

Experiences of autonomy support in learning and teaching among black and minority ethnic
students at university

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In higher education in the UK, there is an unnecessary and inequitable attainment gap of approximately 15% between the number of black and minority ethnic (BME) students and white students who receive a first class or upper second class degree. The aim of this study was to explore whether BME students experienced structural inequalities in teaching and learning that thwarted the extent to which they experienced satisfaction of their need for autonomy, which may contribute to the existence of an attainment gap. Three focus groups were conducted to explore these issues with 17 BME students studying at one UK university.

They were all female, aged between 18–50 years, and most described their ethnicity as Black African. Thematic analysis combining an inductive and deductive approach generated two themes: lack of satisfaction of the need for autonomy, and satisfaction of the need for autonomy. All students predominantly discussed situations in which they felt unable to behave in ways that were concordant with their true sense of self, due to factors including course material that did not address diverse cultural issues and negative stereotypes held by students and staff. They described how this often led to a sense of isolation, diminished motivation, and lower wellbeing. In contrast, some students described specific lectures in which diversity was discussed in a way that satisfied their need for autonomy. Implications for teaching are discussed.

Key words: autonomy; BME students; higher education; attainment gap; equality, diversity, and inclusion; self-determination theory

Introduction

While universities in the UK are generally succeeding in attracting greater numbers of students from black and minority ethnic (BME) groups (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2017), these students underachieve relative to their white peers. This is evidenced by an attainment gap of approximately 15%, whereby 77% of white students but only 62% of BME students achieve a first class or upper second class ('good') degree (Equality Challenge Unit, 2017). Furthermore, the BME attainment gap between Black African and white students is even greater at 25%. In addition to differences in attainment levels, BME students are more likely to drop out of university compared to white students, and are less likely to be in full-time employment within 6 months of graduating (55% of BME students versus 61% of white students) (Equality Challenge Unit, 2017). Although the term 'BME' can be regarded as problematic because it implies homogeneity between students from diverse continents including Africa and Asia, it is used in this paper because it is commonly used in the UK to describe patterns of difference on the basis of ethnicity.

The consistent differences in educational and subsequent employment outcomes for BME students compared to white students are likely to be due to several complex factors that are located in external structural and cultural causes (Berry & Loke, 2011; Richardson, 2015). They are not due to differences in psychological factors (such as personality or general mental wellbeing), socio-demographic factors (Woolf, McManus, Potts, & Dacre, 2013), or prior attainment (Equality Challenge Unit, 2017). While all students may face financial pressures, experience difficulties with social integration, and have to juggle studying with employment and personal lives (Denovan & Macaskill, 2013), BME students face an additional number of potential difficulties. These may include cultural barriers to social integration, differences in academic conventions if they originally studied outside of the UK, and difficulties in communicating if English is not their first language (Hillen & Levy, 2015; Regan de Bere, Nunn, & Nasser, 2015). BME students may also experience 'stereotype threat' as a result of these structural and cultural barriers. According to this theory, members of negatively stereotyped groups may underperform in assessment situations due to a variety of mechanisms, such as anxiety about confirming negative stereotypes, interfering self-consciousness, and narrowed attention (Steele & Aronson, 1995).

The potential causes of the BME attainment gap should, therefore, be addressed by understanding and removing structural and cultural inequalities that arise through teaching

and learning processes (Broecke & Nicholls, 2007; Singh, 2011). While some of these issues will require institution-wide attention and initiatives, the current paper seeks to explore the role of individual lecturers in supporting the need for autonomy satisfaction in the day-to-day experiences of BME students of learning and teaching at university. According to self-determination theory (SDT), all students, irrespective of their backgrounds, possess three psychological needs that provide a motivational foundation for academic engagement, optimal functioning, and wellbeing: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000; 2002). The current study focuses on BME students' experience of autonomy, which occurs when an individual experiences a sense of freedom and volition from perceiving oneself as being the origin or source of one's actions. Autonomy in this context does not mean individualism or self-sufficiency, but a sense of acting according to one's own free will in the absence of external compulsion (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier & Ryan, 1991; Deci & Ryan, 2000).

In a learning and teaching context, satisfaction of autonomy results in enhanced motivation, engagement, learning, and wellbeing (Reeve, Jang, Carrell, Jeon & Barch, 2004). Lecturers who engage in autonomy-supportive teaching nurture and develop the inner motivational resources that students inherently possess (Reeve & Halusic, 2009). They engage students in shared decision making, provide choices for students, and build on students' own interests and preferences (Reeve, 2006). If lecturers and classroom contexts do not allow satisfaction of the need for autonomy, they diminish students' motivation, causing alienation and poorer performance (Reeve, 2006).

It is possible that one contributor to the BME attainment gap is a lack of satisfaction of the need for autonomy among BME students. Although many lecturers may already use autonomy-supportive teaching styles, it could be that teaching and learning environments provide different experiences for BME students compared to white students. If so, this finding will have clear implications for lecturers in terms of the ways in which they can support BME students to experience satisfaction of the need for autonomy and achieve their full potential, which could reduce the BME attainment gap. The aim of this study was to explore whether BME students experienced structural and cultural inequalities in teaching and learning that thwarted the extent to which they experienced satisfaction of the need for autonomy.

Method

Participants

We conducted three focus groups with a total of 17 students who were studying a health and social care subject at a Post-1992 university in England. Ten were undergraduates and seven were postgraduates, aged between 18–50 years (two students preferred not to provide their age). All students were female. Twelve students were Black African, three were Asian, and two were Caribbean. English was not the first language of six students.

Procedure

After obtaining ethical approval, an email was sent to all students in one department, inviting those who identified as being from a BME group to take part in a focus group to discuss their experiences of learning and teaching on their course. Three focus groups containing four, six, and seven participants were conducted. The focus groups were led by a member of staff who also identified as being from a BME background, and was independent of the course. Example questions were: ‘Do you think that you can be yourself on the course and talk about your own ideas and opinions?’ and ‘Do you feel that you have the opportunity to decide for yourself how you go about studying on the course and the way you are taught?’. These questions were developed from those used to assess fulfilment of the need for autonomy in the Basic Needs Satisfaction Scale (Deci, Ryan, Gagné, Leone, Usunov, & Kornazheva, 2001). The students were also asked to discuss their sense of fulfilment of the two additional psychological needs for competence and relatedness, but the focus of the current study was on their experience of autonomy. The focus groups lasted between 60–90 minutes.

The focus groups were transcribed verbatim and the data were analysed using thematic analysis, combining both inductive (data-driven) and deductive (theory-driven) coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell, Norris, White & Moules, 2017). After listening to the recordings and reading and annotating the transcripts, the annotations were coded and labelled, and constructed into coherent themes. The current study provides a preliminary analysis of two primary themes that emerged from the data: lack of satisfaction of the need for autonomy, and satisfaction of the need for autonomy.

Results and Discussion

Lack of satisfaction of the need for autonomy

In both focus groups, most students spoke of how they experienced a significant lack of autonomy in the learning and teaching environment. One way in which this manifested was through restrictive course material that did not always have relevance for them, and did not tackle the challenging issues of diversity and inclusion that they faced on a regular basis. This meant that they could not study areas of personal interest, or talk about the problems that confronted them:

If it was up to me, the content would be *very* different. [...] There's just so many holes within that content that we're taught. [...] I feel like diversity is like this little bit of salt that they put right at the end, that's just like a little garnish. [...] There's just hardly anything on... black and ethnic minorities. (P4)

We don't really sit down to talk about [diversity]... we've never... we haven't talked about this. [...] At first, I thought do I really want to go to this [focus group]? [...] It always feels like you're putting yourself in the spotlight, of being attacked. [...] So it's a case of shall I be quiet and endure it, or... shall I speak up? (P7)

These experiences served to reinforce the students' sense that they were seen as a minority group whose views were considered largely irrelevant and superfluous by white staff and peers. This view was strengthened by some lecturers who did not challenge, or even reinforced, negative stereotypes of people from BME groups:

[With one lecturer] we are assured in the lesson that BME student groups, over the years, have come out statistically... that they don't perform very well. And this is, like, in class. [...] It was said three times, four times. [Another time] we are in a lecture, and we have group work, someone put on their references, that they read in the research, that ethnic minorities were higher in mental health issues, compared to [...] British people. [...] It's things like this that build stigma in class. (P8)

Such incidents made the students feel trapped by stigmatic stereotypes that encouraged white people to see them not as autonomous individuals, but as members of a homogenous, inferior group. This affected the students in ways that went far beyond the classroom, influencing their whole sense of self.

Some students described how they intentionally put on a false persona to interact

with white people at university, trying to present themselves in ways that enabled them to feel accepted by conforming with a dominant social norm:

I feel like an imposter. [...] [With lecturers] I put on an act... my accent changes, my voice changes, and I'll pretend that I am a clever person. [...] If I, you know, put on my real accent and if I talked like where I come from, I probably wouldn't be that well liked there. [...] I feel a bit fake. (P15)

I think my English is an issue. [...] I talk a bit fast, [...] I blur my words, [...] I'm trying so hard [to slow down]. [...] I do a lot of breathing exercises, but that isn't really me is it? I'm just trying to pretend, but I don't want to do that! (P7)

I know that when I'm out in public [...] I get a bit like... like it's Queen's English. [...] We have to put on the acceptable front, you know, the package... to prove yourself to fit into white society. [...] You can't be yourself. (P14)

By hiding their true selves, these students perceived their behaviour as being neither autonomous nor authentic but strongly regulated by external forces. It created explicit awareness that they did not feel free to be themselves at university.

Students in both groups discussed how they felt pressured to think and behave in certain ways in class. They reported how they could not express their own views for fear of prompting disparagement and disdain:

You're here to learn, but sometimes I feel unsure of this, but I think I have an idea and I'll put it across, but it's... you're immediately put on the spot and you're like, oh gosh, or you're made to feel like it's a stupid question. You shouldn't be thinking that way! I feel, oh, you know, I'd better keep quiet and not contribute. (P9)

Some people doubt us because we are BME's, like we don't have that deep ability, like even when you say something in class, you feel like it's being like scrutinised. [...] Depending on who's class, [sometimes] I wouldn't even dare contribute, because maybe you'd be made to feel... [foolish]. (P5)

These students did not regard their actions and voices as just being externally controlled; they sometimes felt that they could not act or speak in the classroom at all. It seemed that they had to remain silent, invisible, and avoid trying to contribute their ideas to white lecturers and peers.

Satisfaction of the need for autonomy

In contrast to the above theme, students provided a smaller number of examples of experiences which satisfied their need for autonomy. Several described occasions with particular lecturers who encouraged them to talk about diversity and ethnicity, making them feel free to express themselves openly in class. They emphasised that this was unusual:

With [Lecturer X], we've done... a lot about, you know, like, different diversities. [...] We had to do about our culture, and that was our chance to really open up and be ourselves, and I thought that was really good, because I'd never, ever had anything like that in my life. [...] I think there are some lecturers that are trying to, you know, put it in there. (P1)

I really enjoyed one of our sessions, we were talking about ethnicity and identity, and I really enjoyed that lecture, because, I felt just, like, so... liberated, I felt, like, so comfortable talking about, like real things that could affect me. [...] These are things that need to be spoken about. (P3)

Some students also described how their courses had, on the whole, enabled them to be reflective, broaden their views, engage in critical thinking, and gain a deeper understanding of their sense of self. This enhanced their experience of autonomy within and beyond the classroom, allowing them to comprehend and regulate their attitudes and behaviours in constructive ways:

It's made me more of a critical thinker. [...] Before I used to be, like, a really negative person [...] but now I think of the positives as well, so I guess it's made me better in that way. (P10)

I think I've gone on a self-discovery journey... it's really made me think. Because sometimes you actually think you know yourself, and then you look back at how you've become a student and start looking into how you made certain decisions and why you made them. [...] It does actually make me see myself in a different light. (P5)

While they still faced racist and discriminatory barriers at university and in society more generally, this sense of autonomy gave them more confidence to manage such issues and maintain a strong and positive sense of self.

Conclusion

The existence of a BME attainment gap is unnecessary and inequitable. The current study explored whether BME students experienced structural and cultural inequalities in teaching and learning in higher education that thwarted their need for autonomy. Given that the need for autonomy underpins academic engagement and motivation to achieve, lack of satisfaction of this need may, in part, contribute to the existence of an attainment gap.

Focus groups with BME students revealed a number of significant barriers in their university education which served to undermine their sense of autonomy. These students felt that external pressures, including restrictive curricula, widely-held negative stereotypes of BME people, and entrenched discriminatory cultural norms, meant that they could not study topics relevant to themselves, articulate and discuss ideas originating from themselves, or even *be* themselves in the university learning and teaching environment.

To address these barriers, it will be necessary for lecturers to become aware of the challenges facing BME students, and to recognise any conscious and unconscious biases that they may hold towards their students (McDuff, Tatam, Beacock, & Ross, 2018). This will be essential for creating an inclusive, supportive atmosphere in which all students feel equally valued and respected. Lecturers must recognise the importance of discussing different perspectives in class, play an active role in encouraging BME students to share their views and experiences, and give positive, stimulating feedback. Many BME students in the UK have started to call for more diverse curricula, for example, through the 'Why Is My Curriculum White?' campaign (see Hussain, 2015). Lecturers are in an optimal position to introduce and co-create new content with BME students to achieve diversity in the curriculum, and enable students to create project and assessment topics that they consider to be personally relevant (Arday, 2019). Opportunities to report racist and discriminatory incidents and receive strong support should be offered in easily accessible ways, such as regular one-to-one meetings with appropriately trained tutors, discussion groups for BME students, or student mentoring schemes.

Overall, it will be vital to ensure that BME students can think and behave in ways that are concordant with their true sense of self at university, in order to nurture their inner motivational resources, stimulate their engagement with learning, and enhance their wellbeing. Higher education can offer tremendous opportunities for students to undergo

transformative, life-changing experiences of self-development, empowering them to achieve their goals and become the people that they want to be. For this to be feasible for all BME students, however, UK universities will have to undergo a significant transformation.

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