

Voices of the minority: Diverse experiences from practitioners in the field of sports and exercise psychology

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The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of sports and exercise psychologists and sports and exercise psychology trainees from minority groups as they practice within the field. The experiences of UK minority sports and exercise psychologists and trainees within the field have not been widely explored in the literature. The lived experiences of three practitioners were explored through the lens of race, sexual orientation and religion. Forty-five-minute semi-structured interviews were analysed using an interpretive phenomenological analysis. The following themes arose from the study: the unseen minority, embed discrimination in sport, improving the field, journey barriers and the qualities of a practitioner. Based on the themes explored future research areas are discussed.

Keywords: Sports psychologist; Minority experiences; Minority psychologists; Qualitative research; Equality and diversity; Inclusion.

Introduction

THE FIELD of psychology continues to struggle with diversity (Ahn et al., 2021) and this can be seen in the lack of diverse research published, the workforce demographics and the training on the educational routes. For example, between 1970–2010, only five per cent of psychological publications in high-tier journals highlighted race (Roberts et al. 2020). The British Psychological Society's (BPS) equality, diversity and inclusion group conducted a preliminary study that sought to gather demographic data within the field of sports and exercise psychology. Of their 129 respondents 83 per cent identified as white and only 16 per cent identified as BAME, with small numbers of respondents identifying as other minority groups such as three per cent identified as non-binary and 16 per cent identifying as having a disability (Morris et al., 2022). This preliminary data shows us a snippet into the demographic splits within the field of sports and exercise psychology in the UK.

The minority influence theory (Moscovici et al., 1969) has been used to explore the impact of the influence of minority groups on majority groups. This model has three components that outline how a minority group can influence the majority and change accepted norms. The first component is consistency, which refers to the minority group's consistency in their message, which can then lead to the majority group rethinking their views. The second component is flexibility, which refers to the ability of the minority group to be flexible and compromising in their views when approaching the majority. The final component is a commitment over time, which may involve the minority group taking risks to showcase their level of commitment to their views. Examples of this theory's impact can be seen in societal and throughout sport. For example, Rosa Parks sitting at the front of the bus, which led to boycotts in 1955; Castor Semenya's campaign to be accepted into the Olympics possibly led to change in UK athletics and Lia Thomas' impact

on swimming as a trans athlete. The theory outlines that with these three components the majority are required to reflect and look at their own norms before the change occurs.

We have seen a rise in efforts for equality, diversity and inclusivity (EDI) organisational projects, practices and strategies becoming an integral part of numerous professional organisations (Williams, 2021). EDI in organisations have been shown to improve creativity, problem-solving, better decision-making and improved organisational productivity (Rohwerder, 2017).

One key turning point for these changes was the killing of George Floyd in 2020, when the whole world was still and watching (Applewhite, 2021). In light of this two years ago, many organisations promised to make changes in relation to diversity (Walker, 2022), and the BPS were no different on this front. The BPS' (2020) declaration of equality, diversity and inclusion states its commitment to promote EDI within the field and shares information on how this will be executed.

Raising questions, such as do the current sports and exercise psychology workforce reflect the clients we serve? Is our workforce diverse and if no, why not? And how can we improve diversity within the field? These are all vital questions that may be asked to push the profession forward. Inequality and lack of diversity in the field can be rooted unknowingly by having biased procedures, which disadvantage certain groups when entering the field (Thomas, 2008). This can include discussing EDI in training practices, educational routes and research. This is highlighted in Butryn's (2002) research, which explored white racial identity and white privilege in sports and exercise psychology consulting. The participant outlined that issues of race and gender were never discussed in relation to human performance, only performance based on a science model was addressed.

Minority group definitio

Though there has been some debate in regards to the definition of minority groups

within research (Prati et al., 2017), the current study will contextualise minority groups as those that are lesser in number than the majority group. This can be encapsulated by race, religion, age, sexuality or sexual orientation amongst our participants. Moscovici's (1994) definition of minority groups aligns with this and adds another dimension as it states that minority and majority groups are defined by size and treatment.

Experiences of minority practitioners

There no large body of research in the UK that explores the experiences of minority groups within the field of sports and exercise psychology (Morris et al., 2022), but the experiences of minority groups have been highlighted in other subdivisions of the field. The experiences of US American Asian sports and exercise psychologists showed overt displays of racism, racial microaggressions and having to excel beyond normal recommendations to be accepted within basketball (Yu, Nyguyen & Petrie, 2016). Furthermore, practitioners found that sporting stereotypes of their race affected their self-perception, confidence and motivation to work with sports teams. It is important to understand that some minority groups are not easily identifiable, and this can include those from certain religious groups or sexual orientations. In these instances, groups have the choice not to disclose information as it pertains to their minority group. This provides them with the choice to not be associated with a minority group or hide their identity and can support them in avoiding discrimination or abuse (Higa et al., 2014). In Bulter's (2004) study, participants reported encountering anti-lesbian and gay ideals along their training route as people were unaware of their sexuality.

For some minority groups adapting to white middle-class norms while in training or practicing in the psychology profession was seen (Shah, 2010). Participants from Shah (2010) stated 'if I am sitting down in a room with a middle class white person, I can interact

with them in a way that's gonna be more suitable for them'. Showcasing a need to adapt to perceived societal norms to make others feel comfortable during interactions. Similar was seen when exploring the experiences of African American female sports and exercise psychologists, which showcased several experiences that impact their practice (Hyman, White & David, 2022). It was highlighted that due to being in environments that were predominately white male dominated they changed their hair either by straightening or relaxing it to fit in with what they felt was the norm of their environment. Additionally, some participants stated being hyperaware of themselves and how they or their identities impacted or influenced others they worked with and the physical exhaustion this led to.

Additional barriers were shown in a study by Adetimole et al. (2005), which explored three black trainee clinical psychologists' experiences of being minorities within the field. This included participants feeling that they were in the field to meet a diversity quota, their experiences and knowledge as black practitioners not being celebrated and being exposed to overt experiences of racism in ideas and attitudes along their journey. On psychological training routes, it has been seen that those from minority groups find the exploration of some theories, such as the psychoanalytic approach's views on sexuality not inclusive and uncomfortable (Butler, 2004).

In contrast, strengths have been attributed to being a minority within the psychological field as practitioners felt this allowed them a level of open-mindedness when interacting with clients (Butler, 2004).

Discrimination in the fields we work

Exploring the experiences of minority practitioners sheds a light on key experiences, and looking at the spaces in which they work is just as beneficial for understanding their lived experiences. Sports and exercise psychologists will work in several fields, including sports domains, exercise

domains and performance sectors (Association for Applied Sport Psychology, 2022). Societally, sport has been used as a tool to integrate a number of different groups (Gomez-Gonzalez et al., 2021); although policymakers made strides towards improving inclusivity within the sporting domains (Tacon, 2007), there is still a long way to go.

This can be seen in the experiences of female sports and exercise psychologists who experienced more sexism in male-dominated sports than in sports of mixed gender (Goldman et al., 2021; Roper, 2008). As equally important, gay athletes have been seen to hide their sexuality in sports due to the lack of acceptance of them by teammates, coaches and institutions of sport (Lucyk, 2011). This can be due to a fear of experiencing homophobia within their sport (Woog, 1998).

In addition to fears that athletes faced, discrimination and sexism have been faced in coaching where we have seen British female Asian coaches undergoing this in grassroots football (Kilvington, 2016). Understanding the areas in which our practitioners work, both minority and the majority can further enhance the understanding of the barriers and situations they may face.

Purpose of study

Previous studies exploring minority psychologists within different subdomains and in sports and exercise psychology have shown the barriers that minority groups face. Using an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach the current study aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of sports and exercise psychologists and trainees from a minority group. The research was concerned with specifically exploring the experiences of practitioners as they worked within the field. Further knowledge of this topic can allow for a better understanding of barriers that minority practitioners face and their views on how we can improve equality and diversity in the field of sports and exercise psychology.

Method

Research design

This study used an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) of three semi-structured interviews to explore how practitioners make meaning of being a minority group within the field of sports and exercise psychology.

Participants

Participants consisted of one newly qualified sports and exercise psychologist and two trainee sports and exercise psychologists. Two of the practitioners identified as female and one identified as male. The minority groups that these participants came from included the LGBTQI+ community, the Jewish and Arabic communities. This allowed understanding from three minority groups' perspectives.

The primary inclusion criteria for participants were to be an HCPC registered sports and exercise psychologist or be on the British Psychological Society's (BPS) stage 2 training pathway. Participants must have been currently working with clients either independently or under supervision. Finally, participants would be from a minority group, one of which is represented under the nine protected characteristics identified in the Equalities Act. This included age, race, gender, sexual orientation, religion and sexuality. Participants who did not fit these criteria were excluded from participation.

Recruitment of participants was conducted via social media and peer supervision groups. The practitioners who expressed interest in the study were sent an information sheet with further details on the study and upon consent, an interview was arranged via zoom. Pseudonyms have been used to protect participants' identities.

Procedure

An initial call for participants was sent via email and social media groups to recruit for the study. Those who showed interest were issued an information sheet with further details about the study. For those interested,

a follow-up conversation was held to provide further details on the study and its purpose. Once consent was gained, a 45-minute semi-structured interview was arranged using the Zoom software system. All interviews were recorded using Zoom and then transcribed verbatim. All participants were made aware that they had the right to withdraw up until their interview was transcribed.

Data analysis

The IPA process outlined in Pietkiewicz and Smith (2012) was used to conduct the analysis. This is an in-depth process that allows for the emersion of the data and experiences to be explored.

1. The first step involves reading the raw transcripts to familiarise oneself with the data and noting down initial understandings. This step also involved reviewing and listening to audio to immerse oneself in the personal experiences and remember the interview atmosphere.
2. Next, emerging themes are identified and initial notes and reflections are used to support the creation of these. A Microsoft Word two-column table was used to organise data and create these.
3. Themes were then reviewed to ensure they captured the nature of the experiences and research.
4. Finally, the themes were written up and described using extracts from the interviews to do so. The researcher's analytic comments follow within the section.

Reflexivity

The practice of reflexivity allows for self-awareness, credibility and deeper understanding of the research (Dodgson, 2019). The author is part of a minority group as a black female practitioner and a chartered sport and exercise psychologist under the BPS. Throughout the study, reflexivity was practiced by way of reflexive diary writing by

the researcher. This allowed for reflections on my findings in the research, key points that arose from interviews and any professional insight. This allowed for the conscious raising of how the researcher's own experiences of being a minority in the field and how data were responded to.

Results

The purpose of this research was to explore the experiences of sport and exercise psychologists and sport and exercise psychology trainees. Specifically, their experiences as minority groups within the field and the impact this has on them in practice. The findings from the semi-structured interviews are presented as individual quotes and compared together to showcase different takes on the themes. The themes that arose were: the unseen minority, embed discrimination in sport, improving the field, journey barriers and the qualities of a practitioner.

The unseen minority

This theme captured participants' views on being a minority group, which is not initially identifiable in relation to other groups. Two participants showcased similarities in their ability to hide their minority group until further interaction occurred. For example, Ruth explains:

I'm white. Until, you know my name [in reference to the participant's surname]. You don't know who I am, once you know my name.... it's pretty obvious. ...but up until that point, I'm okay. Like nothing is coming at me. I can hear stuff that is a bit unsettling, but I've had so much anti-Semitic rubbish. My entire life... just a little comment here and there really doesn't do anything to me anymore

As Ruth is from a religious minority group, in the UK, she may not be initially characterised as other until her origins or roots are known. This was similar to Dirk who identified as a cisgender white gay male who on some occasions may not be automatically

grouped into a minority group. This is seen as he explains:

I've literally had people that are like three months down the road and I'm... talking about having a date with some guy and they're all like, you're gay.

In contrast, Greta is of Arab, middle eastern descent, which means that her minority group background is known instantly.

Both Dirk's and Ruth's experiences are similar to those found in Bulter's (2004) study, which highlights that LGBTQ trainee psychologists did not always disclose their sexuality, which meant they heard derogatory comments in relation to the LGBTQ community.

Embed discrimination in sport

As two of the participants worked mainly in the sports field, they discussed the discrimination they had observed or experienced while working as a practitioner. For example, Ruth outlines:

it's the fact that nobody knows what Friday night is.... no one is aware of the holidays, on any level. It's the fact that, Football is allowed to continue to exist in this way. It's the complete acceptance. So that's the stuff I'm kind of like, this is a hostile environment and this is why I came into this in like, I have hide because I've been to football matches I've heard the chants.... it's not just S chamber songs, it's also bananas being thrown

As Ruth is of Jewish descent, she highlights the lack of consideration for Jewish athletes as it pertains to the Sabbath and other religious days. She also highlights being helpless as it appears to be an accepted norm by the masses. In line with this, Dirk discusses accepted and nonaccepted norms within the sporting field. He states:

it's more accepted to be a gay man in figure skating than it is to be a gay man in football.... slowly but surely it's kind of stepping forward

there. And then we get to intersex athletes. I mean, nobody knows what intersex is. So when you have somebody like Caster Semenya who comes along, they don't even know what to do.

Additionally, he highlights his own experience as a gay man within sport as he states:

I've experienced homophobia at swim competitions on deck, in the locker rooms, things like that..... I was the swim coach for, a kids swim team that I had so much fun coaching..... but the parents were like homophobic .. it made it hard for me as a coach just to be able to do my job.

Dirks's experience of discrimination support similar findings on coaching, sexism and discrimination towards British Asian women with respect to football (Kilvington, 2016).

Journey barriers

This theme explores barriers some participants faced during their time as practitioners, finding roles and along the educational route. Greta discusses:

I think, well, can you go to a sports psychology conference? Everyone there is white middle class,... it's the first thing that I noticed going into a room. And I think that it is a barrier because, at sports psychology level, at national level, at every level, I think there's barriers to ethnic minorities. And the same barriers that would apply there, I applied here. ...I think that, people perceive you differently. I think you'd have to work a bit harder to show that you are on a level playing field with everyone else.

This was similar to findings by Asian American sports psychologists who felt they had to exceed the norm to do well in the field (Yu, Nyguyen & Petrie, 2016). Conversely, Dirk explains that being a gay man and not from a minority group, which is initially identified as posed barriers to him as he states:

I worked at the office of diversity on establishing a gay-straight Alliance. And I, worked

with this organisation on.... the LGBT sports magazine that... we build diversity and inclusion training, so I'll put those in the description because I mean, that's what you're supposed to put into a description, right. Is what you do and I mean, ...if it helps. My secret hope is it kind of helps like check their little diversity tick check box. But I also feel like it's also kind of been a barrier as well, because they like visible diversity, right.

This was not the same for Ruth as she explains

Sometimes I worry that my name is divisive.... it does the kind of triage for me. If you don't want to work with someone with my name, they won't contact me. So there's that. From my very specific personal perspective. And this won't be the same for other Jews. I have been lucky. I think I've been lucky. I don't think I've experienced a huge number of, barriers in terms of access to the profession.

Even though Ruth outlines a lack of barriers she faces there is a juxtaposition as she discusses her name as being divisive and essentially acting as a barrier.

Qualities of a practitioner

This theme captured views on the qualities participants felt they brought to the field as minority practitioners. When asked two participants highlighted the importance that being a minority or having a different view makes in practice. For example, Greta explains:

If you face certain challenges or if you come from a certain place, obviously you bring with it, that culture.... You bring with it a different viewpoint, but also you can relate more to say, athletes, individuals, people who are of an ethnic background, you can relate to certain challenges that they face, which is nice because they would hopefully feel a bit more comfortable with you. I've had it where clients say to me.... I feel much more comfortable with you because you're Indian. I'm like, I'm not Indian [Laughs] but I'm glad you feel that

way.....It's important because not everyone is white middle class it's that expression, If all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail, because if everyone was exactly the same and approached things in exactly the same way, nothing would ever get done, you need variety, you need different experiences, different viewpoints, people come from different places and it's important to recognise that, to be able to work effectively with others.

Similarly Ruth explained

So questioning, I think it's important and the perspective that comes from a different viewpoint. I think there's a certain empathy that comes with, maybe not being part of the majority, the kind of an empathy and a compassion. I'm not saying isn't there, if you're not, but maybe it shows up in a slightly different way.

Both Ruth and Greta's view is similar to those expressed by LGBTQI+ psychologists who expressed that being from their minority group allowed them an open-mindedness while working with clients (Butler, 2004). Conversely, Dirk explained another point of view, which he felt was of quality as a minority practitioner, which he explained:

I've got a lot of confidence, With the whole coming out as gay and in dealing with all this homophobia and dealing with all this stuff. Being in sports as a gay minority is not easy. And for me, I've always had this confidence in that I know I'm gay and I'm happy that I'm gay. I like being gay. And regardless of what other people want to, whatever their opinion is, It's pretty much not important. ...so that confidence, it's a way that kind of radiates to other people, and they actually point it out, and say you're always so confident in everything you do.

Improving the field

Finally, the theme of improving the field explored participants' views on how sports and exercise psychology could further be equal, diverse and inclusive. Greta expresses

a need to make the field accessible to those that financially would be priced out of the profession. She explains:

I think firstl , we need to make it more accessible because the reason why it caters to a certain demographic is. You have to be a certain demographic to get into it. You've got to fund this... you've either got to have worked your whole life, or you've got to have an affluent family. And we know that a lot of the BAME community, I don't really like that word actually but alot of the BAME community. They don't have that. They often come from deprived areas in London and so they wouldn't be able to fund this sports psychology thing it's expensive and it's not just the six grand you pay to get on. And the supervision fees, it's literally everything, because if you do this properly, you need to find work and that work is not going to be well paid. So firstl , it needs to be accessible to allow for that.

Whereas Dirk felt embedding learning into the curriculum was the best option as he states:

the way that we train psychologist for future, college courses and certification programmes and stuff like that. And at this point it's not even LGBT specific, right. It's, the issues affecting people of colour and minority communities within. Right. You know, people from like Asian descent, the kind of racism, they experiences is different then what black people experience, which is different than everybody else. So everybody has their own reality or their own things that they have to deal with. So, it's not that we have to try and teach, you know, a classes of sports psychologist. Okay. Here's how you do with Asian, you know, racism. And here's how you deal with, you know, you don't, you don't need to teach them that, but what you, what the field I think we can best benefit from is how can we. Put in this range of perspectives and this diverse, you know, different, uh, like diverse knowledge bases and say, okay, you know, you know, let's, let's, let's try and make this cross-cultural.

Conversely, Ruth showed some reservations that came out throughout her answers, as she explained:

I think maybe awareness. I like to hope that if you just provide people with enough information and enough awareness and enough empathy. I think we need to enhance empathy for a start I think that's important. I think more education. so I don't know. Aren't we doing these things? I might just be getting hopeless now. Sorry. Um, consciousness building consciousness raising, I think, has to happen. I think empathy needs to be built.

All practitioners highlighted different views on how to make the field inclusive and diverse, which are all areas for exploration. Ruth highlights reservations as she believes a lot had been done, but not much had changed. In relation to the minority influence theory, if she and other minority groups stay committed to the message and take risks in how they showcase this it can allow reflection from the majority group.

Limitations

Firstly, the sample size of the study was small with only three participants being interviewed and experiences explored. This could mean that vital views from other practitioners were missed. As the researcher looked at those practicing within the field, this ruled out any qualified sports

psychologist who worked in academia or research fields from the study.

Conclusion

This article's purpose was to share the experiences of three minority practitioners practicing in the field of sports and exercise psychology. While there were common experiences and thoughts that arose, there were a number of differences, and this shows us the uniqueness of the minority experience practising within the field. This includes the barriers to practising as a minority and their overall experience.

As the BPS looks to improve equality, diversity and inclusivity within the field, hearing from those practicing and training is vital. Understanding how minority groups within the field of sports and exercise psychology experience professional practice and its workings are important for growth. The more we understand the barriers and ways to improve these minority groups the more we can accommodate the next generation of practitioners. The current study highlights areas for further exploration, including looking at the experiences of minority groups working in academia and a larger-scale exploration of minority group views on inclusion within sport and psychology.

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