


Perinatal Mental Health Inequalities Affecting Mothers from Ethnic Minority Backgrounds: A Qualitative Study of Occupational Therapy Students' Perspectives from Education to Future Practice

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Dates:

Received: 11/02/2026
Accepted: 11/04/2026

Article citation:

Ruddock, K. M. (2026). Perinatal mental health inequalities affecting ethnic minority mothers: A qualitative study exploring occupational therapy students perspectives. *The Human Occupation & Wellbeing Journal*, 2(1).
<https://doi.org/10.18552/dwma.wj76>

Conflict of interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.



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ABSTRACT

Background: Perinatal mental health inequalities remain a concern in the United Kingdom (UK), particularly for mothers from ethnic minority backgrounds who often face additional social and structural barriers to gaining support. This study aimed to explore how occupational therapy students understand these inequalities and how prepared they feel to work with mothers during the perinatal period.

Methodology: A qualitative phenomenological design was used. A purposive sampling strategy was used, and semi-structured interviews were conducted with four occupational therapy students from a UK University. Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis to identify key themes in the participants accounts.

Findings: Three themes emerged, pointing to gaps in confidence, understanding, and readiness for culturally responsive work. Students described different levels of awareness of perinatal mental health, with some drawing on placement experience while others relied more on personal or informal knowledge. Students felt that the lack of focused teaching on perinatal mental health and cultural humility sometimes made it harder for them to work out how their academic learning should translate into everyday practice.

Conclusion: Overall, the findings suggest that clearer curriculum guidance and more practical learning opportunities may help prepare the future occupational therapy practitioners to deliver safe, fair and more inclusive perinatal mental health care and support.

Keywords: Perinatal mental health, inequalities, occupational therapy, ethnic minority mothers, occupational therapy education

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INTRODUCTION

Maternal suicide is the leading direct cause of death in the first year after giving birth (Medland et al., 2025). Although the United Kingdom has made progress in developing specialist perinatal mental health services (Horakova et al., 2024; Knight et al., 2023), significant inequalities remain, particularly for mothers from ethnic minority backgrounds. For many women needing support during this time, the ability to access timely and appropriate care and support is shaped by social and structural inequalities.

Black and South Asian mothers are less likely to seek or receive perinatal mental health support, because they face barriers in accessing it (Conneely et al., 2023). That said, Conneely et al. drew on a relatively small qualitative sample, and their findings may not capture the full range of experiences across different regions of the UK. Jankovic et al. (2020) found that Black and Asian women in the UK were under-referred to perinatal mental health services, even when they showed similar or higher levels of distress than White women.

Vedam et al. (2019) also showed that ethnic minority mothers commonly reported mistreatment, discrimination and having their concerns dismissed, which suggests that these issues are not unique to the UK but form part of a wider, global problem in maternity systems. It is worth noting that the study by Vedam et al., (2019) was based on maternity care in the United States, and whilst the themes they raised resonate with evidence found in the UK, the differences between the two healthcare systems mean the findings cannot be applied to the UK context without some caution. These inequalities do not occur in isolation; they have direct consequences for how women participate in everyday roles, routines and meaningful

occupations (Townsend & Wilcock, 2004). Within occupational therapy, these inequalities can be understood through the concept of occupational justice, which looks at people's right to engage in meaningful roles and activities. Townsend and Wilcock (2004) argue that when people are prevented from engaging in valued occupations due to social, cultural, or structural constraints, they experience occupational injustice. Tinarwo and Robin (2025) support this view as they found that Black students in UK higher education face occupational deprivation and marginalisation rooted in structural racism, affecting their sense of belonging, identity and their ability to participate equally in education.

Intersectionality reveals how structural inequalities and systemic racism affect outcomes in perinatal mental health (Birthrights, 2022). Kent (2021) uses Crenshaw's idea of intersectionality to demonstrate how the combination of race and gender shapes ethnic minority mothers' experiences and can limit their access to equitable care. Whilst theoretically strong, it is mainly based in a psychoanalytic group setting rather than perinatal services, though it still offers a useful framework for understanding how overlapping identities shape experiences of inequality. The Birthrights (2022) inquiry offers a valuable, detailed account of institutional racism in UK maternity care, although it is worth noting that it is an advocacy-led document rather than a peer-reviewed study, and its findings should be considered alongside empirical research rather than as a standalone evidence base.

Halsall et al. (2024) found that language barriers, cultural misunderstandings and the lack of diversity within the Occupational Therapy workforce all affected how accessible and supportive occupational therapy services were for ethnic minority mothers.

Research shows a lack of ethnic diversity within occupational therapy in maternal mental health, with only about 13% of Occupational Therapists in the UK identifying as from ethnic minority backgrounds (Beagan et al., 2023). Only 4% of occupational therapists in the UK identified as Black (HCPC, 2024, as cited in Otuniga & Chichaya, 2025). This gap in representation can directly affect the quality of care that women receive. When occupational therapists lack cultural understanding or fail to recognise that occupations are shaped by culture, this can contribute to the inadequate care provision for minority populations (Brown et al., 2021). This highlights how a lack of cultural understanding can hinder fair care for people from diverse backgrounds. Without teaching that acknowledges cultural differences, students may turn to their own experiences in practice or avoid certain occupations if they feel their cultural insight is limited (Johnson et al., 2022).

Since 2021, the Royal College of Psychiatrists has recognised the role of occupational therapy within perinatal mental health services. Johnson et al. (2022) argue that discussions about race and equality should be woven throughout occupational therapy education, rather than limited to isolated sessions. Beagan et al. (2023) argue that racism is embedded within occupational therapy's history and systems, shaping how people are educated, recruited, and supported in the profession.

Embedding antiracist and culturally aware teaching across occupational therapy education could help future practitioners recognise and respond to the barriers faced by mothers from ethnic minority backgrounds. This aligns with the guidance from the Royal College of Occupational Therapists (RCOT, 2021) and the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC, 2023), highlighting need for

fair, inclusive, and person-centred practice, particularly in perinatal mental health support. Despite increased attention to perinatal mental health, there remains a limited understanding of how well occupational therapy students are prepared to support mothers who face these inequalities. Therefore, this study explored the students' awareness and understanding of perinatal mental health inequalities faced by ethnic minority mothers. It examines their perspectives on the role of occupational therapy in addressing these disparities in practice.

Positionality

My positionality as a Black mother, alongside my lived experience, clinical training during my final occupational therapy placement within a community perinatal mental health team, voluntary work with a national postnatal depression charity, and my understanding of perinatal inequalities, may have shaped my interpretation of the data. Reflective notes were recorded throughout the analysis process, acknowledging that positioning and reflexivity work closely together in qualitative research. I used reflective notes to remain aware of my opinions throughout the interpretation of the findings, minimising bias. Finlay (2002) suggests that positionality and reflexivity are inseparable in qualitative research. Holmes (2020) extends this argument, noting that reflexivity cannot eliminate bias entirely, as data interpretation remains shaped by the researcher's social positioning and lived experience.

METHODS

This study is positioned within an interpretivist paradigm, which views reality as shaped by social interactions and understood through how individuals make sense of their experiences (Bryman, 2016). The study used a qualitative, phenomenological design to explore how occupational therapy

students understand perinatal mental health inequalities affecting ethnic minority mothers. A phenomenology approach is appropriate because it focuses on how individuals experience and interpret the world around them, enabling a deeper understanding of individuals' perspectives and meanings (Smith et al., 2022).

A purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit occupational therapy students who were nearing completion of their studies or had completed at least the first year. First-year students were excluded because of their limited curriculum exposure and were unlikely to have developed sufficient insight into perinatal or cultural-competence content (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This ensured that these students had relevant educational experience and could meaningfully reflect on their preparedness. In health-related qualitative studies, purposive sampling is commonly used when the aim is to capture informed viewpoints rather than broad generalisability (Palinkas et al., 2015). It is acknowledged that four students from a single university are a small sample. This was shaped by the practical demands of completing research within a 12-week timeframe. The time needed to also obtain ethical approval further reduced the window available for recruitment.

The students were recruited through a digital advertisement with authorisation from the occupational therapy course directors. All interviews were conducted online using Microsoft Teams, providing a practical and flexible way for students to participate despite their academic commitments. Each interview followed a semi-structured format and lasted up to 60 minutes, depending on how much the student chose to share. Students received an information sheet, and informed consent was obtained before the interviews were

undertaken. All data were anonymised, and confidentiality was maintained (RCOT, 2021), unless disclosure was necessary to prevent harm. However, no adverse events occurred during the study.

An interview guide was developed in alignment with the study's aims. Questions focused on students' awareness of perinatal mental health, their understanding of inequalities, and how well they felt their education prepared them for working with mothers from ethnic minority backgrounds. The interviews were audio and visually recorded and then transcribed verbatim. Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis. This approach offered a flexible yet rigorous process for generating themes grounded in students' accounts.

Rigour was addressed through the four commonly recognised components of trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Tariq, 2025). Credibility was enhanced by applying the same semi-structured interview guide across all interviews and close engagement with participants' accounts. In this study, transferability was supported by clearly outlining who was involved and where the research was completed, including that participants were pre-registration occupational therapy students and apprentices from BSc and MSc courses at a UK university. Dependability and confirmability were supported through clear documentation of the research process and an audit trail, which helped ensure that decisions were transparent and grounded in the data (Treude, 2024).

Ethical approval was obtained from the Coventry University Ethics Committee (reference number: P188541). The interviews engaged with potentially sensitive subject matter.

Participants were informed in advance that some questions might elicit distress, and clear procedures were established to pause or terminate the interview, with appropriate signposting to support services where necessary. Participants were also reminded of their right to decline to answer any question or to withdraw from the study at any point without consequence, consistent with established ethical guidance on voluntary participation (Roberts & Hyatt, 2018).

All data were anonymised, and confidentiality was maintained in accordance with professional standards (RCOT, 2021; HCPC, 2023). The limits of confidentiality were clearly communicated, including circumstances requiring disclosure to prevent harm (Cook, 2001). No such situations arose. All participants completed the interviews without distress and were provided with information on wellbeing support services for optional debriefing.

RESULTS

The four participants interviewed included three final year MSc students and one BSc student. All students had completed at least two practice placements. Two participants identified as White British, one as Asian British, and one as Black and White dual heritage. All were female and had exposure to mental health and community settings during their studies. Three themes were developed from the analysis, each showing how participants understand perinatal mental health and the inequalities faced by mothers from ethnic minority backgrounds. Table 1, shown below, presents the themes, sub-themes and direct quotes.

Table 1: Themes and subthemes

Themes	Subthemes
Recognising barriers but lacking knowledge.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educational gaps in perinatal mental health content. • Identifying barriers faced by mothers from ethnic minorities. • Reliance on personal interest or university placement. • Lack of confidence in practice.
Inequalities, cultural barriers, and the need for cultural humility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language barriers. • Stigma around mental health. • Mistrust of services. • Uncertainty about how to respond in practice. • Awareness of personal biases; Inadequate training for diverse practice.
Developing an Occupational Perspective in Perinatal Care	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Value of community-based perinatal occupational therapy. • Reducing social isolation. • Unclear professional role. • Limited exposure to perinatal occupational therapy. • Supporting routine and mental wellbeing.

Recognising barriers but lacking knowledge

All four students interviewed shared the same experience that they had received very little or no teaching about perinatal mental health. The knowledge gained was either from academic placement or a personal interest. Students described several challenges, including language barriers, miscommunication, stigma, and cultural misunderstandings affecting mothers from ethnic minority backgrounds. *“I only know about it because I spent a day in the perinatal team. It wasn’t something we were taught”* (Participant 2). This suggests that some students may be entering placement with limited foundational knowledge, which may shape their confidence when working with mothers

during the perinatal period. Participants also described several challenges faced by ethnic minority mothers, including language barriers, miscommunication, stigma, and cultural misunderstandings. A participant described practitioners' assumptions based on Western norms, which led to a mother's behaviour being misinterpreted. *"She spoke very little English... she wasn't able to communicate her needs... staff would assume that was mental illness... She didn't trust the service... I think there was definitely a cultural misunderstanding there"* (Participant 2). This highlights how participants are noticing how cultural and communication barriers can affect trust, access and early engagement with services.

Inequalities, cultural barriers, and the need for cultural humility

Participants discussed the need for cultural humility, acknowledging personal biases, and working sensitively with diverse cultural groups. They felt this was not consistently covered in their training. Many felt that teaching about culture was too general and didn't adequately prepare them for real-life situations. Participants also mentioned the need for case studies that reflect the wider societal issues faced by everyday people, such as race, cultural bias, and diversity. This theme was shaped by subthemes relating to very limited cultural education, being aware of inequalities in practice, but not knowing how to respond professionally. (Participant 4) highlighted: *"I know inequalities exist, but I don't feel knowledgeable enough to know what to do"*. This theme suggests that although participants value cultural humility, they do not yet feel equipped to apply it in practice due to limited structured teaching. These reflections also mirror wider concerns in occupational therapy.

Developing an occupational perspective in perinatal care

Although participants felt underprepared, they still recognised that occupational therapy has a place in supporting mothers' wellbeing during the perinatal period. They explored how occupational therapy can support routines, identity, social connection, and meaningful occupations. Participants described recognising the importance of occupational therapy in the perinatal period but having limited confidence in applying the occupational perspective. The reliance on observed clinical practice was prevalent rather than independent clinical reasoning. One student mentioned their experience within a community perinatal placement. Here, they saw how group-based activities helped mothers feel less isolated and more motivated to engage in day-to-day activities. *"They now don't feel loneliness... they don't feel under the weather all the time. They get motivated to go and do activities every day... this was mainly from attending occupational therapy groups in community hubs"* (Participant 3). This theme shows that participants can see the potential contribution of occupational therapy, even if they have not yet developed a full understanding of how to apply an occupational perspective independently. This may suggest that whilst placement exposure helps students recognise occupational therapy's role, they need more structured teaching and practice-based learning to build confidence and professional reasoning in perinatal care.

DISCUSSION

The findings from this study are discussed in relation to national evidence on racial disparities, structural inequalities, and current professional guidance. Understanding the findings within this wider context is important, as it helps explain how student perspectives connect to what is already known about

perinatal mental health inequalities and workforce preparation. The themes presented here may reflect broader national patterns of unequal access, gaps in cultural responsiveness, and inconsistencies in professional training. It is important to interpret the findings in this way because it explains what this data means for the profession and its contribution to the evidence base of perinatal mental health, as qualitative analysis relies on interpretation to demonstrate both significance and relevance (Pope & Mays, 2020).

Furthermore, participants reported limited learning about perinatal mental health during their studies; consequently, this could impact their confidence and preparedness to support mothers with complex and diverse social and cultural needs. Students relied heavily on personal interest or brief placement experience. This suggests a possible gap between current occupational therapy education and the increasing recognition of perinatal mental health within UK occupational therapy practice, as noted by the RCOT (2021). Hess-April et al. (2016) found that without clear learning and practical guidance, university students often experience a theory-to-practice gap that fails to align with the realities of clinical work. Although perinatal mental health is widely recognised as an important area of care, not all professionals feel ready to support women during this time. Evidence indicates that practitioners frequently feel underprepared to meet the emotional and relational needs of mothers in distress. Coates et al. (2019) found that confidence in perinatal mental health care stems mainly from experience rather than formal teaching, highlighting a fundamental weakness in the current training students receive. Sambrook-Smith et al. (2019) also highlight that these gaps persist into early practice,

leaving new graduates entering the workforce without the skills they need.

Students highlighted significant language barriers, cultural misconceptions, and mistrust. These challenges reflect national evidence of disparities in access to services and outcomes (Conneely et al., 2023). In the UK, ethnic minority women, who make up around 14% of the population, are also at a higher risk of experiencing perinatal mental health problems compared to White British women (Royal College of Midwives, 2020), which further illustrates that students' observations are part of a much wider pattern. These observations also reflect the broader structural inequities highlighted in the MBRRACE-UK reports. Although students recognised inequalities, they often focused on individual-level issues such as confidence, culture, and communication rather than naming structural racism or systemic factors. This may reflect limited opportunities for students to engage with intersectionality within their university studies.

Birthrights (2022) shows how systemic racism and intersecting barriers worsen the perinatal experience for mothers of ethnic minorities. Kent (2021) draws on Crenshaw's intersectionality theory to show how both racism and gender can limit women's choices and sense of control. This way of thinking was not consistently reflected in the participants interview responses, suggesting they may not yet feel fully prepared to understand perinatal inequalities through a structural lens. A participant described situations where practitioners misinterpreted cultural norms as symptoms of mental illness. This aligns with earlier studies by Jankovic et al. (2020) and Watson et al. (2019), who found that misinterpretation contributes to reduced engagement and mistrust. It also reflects the findings of Prady et al. (2021), who found that

ethnic minority women are less likely to have their perinatal mental health difficulties identified and appropriately managed, reinforcing how these barriers are embedded in how care is typically delivered. Understanding these challenges is imperative for future occupational therapists, who must work in ways that recognise broader social and cultural factors. The World Federation of Occupational Therapists (WFOT, 2019) states that safe and equitable care begins with the wider contexts that shape people's lives.

Although students were beginning to think about wider inequalities, their responses still centred more on personal assumptions rather than wider structural issues. The participants described wanting to understand how their own assumptions might affect mothers from different backgrounds. This shows an early awareness of reflective practice but also highlights the gap between recognising cultural issues and feeling confident to respond to them in practice. Their reflections align with support existing literature urging occupational therapists to move beyond surface-level cultural awareness and towards ongoing reflective practice (Beagan, 2015; Hammell, 2013).

Racism is said to be embedded in the history and systems of occupational therapy. Beagan et al. (2023) argue that students are left without the necessary tools to work safely and sensitively with those who are from ethnic minority backgrounds, due to a lack of direct teaching on cultural humility. This was reflected in the students' comments, which indicated that the teaching they received was too broad and not grounded in real-world practice examples. This supports the need for cultural humility as an ongoing reflective process, as described by Hammell (2013) and Johnson et al. (2022). Students are beginning to identify practical ways to support

mothers, even if they do not yet feel confident applying them independently, which aligns with Singh et al. (2022) on responsive and reflective practice. These reflections on inequality align with evidence that inequalities shaped mothers' experiences of care. Halsall et al. (2024) report that ethnic minority mothers are at greater risk of mental illness in the UK, compared to White women of British heritage, yet perinatal mental health occupational therapists still lack clear study-based guidance on how to design accessible and culturally responsive services. Without stronger teaching, students may enter the workforce with good intentions but limited ability to recognise or challenge the structural and cultural barriers these mothers face. The findings link directly back to the theoretical framework outlined earlier, particularly occupational justice and intersectionality, which emphasise how wider social structures shape mothers' opportunities to engage in meaningful occupations.

Students identified the value of occupational therapy in supporting mothers through routines, identity, and meaningful activities. Their observations align with the findings of Halsall et al. (2024), who emphasise occupational therapy's role in connection, structure, and emotional well-being. Students felt that clearer teaching and more focused learning during the programme would help them understand this role earlier, rather than only realising its value during placement or personal experience. Students believed that, with clearer training and more focused teaching during the degree, occupational therapists could contribute even more effectively to perinatal mental health support.

Practice, policy and wider context

The findings from this study sit within a much wider national, professional and social context, where concerns about perinatal mental

health inequalities have become increasingly visible and difficult to ignore. Nationally, the MBRRACE-UK reports continue to show stark racial differences in maternal outcomes, with Black women facing the highest risks during pregnancy and the year after birth (Knight et al., 2023). Whilst the MBRRACE-UK findings are imperative, using broad ethnic categories means the diverse experiences of different communities can easily get lost within that data (Halsall et al., 2024).

Politically, the House of Commons described the ongoing inequity affecting Black people, racism and human rights as 'a damning indictment of society, which should be addressed as a matter of the highest priority' (Joint Committee on Human Rights 2020). Social factors, including stigma, discrimination and poorer living conditions, also shape how mothers experience perinatal mental health difficulties (Baldwin et al., 2019). These issues shape the environment that new occupational therapists will join. Professionally, organisations such as RCOT (2021), HCPC (2023) and NICE (2014; 2020) all emphasise the importance of culturally sensitive, person-centred practice. Nevertheless, students in this study often felt unprepared to meet these expectations. Their experiences align with concerns raised by Birthrights (2022), which argues that many maternity guidelines still very often reflect White, middle-class assumptions and fail to recognise the systemic racism shaping the experiences of ethnic minority mothers. This discrepancy between professional expectations and students' confidence emphasises a clear gap in workforce preparation. The findings suggest several areas that need to be addressed. Universities could offer more structured teaching on perinatal mental health and cultural inclusivity. Students also

suggested that learning would be more meaningful if linked to real case studies, reflective practice and examples from specialist services. Occupational therapists working in perinatal mental health may also need to improve access to interpreters and develop culturally responsive communication. There is also a real opportunity for these therapists to develop further within perinatal services, as RCOT (2021) highlights the growing need for occupational therapists across prevention and early intervention pathways in mental health. Professional bodies such as RCOT and HCPC could facilitate this by providing guidance and CPD pathways in perinatal practice. Without this support, students may continue to enter the profession feeling unsure about their role in addressing inequality.

At a wider policy level, concerns remain about the lack of oversight in perinatal mental health services. The World Health Organization recommends that all mothers should be screened for mental health difficulties after giving birth, and that support and treatment are readily available, yet (Layton et al., 2025) note that there are currently no global measures in place to track how well perinatal mental health care is being delivered or improved. Without consistent monitoring, it becomes difficult for services and future therapists to determine whether the inequalities identified in this study are being reduced.

Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. Holmes (2020) argues that a researcher's social background, assumptions, and personal values shape what they focus on and how they construct meaning. Whilst reflexive notes were employed to minimise this (Braun & Clarke, 2022), reflexive thematic analysis acknowledges that researcher bias cannot be eliminated. Therefore, findings represent a subjective reading of the data rather than a

neutral or definitive account. A further limitation is the small sample size. Four students were recruited from a single UK university, and this reflected the realities of conducting student research rather than a methodological weakness. Ethical approval required recruitment through a single institutional gatekeeper, and students could only be recruited from within that university as part of the ethics requirements. The 12-week timeframe, which included ethical approval, further limited the opportunity to recruit more widely. Purposive sampling was appropriate because the study aimed at exploring informed perspectives in depth rather than producing findings that could be generalised statistically (Palinkas et al., 2015). Within reflexive thematic analysis, the depth and quality of what participants share rather than how many people took part matter more (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This study used a small sample of four due to time constraints and the number of participants who came forward. It does not claim data saturation; the aim was to gather rich data from those who were willing to share their experiences.

It is acknowledged that a larger sample might have provided wider variation, but the consistency of themes across the four interviews offered enough depth to address the research question. The findings are not intended to be generalised but to offer insight into the experiences of these four students. Although data saturation is more commonly discussed in grounded theory, Francis et al. (2010) suggest it can be considered achieved when no new themes emerge across interviews, and in this study, consistent patterns were present across all four accounts. The participating students brought varied levels of personal and professional experience to perinatal mental health, from one with direct placement experience in a

perinatal team to another with very limited prior awareness, which meant the small sample size still offered a meaningful range of perspectives.

CONCLUSION

This study explored occupational therapy students' perceptions of perinatal mental health inequalities, cultural humility, and their readiness to practise. One of the most notable findings was the uncertainty students felt around cultural humility and how to apply it in real practice. Students recognised the potential contribution of occupational therapy within perinatal mental health, even if they felt under-prepared to deliver it. A future study could include occupational therapy students from several UK universities to determine whether the same gaps in knowledge and preparedness are observed elsewhere. It would also be valuable to gain the views of qualified occupational therapists working in perinatal teams, as their experiences could offer a clearer picture of what is needed in practice. There is also very little research that centers the voices of mothers from ethnic minorities themselves and how they experience occupational therapy support, and this remains a key area that needs attention.

This study highlights the value of building a more diverse occupational therapy workforce, which could improve trust and engagement among ethnic minority mothers, reduce cultural misinterpretation, and help challenge the systemic biases that contribute to inequalities within perinatal services. It also points to improvements in both education and service delivery, with gaps identified in the curriculum on perinatal mental health and cultural humility. Addressing these gaps could better prepare students to support mothers from ethnic minority backgrounds, helping future occupational therapists become better prepared to identify distress

earlier, work in more culturally safe ways, and contribute to fairer outcomes for the mothers and families they support.

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