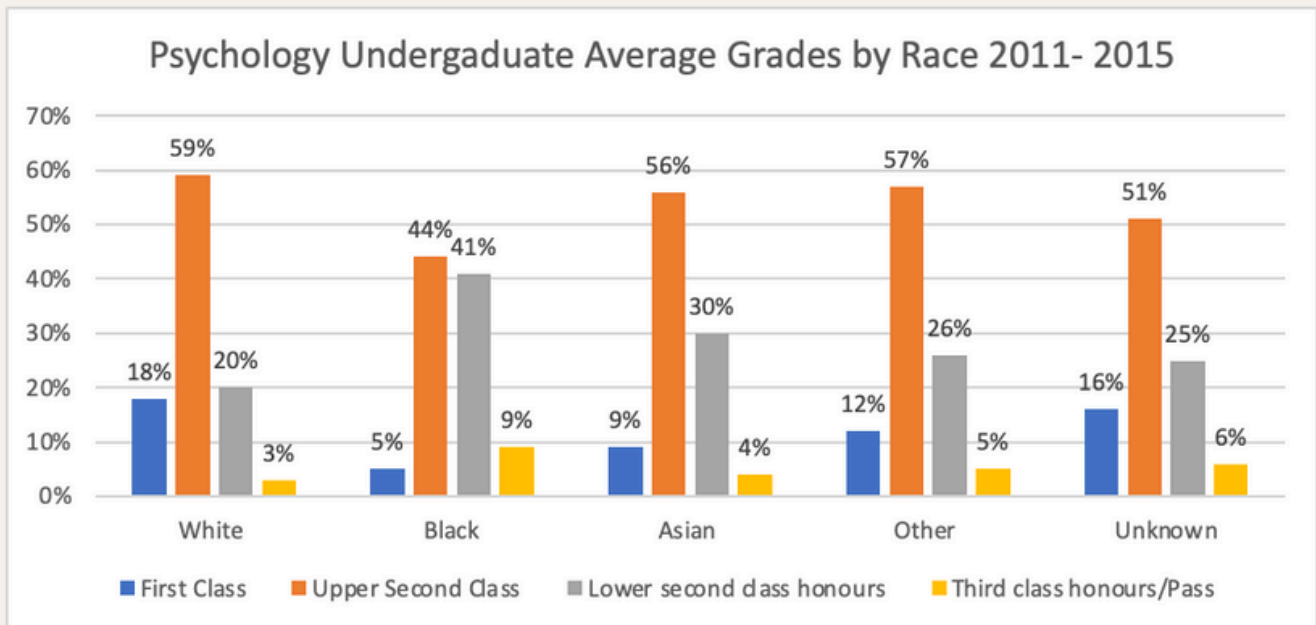
HEFCE Report (2017)

Figure 2 Attainment levels based on ethnicity HEFCE report 2017

Figure 2 highlights the attainment levels of different students compared by ethnicity. Figure 2 shows that white students significantly outperformed those from racially minoritised groups students at undergraduate level. Although the numbers do not show other underlying factors, at their core, these numbers are not showing issues that could be to do with discrimination, teaching methods or unconscious bias that may be at play here.

What are the different career areas of psychology?

Clinical Psychologists
Deal with a range of mental health conditions usually within the NHS but some work privately. Tend to work with clients who have more 'severe' mental health conditions than counselling psychologists.

Counselling Psychologists
Work with people who have a range of mental health issues. Use a variety of modalities to help support clients. This route is not NHS funded

Educational Psychologists
Work with people in educational settings and tackle learning differences, social, emotional and developmental problems. They find ways of allowing people to get the best out of their learning experiences.

Applied areas of psychology

Health Psychologists
Promote health and wellbeing and understand physical illness. Trained to help with the psychological and emotional aspects of illness and support people who are chronically ill.

Occupational Psychologists
The psychology of work and organisations. Work with organisations and individuals to improve job satisfaction, wellbeing and motivatoin and recrutiment.

Forensic Psychologists
They modify offender behaviour, reduce stress for staff and prisoners. Provide evidence for interventions. They can work in prison services, rehabilitation units and secure hospitals.

Sports & Exercise Psychologists
Advise sports teams, counsel referees, help atheletes with personal development .Can work with sports teams or as inependent consultants.
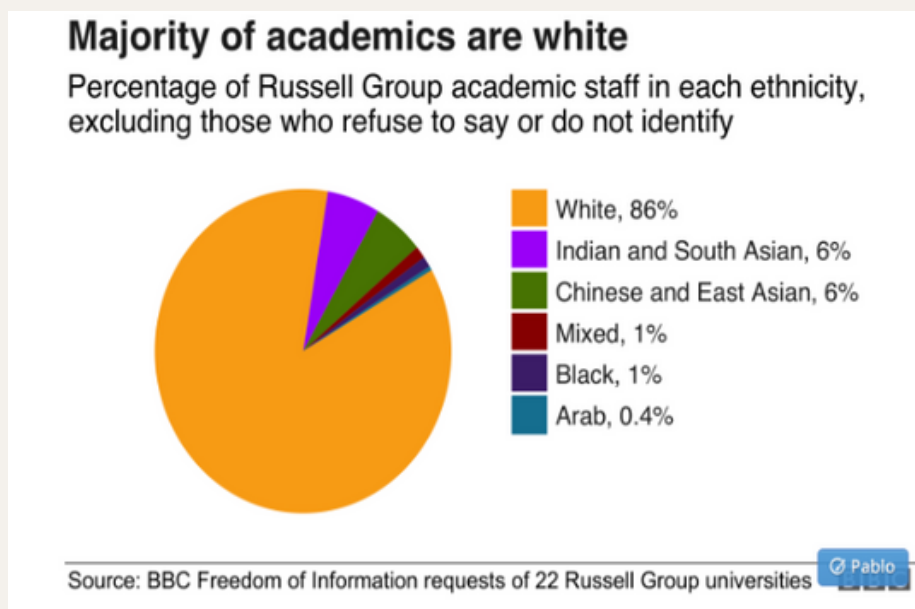
Diversity and Inclusion within different professions

Over the last ten years or more, the UK has seen a resurgence of diversity awareness within organisations and professions. For example, I.T. and technology have organisations such as UK Black Tech and the 30% Club, an organisation to improve the representation of women FTSE 250 boards spearheaded by Dame Helena Morrisey.

According to an inclusive board report published in 2016, technology leaders in 500 firms investigated over 3000 executives in the UK and found over 30% of them had been to private schools compared to 7% in the general population. Additionally, 11% of senior leaders were non-white, while 75% of boards and 70% of senior executive teams had no people from racially minoritised groups members. This data doesn't seem to exist for organisations specialising in occupational psychology.

Majority of academics are white

Percentage of Russell Group academic staff in each ethnicity, excluding those who refuse to say or do not identify

- White, 86%
- Indian and South Asian, 6%
- Chinese and East Asian, 6%
- Mixed, 1%
- Black, 1%
- Arab, 0.4%

Source: BBC Freedom of Information requests of 22 Russell Group universities

In academia, a 2018 study by journalist Rianna Croxford, surveyed 22 Russel Group Universities in the UK, it was found that 14% of academics were from racially minoritised backgrounds. Additionally, it was found that the pay levels were significantly less for non-white academics as well as women when compared to white males.

Diversity in UK Psychology

The current diversity situation for most psychological disciplines in the UK is, unclear or yet to be investigated. Based on the data for other professions, the fact that the professional body of occupational psychology does not hold this data suggests that diversity and inclusion is not at the forefront of the organisation's agenda.

For a discipline that often advises organisations about diversity, inclusion, assessment and selection and talent management best practice, it smacks of pure negligence that these areas are not a) being monitored and scrutinised and b) used to increase standards and the representativeness of organisations.

Individuals within some areas of psychology are attempting to address the lack of diversity and inclusion, most notably in clinical psychology. In 2013 it was highlighted that 9.3% of qualified clinical psychologists were from BME backgrounds in the UK. According to research by Murphy (2019) white applicants to the Psychology Clinical doctoral programme are more than twice as likely to get on clinical training programmes compared to Black applicants. Black applicants' likelihood of being shortlisted for interview is 1 in 13, compared to 1 in 5 for white applicants (Murphy 2019).

According to American statistics from data from American Psychological Association's 2013 Commission on Accreditation, out of 25,000 doctoral students, around two-thirds were white. An American study of graduate students found the following barriers to non-white students: academic barriers and no or stereotypical representation of their identity in the curriculum.

Based on this information, it suggests that there is a distinct lack of focus on the diversity and inclusion of psychology as a profession and not enough solutions to try and reduce the gap in attainment and access to the areas of applied psychology. Career theories will now be examined to find out links to the lack of diversity within psychology professions.

Career Theory Research

Crites (1969) explained career barriers as "twarting conditions that may hinder the career development process. Since the mid-twentieth century, studies have been conducted and theories have been developed to explain how careers 'have been constructed, developed and maintained'. Many career theories, such as Holland's theory of vo cational choice (1958), are based on an individual's personality types and how this links to different careers. Holland's research highlighted that certain people flourished in career environments they fit into. Other theories that highlight barriers to pursuing these careers also exist despite feeling an affinity to a profession.

The social cognitive career theory

The social cognitive career theory tries to explain three areas or career development. This includes describing how academic and career interests develop: how educational and career choices are made and how career and academic success are obtained. The theory is based on Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory. The components of this theory include specific ideas, including self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations and personal goals. Self-efficacy beliefs are assumed to derive from our own experiences, including accomplishments and vicarious experiences, as well as social persuasion and physical and emotional states. Personal accomplishments and the messages we receive about these things include which social models or reinforcing messages people are exposed to. This can, therefore, affect a person's self-efficacy or confidence they have in themselves to achieve or do something.

Outcome Expectations

Outcome expectations are the beliefs people have about consequences or outcomes or completing behaviours e. g. (if I do this, what will happen?) People are more likely to engage in behaviours that they think will be valued or lead to positive outcomes (e.g. high social standing, attractive work conditions, self-approval). Both self-efficacy and outcome expectations mediate individuals' efforts.

Personal Goals

These are separated into choice and performance goals. Personal goals suggest that people will be more likely to set goals they think are attainable and achievable. These goals tend to be related to career self-efficacy and outcome expectations. This also means that individual success or failure in something may help them to confirm or deny self-efficacy and outcome expectations.

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Literature Review

Lent (1994) highlighted three areas of the social cognitive career theory. Lent (1994) found that verbal persuasion, vicarious learning and physiological states combine to create an individuals self-efficacy expectations. Lent et al (1994,2002; Lent 2013) highlighted that demographic and individual differences play a role in developing self-efficacy beliefs. The choice model (Lent et al 2002; Lent 2013) highlights that personal inputs (race, gender, age and personality) and background learning experiences, influence self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations.

Research by Bryers-Winston and Rogers (2019) examined 688 undergraduate students to pursue careers in STEM subjects. It was found that self-efficacy and outcome expectations were directly and positively associated to career intentions. It was also observed that vicarious learning experiences influenced the sample.

Research studies largely support the existence of this theory. In a study conducted by Inda et al (2013) where the social cognitive theory was tested, it was found that female engineering students had less career self-efficacy beliefs and interests than men. Women were more likely to perceive support barriers where as men perceived more potential family barriers.

In another research study by Cunningham et al (2005), 197 undergraduate students across universities in America found that positive self-efficacy and outcome expectations had positive association with outcome expectations. It was also found that human and social capital can be supporting factors to outcome expectations and banners such as discrimination and lack of advancement opportunities can be related to self-efficacy.

A meta-analysis was conducted by Rasdi and Annari (2020), and they investigated the applicability of social cognitive career theory in predicting life satisfaction of university students. The meta-analysis looked at 16 studies with a total sample size of 7,967. They found that there was an association between goal processes, environmental factors and domain satisfaction. Self-efficacy beliefs went some way to explain why some students felt inspired to take on gradually challenging tasks.

These studies highlight the complexities of creating a secure environment for people to exercise and enact their own careers. Positive self-efficacy, environmental factors, and vicarious learning experiences are all associated with outcome expectations or the likelihood of a person pursuing their career goals.

Social cognitive career theory highlights the importance of the individual's power of decision-making and recognition of, and response to occupational career barriers. Individuals realise and identify specific barriers (based on their perception of occupational accessibility) and form coping strategies such as compromising of occupational goals. Through compromising career goals due to perceived barriers, individuals may feel negatively towards the career decision-making process and display anxiety, concern and a lack of confidence. This may erode self-confidence and complicate career planning (Luzzo 1996).

The literature also suggests that having positive career role models (vicarious learning experiences) and the ability for people to see themselves and can grow are factors leading to a fairer career experience for all. Based on the research and data included, the main research questions were:
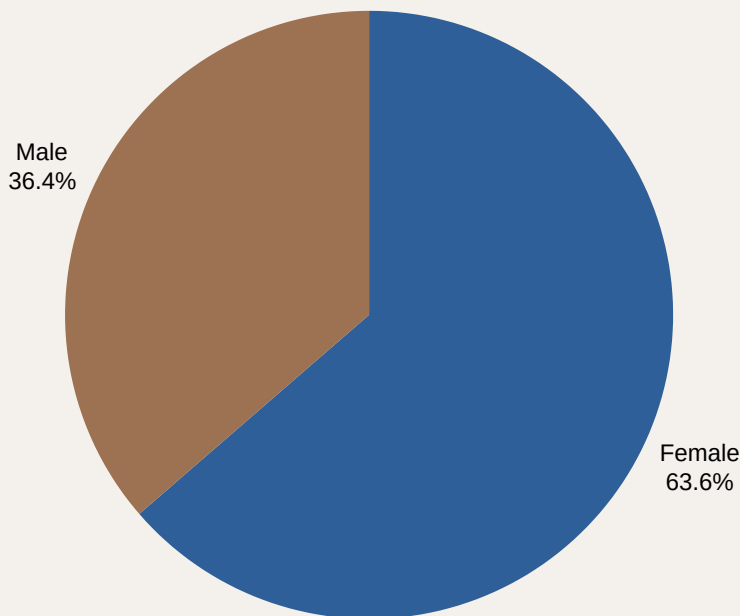
1. How do people from racially minoritised groups who are in the field of occupational psychology, including students, graduates and professionals, experience the profession?
2. How easy is it for occupational psychology students and professionals from racially minoritised groups to enter and maintain their careers?
3. If there are problems within the profession around diversity and inclusion what can we do about them?

Method

- The research used a qualitative design, interviewing 11 occupational psychology students and professionals.
- 64% of them were female, the mean age was 33, and the age range was from 24-54
- 7 participants worked in occupational psychology roles and 81% graduated between 2008 and 2018.
- 6 of them were black African, 2 were black Caribbean, 2 were South Asian and 1 was East Asian.
- The data collection was conducted in 2018 using mainly telephone conversations that were transcribed and thematically analysed.
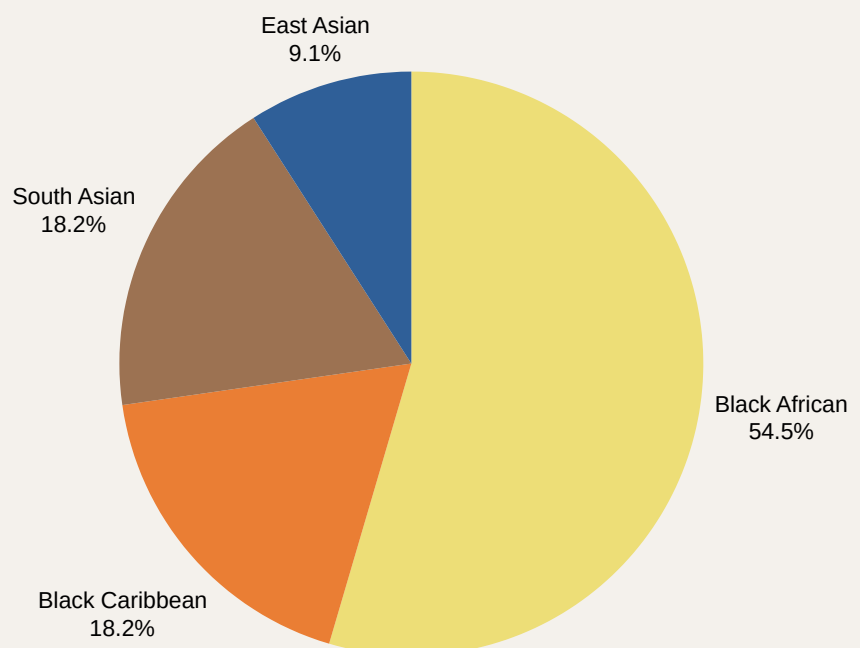
Gender

Male
36.4%

Female
63.6%

33

Mean Age

Ethnicity

East Asian
9.1%

South Asian
18.2%

Black African
54.5%

Black Caribbean
18.2%

Results

1) Challenges securing an organisational psychology role

Whilst a few participants found it easy to secure a role in the profession, the majority found it moderately or significantly hard to secure a role. One reason was the lack of networks,

"it's a lot about who you know… it's an incestuous industry who you know is as important as what you do" (Participant 9, Female).

Elitism was another theme that came up in the interviews some participant thought it was evident when applying to roles and that it is a closed profession.

The lack of visible jobs was also highlighted as a barrier to securing a role in occupational psychology.

"if you train as a doctor or a lawyer, it's easy to find jobs. The lack of visible job opportunities and there is a lot of investment you have to make to get a look in for roles." (Participant 8, Male).

Another theme that was highlighted in the interviews is that some participants thought they didn't have enough information about the profession when they were studying undergraduate psychology and before this.

"I knew what I wanted to do but I didn't know what it was called. I searched google, psychology, people, work and eventually I came across occupational psychology" (Participant 11, female).

"I never heard about occupational psychology until someone told me about it" (Participant 7, Female).

Participants also highlighted chartership as a barrier to getting into the profession and maintaining roles within it.

"Lots of things have changed, the changes made to the stage two have made it difficult and it's quite a big barrier for certain types of people." (Participant 6, Female).

"Wanted to be chartered, tried to contact a few companies. A year and a half two years later, though really disheartened and had to do something"(Participant 2, Male).

2) Race, diversity and inclusion within organisations
Another main theme was race diversity and inclusion within organisational psychology organisations.

"Seeing people, diversity or lack of… [It's] human nature [for people] to find [others] who are like themselves. When I see all of these occupational psychology teams as they have their pictures on their websites, I look and think, no diversity. It is the same thing time and time again." (Participant 11, Female).

"I looked at the pictures of people who worked in the firm, none were of colour, there were some who were EU or non-EU, but white. There were no managers of colour at other firms I know there isn't a lot of diversity at leadership levels." (Participant 5, Male).

"I knew it wouldn't be easy because there were no black people…I didn't see any black women or black anything black in occupational psychology." (Participant 10, Female).

3) **Indirect and Direct Discrimination**
Participants highlighted examples of direct and indirect discrimination were highlighted.

"I worked for a team leader and they said they don't like women or non-white people… [I have been] mistaken for an administrator and not a business psychologist or an assessor. [I am] quizzed about qualifications and how long I had been doing the job for. It's almost like every time I go somewhere, I have to prove myself and show my credentials."

A question posed to the participants was how diversity can be increased within occupational psychology.

"I would like us to be able to have more conversations and acknowledgement that these issues exist inside the profession" Participant 7, Female

"1. recognising there is a problem and 2. highlighting why diversity and inclusion is needed and 3. interventions and graduate schemes for high performing and everyone and let more people be aware of the profession. There could be more marketing and exposure." (Participant 5, Male).

Discussion

The field of psychology, particularly occupational psychology, faces significant challenges in diversity and inclusion, as evidenced by multiple studies. The disparities in access and achievement for racially minoritised students and professionals, have been a consistent theme in recent research (Murphy, 2019; Palmer et al., 2021). Career theories, such as the Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) (Bandura, 1986), help explain the barriers individuals from underrepresented backgrounds experience.

Firstly, the findings from this research show that racially minoritised groups, face significant difficulties and disadvantages in securing occupational psychology roles. This lack of access is reflective of broader systemic issues within the field, where racial and socio-economic backgrounds influence the likelihood of pursuing or succeeding in a psychology career

Research findings highlighted some themes, such as lack of career visibility and networks in occupational psychology, especially during undergraduate degrees or before. This lack of knowledge could lead to people overlooking this area, further perpetuating the lack of diversity and inclusion. Some participants noted the difficulty in even discovering occupational psychology as a career path during their studies, further perpetuating their underrepresentation, the closed and "incestuous" nature of the field, where "who you know" often outweighs "what you know" further hinders access for individuals outside established professional networks, particularly those from minority backgrounds.

Another theme highlighted within the findings were challenges securing an occupational psychology role. Many spoke about the lack of visible opportunities and that it seems like an 'elitist' profession, centring on existing networks. Which many of our participants felt they were outside of. Other participants felt like they were anomalies as 3/11 of them had found roles within occupational psychology firms.

The visible lack of diversity amongst occupational psychology firms was highlighted as another barrier. Participants felt that there was no representation of them within these organisations and they questioned their success or ability to secure a role.

The SCCT highlights the role of self-efficacy and outcome expectations in career development (Kelly & Foley, 2009). For minority students and professionals, however, the perception of systemic barriers, such as racial discrimination and lack of representation, directly impacts their self-efficacy. As reported by participants, seeing a lack of diversity in leadership roles and team members in occupational psychology can reinforce the idea that these spaces are inaccessible. These perceptions may lower self-efficacy, leading to reduced career aspirations or a reluctance to pursue psychology as a profession (Lent et al., 1994). Based on the literature, studies highlight the importance of career self-efficacy in the shape of information and the positive positioning of the profession. This, according to participants, needs to be improved.

The research also identifies the role of structural barriers, such as the chartership process, which can disproportionately disadvantage individuals from minoritised backgrounds. These barriers often limit access to the profession and create an ability to advance within it. These obstructions create a cycle where underrepresented individuals face systemic barriers at multiple stages of their careers, from education to professional practice. This highlights how the lack of vicarious learning experiences in the shape of role models is related to poor career self-efficacy.

Additionally, direct and indirect discrimination was experienced by individuals who had secured roles within occupational psychology, in the form of direct discrimination and microaggressions.

In conclusion, while some efforts have been made to address diversity in psychology, the profession still has a long way to go. Structural, systemic, and cultural changes are necessary to foster greater inclusion and equity, making psychology more accessible to individuals from all backgrounds.Top of Form
Bottom of Form

To answer the title of the research, "is an occupational psychology career for everyone?" at present, it is not, there is a lack of visible diversity with regards to race, ethnicity and socioeconomic status anecdotally within the UK. Steps to address this are addressed below.

Recommendations

1. Acknowledgement of the problem, increase awareness of the diversity and inclusion issue within occupational psychology

2. Interventions e.g. graduate schemes and provide fast track and easily accessible pathways for chartership, entry-level roles, structured internships, more after-qualification support, shadowing and projects

3. Division of Occupational Psychology to collect data on gender, ethnicity and other protected characteristics on an annual basis

4. Pay attention to different protected characteristics, not just gender and within and between ethnicity subtle differences in representation at all levels of the profession

5. Imbed inclusion into the profession, develop accountability to avoid it being a futile, box-ticking exercise

6. Look at different strands of diversity for the organisation to understand and provide interventions to avoid the Guinness effect better representation at the top

7. Democratise chartership to make it representative, rigorous and more accessible. Undergraduate degrees are currently around a minimum of £27k and Master's degrees in occupational psychology range in price is it really a) necessary to charge so much for chartership now? b) what are the effects of these prices on who can access the courses

8. Encourage firms to reach out more AND HIRE people that represent the modern working world and clients as one participant highlighted "it feels like opportunities aren't for everyone".

9. Widen participation, increase awareness, impact and knowledge. Attend schools, universities and colleges and publicise the profession for all.

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