

# 'Stereotype threat' could affect exam performance of ethnic minority medical students

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The underperformance in examinations of UK medical students from ethnic minorities could be partly down to a psychological phenomenon called 'stereotype threat', according to new UCL research published today in the *British Medical Journal*.

Medical students from ethnic minority backgrounds make up approximately 30 per cent of the UK medical student population, but significantly underperform in assessments compared to their white counterparts. Similar findings have been reported in the USA and Australia.

The qualitative study, led by researchers from the UCL Academic Centre for Medical Education (ACME), was informed by US research which found that African American college students underperform in tests because they are worried about living up to negative stereotypes about the ability of their ethnic group - a phenomenon dubbed 'stereotype threat'.

Lead author Katherine Woolf, UCL ACME, said: "The problem in applying stereotype threat to UK medical students is that the majority of ethnic minority medical students here are from South Asian backgrounds, and it is not fully clear whether negative stereotypes exist about that group.

"The aim of the study was to establish if negative stereotypes about that group do exist and thus if stereotype threat might be one reason that UK ethnic minority medical students are underperforming academically."

The study was conducted by interviewing an ethnic mix of Year 3 medical students and their clinical teachers. It was found that the clinical teachers (mostly doctors) as well as the medical students themselves did have negative stereotypes about UK Asian medical students, who were perceived as being over-reliant on book learning and excessively quiet in class. No evidence of direct discrimination was found.

Katherine added: "The fact that these negative stereotypes exist raises the possibility that stereotype threat may be occurring. We found that both students and teachers considered the student-teacher relationship to be a vital part of learning, but some clinical teachers disliked teaching and could behave antagonistically towards students whom they perceived as having "negative" attributes (e.g. being quiet in class). Students also reported being unable to learn from unenthusiastic or intimidating teachers, suggesting that negative stereotyping might adversely affect Asian medical students' learning by interfering with their educational relationships with teachers.

Jane Dacre, head of the Division of Medical Education at UCL said: "It's clear from our results that more research needs to be done into the effects of stereotype threat in UK medical schools, and in fostering positive educational relationships between all students and their clinical teachers."

Source: University College London

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