

## Individual Research Project Presentations Day 10<sup>th</sup> June 2024, Kent and Medway Medical School.

### Intercultural barriers to communication in healthcare; is it the disparities in cultural background themselves, or internal biases and assumptions at the root of the problem?

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#### Abstract

**Background:** The National Health Service is one of the largest employers in the world and is currently employing the most diverse workforce in its history (Editor, 2023). This diversity reflects a broad spectrum of cultural backgrounds, values, beliefs, and most importantly, a range of languages and linguistic competencies. According to the Office for National Statistics, the 2021 census reported that in England and Wales, 1.5% (880,000) of usual residents aged three years and over could not speak English well, and 0.3%, (161,000) of the overall population could not speak English at all (Waddington, 2022).

Intercultural communication within healthcare settings presents challenges when cultural disparities and personal biases conflict. This research aims to explore the root causes of intercultural communication barriers within the NHS. It seeks to determine whether these barriers stem mainly from cultural disparities, or whether internal biases and ingrained assumptions play a significant role too. Understanding the influence of cultural diversity on communication within healthcare settings is essential for developing more effective strategies and interventions to improve communication efficacy across different cultural contexts within the NHS.

**Methods:** This study began with a review of existing literature to identify prevalent misconceptions and prejudices surrounding intercultural communication in healthcare. Subsequently, the author created fictionalised ethnographic accounts to re-enact real-world scenarios of communication barriers experienced in healthcare settings. Thematic analysis was used due to its ability to help identify common themes across ethnographic accounts. Three major themes emerge: age-related communication barriers, language as a barrier, and biases in disability culture. These themes underscore the complexities of intercultural communication, revealing how assumptions and biases hinder effective patient-provider interactions.

**Results:** Key findings from this study included 1. Assumptions and prejudices play a significant role in shaping communication dynamics, often leading to misinterpretations and misunderstandings; 2. Cultural sensitivity, awareness, and the ability to challenge one's own

biases are essential for improving communication and enhancing patient care, and 3. Effective communication in healthcare is not solely about overcoming language barriers or cultural differences but involves addressing deeper biases that pervade healthcare settings.

**Conclusions:** In conclusion, addressing intercultural barriers in healthcare requires a holistic approach that considers both cultural and internal factors. Healthcare providers should develop critical awareness to identify and challenge the biases that hinder effective communication. By actively engaging with the diverse perspectives and experiences of patients, healthcare systems can better meet the needs of all individuals, thereby enhancing the quality of care and patient outcomes. This research highlights the importance of an inclusive healthcare system where diversity is understood and respected, and where communication barriers are actively addressed to ensure equitable and effective patient care. The conclusions drawn from this study will act as a foundation for future research and practice, emphasising the continuous need for improvement in intercultural communication within healthcare settings.

**Keywords:** Healthcare Professionals | Language barriers | Intercultural barrier} | Prejudices |

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