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Narratives of Belonging, Exclusion, and Endurance: A Narrative Inquiry into the Experiences of African and Asian Descent Staff in the UK National Health Service

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Abstract

Persistent racial and ethnic inequalities continue to shape workplace experiences within public sector organisations, including healthcare systems. This paper presents findings from a narrative inquiry exploring the holistic experiences of staff of African and Asian descent working within the United Kingdom National Health Service (NHS). Despite long-standing equality and diversity policies, disparities in career progression, leadership representation, and workplace wellbeing remain evident. Using narrative interviews, participants' professional life stories were elicited to examine how organisational culture, power, and identity are experienced and interpreted over time. Participants described entering the NHS with strong vocational motivation and expectations of fairness and inclusion. Over time, their narratives revealed recurrent experiences of marginalisation, exclusion from informal networks, and opaque progression processes. These experiences were rarely framed as isolated incidents but were understood as cumulative and embedded within everyday organisational practices. Participants also articulated strategies of adaptation and endurance, including self-monitoring, emotional regulation, and the recalibration of career aspirations, in order to remain professionally viable. While commitment to patient care and public service remained strong, these strategies often came at personal cost, affecting confidence, wellbeing, and leadership ambition. The findings demonstrate the value of narrative inquiry in capturing relational, emotional, and temporal dimensions of work that are frequently overlooked in policy discourse and quantitative research. By foregrounding lived experience, this study contributes to social science debates on race, work, organisational culture, and inequality. Although situated within the UK NHS, the insights offer broader relevance for public sector organisations internationally.

Keywords: Narrative Inquiry, Workplace Inequality, Race and Ethnicity, Organisational culture, Public Sector Employment