Research protocol
Taking Space University of Sheffield

Authors: N. Ronald Mutambirwa*, Angela Barrows

*ron.mutambirwa@sheffield.ac.uk

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1.1		
1.0 [*original*]	October 2023	

1. Summary

Background

Taking Space has, to date, only undertaken some small-scale evaluation based on student and staff feedback and the aim of this research protocol was to develop an impact evaluation that would help develop our ideas for a more systematic and ambitious roll out.

Aims

The aim of the project is to identify the effectiveness of Taking Space on student retention and increase in mental wellbeing among black, minority ethnic or students of colour who attend a HE institution. It has been reported that Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) students have a lived experience of racism and cultural barriers that contribute to isolation and worsening wellbeing, leading to poorer outcomes in the HE experience. The project may demonstrate to what extent the provision and attendance at a Black led support group can make a difference in retention and wellbeing among BAME students at the University of Sheffield (UoS).

Intervention

Taking Space is a trauma informed, peer focused support group for BAME undergraduate and postgraduate students at the University Counselling Service (UCS) to have a supportive safe therapeutic space to support improved mental health and wellbeing. Taking Space will be evaluated over the course of the 2023/24 academic year during term time.

Design

The design will be based on a pre and post-test.

Outcome measures

Primary outcome is course completion among BAME students in the 2023/24 academic year and progression to 2024/25 academic year following the intervention. The secondary outcomes are mental wellbeing, sense of belonging and perceived impact on academic outcomes.

Analyses

The study will test for statistically significant differences in the pre-intervention and post-intervention scores.

2. Background

Project contributors

Organisation	Name	Role and responsibilities
University of Sheffield (UoS)	Louise Knowles	Head of Mental Health Counselling & Therapy Service
	Ronald Mutambirwa	Cognitive Behavioural Psychotherapist /Mental health practitioner. Responsible for facilitation of group, protocol contributor.
	Angela Barrows	Counsellor/Psychotherapist. Responsible for facilitation of group, protocol contributor. facilitators of the group.
	Andre Nunn	- Service support staff - University of Sheffield (UoS) Design and print services. - University Counselling Service (UCS) *Collaboration with the UoS Centre of Equity and Inclusion*
TASO	Dr Helen Lawson	Research Programmes Manager
	Dr Rob Summer	Research Manager
	Rain Sherlock	Head of Evaluation
		All supporting on research protocol and training

In 2020, the racial harassment report in higher education UK found that over a quarter of Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) students experienced racial discrimination and racial harassment. The importance of this report was in further detailing the systemic and institutional racism faced by students within higher education (Universities UK, 2020). While different forms of racism have been identified including direct exposure, indirect exposure, personally mediated, and structural racism, the forms that have mostly been seen within young people of black and ethnic minority are structural and personally mediated (Berry et al 2021). Personally mediated racism includes experiences of stereotypes and prejudices about an individual's ability, motives, or intent based on their race, these can be expressed implicitly (unconscious) or explicitly (conscious) and experienced directly and indirectly with the potential for a deleterious effect on mental wellbeing (Jones, 2001, Nadal et al 2014).

The development of this initiative followed on from the re-exposure of longstanding issues of racial inequality nationally with the advent of the Black Lives Matter movement and significant preliminary national concerns raised around inequality and the disproportionate effect on BAME communities from the Covid-19 crisis. Locally the university BAME Student Committee had been fielding calls from distressed members in the wake of the murder of George Floyd in the USA and the Black Lives Matter demonstrations that followed. In response to the BAME Student Committee asking the University Counselling Service (UCS) for support, UCS worked co-productively with the BAME student committee to develop a space where the voices of Black and minority ethnic students could be heard. A critical part of the development was the involvement of two UCS staff who identify as Black, Angela Barrows (a registered psychotherapist) and Ron Mutambirwa (a registered mental health practitioner and Cognitive behavioural psychotherapist). The co-production process identified the need for an ongoing support group.

Taking Space' project is a trauma informed, peer focused support group for BAME undergraduate and postgraduate students to have a supportive safe therapeutic space to support improved mental health and wellbeing. The group aims to challenge the unhelpful narratives around BAME students and their mental health and increase awareness and understanding of BAME student mental health and wellbeing. To unpack the lived experience and life events which shape the mental health and wellbeing of BAME students at University of Sheffield.

By offering to support the students the intention is for BAME students to maintain and continue their studies whilst at university. To support BAME students to become more self-confident and enhance self-esteem, reducing stress and anxiety, leading to improved academic performance. To provide a safe space, potentially offering participants the opportunity to develop social connections that can be outside of the group promoting peer support. To potentially provide/enhance tools, skills, and experience for life after university to manage their own mental health and wellbeing. Increased personal and professional development career readiness and access to job opportunities for students of colour.

In February 2021, Angela and Ron facilitated an inaugural session with the BAME student committee to fine tune the structure of sessions and develop a mechanism for evaluation. Participant feedback from this *test* session included:

"Important and valuable space; not realised needed this until now; fantastic; impact for other students, incredible thing to offer; really lovely - everyone had time to speak; go to

know each other"; "time went by so quickly; impact can be very personal over time to have a light bulb moment"; "comfortable to say what needed to say because I felt safe to be open".

Following this session, a series of six 90-minute, trauma-informed support sessions were delivered. This developed into several ongoing support groups that have been provided ranging from fortnightly to monthly since 2021.

Taking Space, has to date, only undertaken some small-scale evaluation based on student and staff feedback. These often-individual testimonies are powerful in themselves but as we developed our ideas for a more systematic and ambitious roll out, we wanted to develop our approach to evaluation. However, there is a dearth of evidence for the effectiveness of this type of intervention on student retention and increasing mental wellbeing among BAME students. The research protocol aims to build on the available evidence, to identify the effectiveness of a BAME peer support group 'Taking Space' within HE. The project received funding from UCS and the UoS Centre for Equity and Inclusion. Some of the funding supported producing printed literature to promote the group to BAME students in the University**.**

3. Aims

The aim of the project is to identify the effectiveness of a peer support BAME group - Taking Space - on student retention and increase in mental wellbeing among black, minority ethnic or students of colour who attend a white dominated institution. Despite lived experience of racism and the salience of practical and cultural barriers that contribute to isolation and worsening wellbeing, leading to poorer outcomes in the Higher Education (HE) experience, BAME students are least likely to seek mental health support within HE.

1.The primary research question:

What is the potential impact of attending 'Taking Space' on student retention among Black, minority ethnic or People of Colour in undergraduate and postgraduate cohorts?

2. The secondary research question:

What effect does 'Taking Space' have on the mental wellbeing among Black, minority ethnic or people of colour in undergraduate and postgraduate cohorts?

4. Intervention

Taking Space is a trauma informed, peer focused support group with students who identify as BAME. The group rests on the assumption that students will value a space where they can talk freely about trauma related race issues with people they can relate to. The group is available online for easy access to students. The intervention was preliminary tested by the BAME student committee in February 2021, where it was fine-tuned, and further developed before rolling out later that year.

BAME students participate in a small experiential open group with a maximum of 12 participants, the group is open to enable students to attend as and when they want without affecting the group functioning. The size of the group enables it to be small enough for participants' voices to be heard allowing self-disclosure, feedback from others that enables group balance to be used therapeutically.

The group is facilitated by qualified experienced professionals in mental health who are culturally sensitive and identify as black. Knowledge of access to self-care (food, hair etc) within the locality for students coming from outside the city, enhances individual coping mitigating physiological and psychological response to stress.

Students are given the autonomy to select the topics they want to talk about instead of being restricted to a predetermined group structure. This enables students to explore their personal experiences. With freedom of choices comes increased agency where students will experience ownership in what they are able to talk about in the peer support group increasing engagement and sense of connection, they develop confidence in advocating for their own needs.

The group is delivered during term time, initially fortnightly from 2021, then changed to monthly for a duration of 90 minutes including afternoon and evening sessions to accommodate the needs of students based on their academic timetables. The number of sessions has been ongoing since 2021.

The format can be and has been replicated, consistently evaluating the process at the end of each academic year by looking at the registration format, timings and taking on board student feedback and suggestions from after session evaluation questionnaires.

The criteria for discontinuing the intervention would be insufficient or no funding from the university, if one or both facilitators left the service or low/no numbers of students attending over a period. The reverse of this would be increased numbers of students wanting to attend, consideration of increasing the number of sessions, and limited facilitators space and time.

Theory of Change diagram
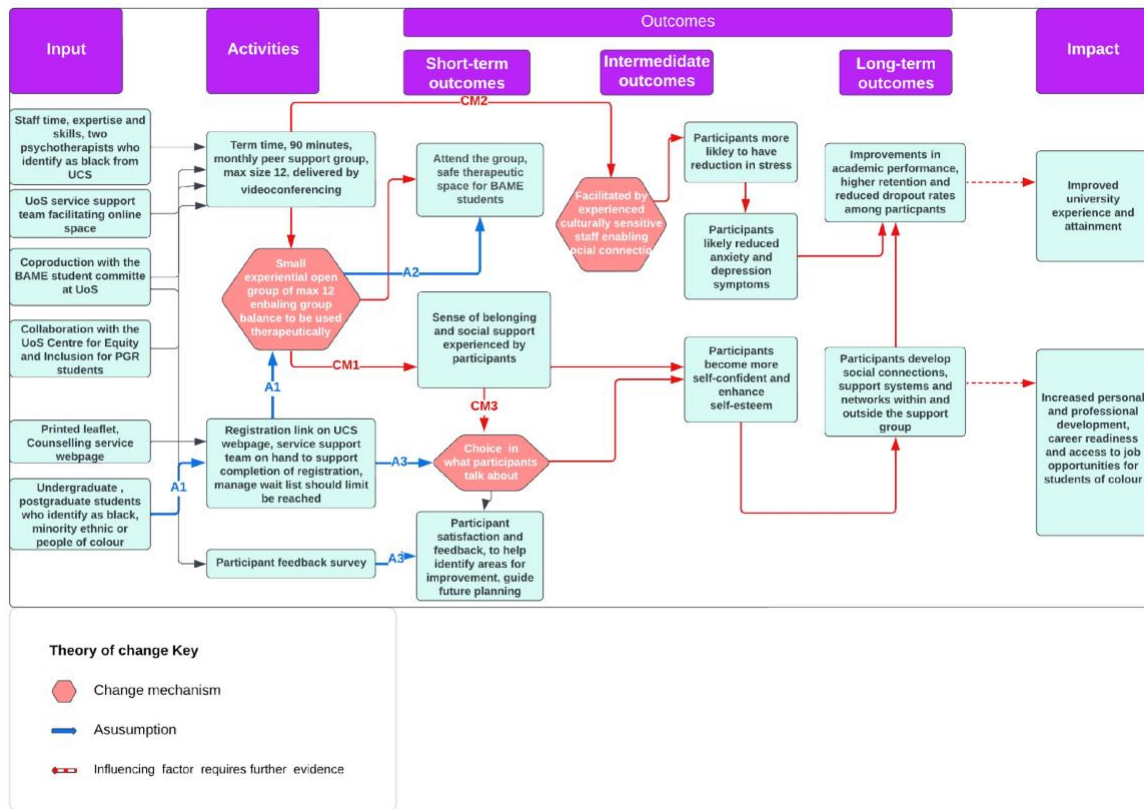
5. Design

Data will be collected as part of a specific peer support group offered within the UCS. Eligible participants will be students attending Taking Space from October 2023 to June 2024 during term time, but it is anticipated that it will be ongoing. The design will be based on a pre- and post-test using the Counselling Impact and Academic Outcomes questionnaire (CIAO), Short Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale and TASO sense of belonging scale and participant feedback. Pre-questionnaires will be sent electronically to a student two days prior to the intervention. The post-test will be sent a week after the intervention. Data will be stored on the UCS IT clinical records system, where we will compare outcomes (impact on academic outcomes/wellbeing/sense of belonging) before and after the intervention with consent from the participating students. The diagram below provides a visual presentation of the design. This pre-/post- design will only apply to survey outcomes.
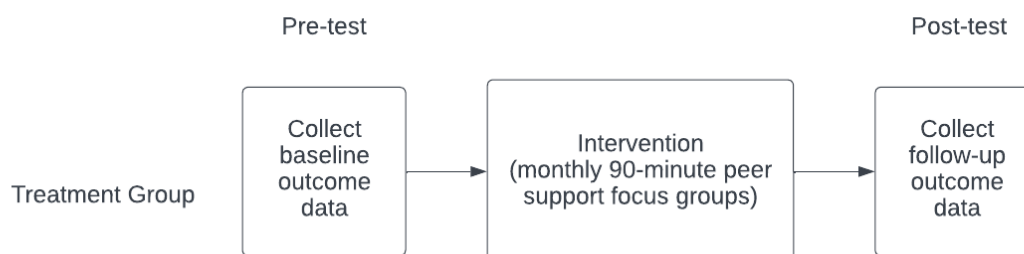
6. Outcome measures

The following outcomes are to be measured in the project.

Primary outcome:

- Course completion among BAME students in 2023/24 academic year and progression to 2024/25 academic year following the intervention, by assessing the percentage of group members who successfully complete their courses or progress to next year through the UoS Corporate Information Enquiry System (CIES).

Secondary outcomes:

- Measuring mental wellbeing as an outcome to prevent poor mental health
- Perceived impact of intervention on academic outcomes
- Sense of belonging for BAME students
- Better understand and respond to impact of racism on mental health

Interim or proxy outcomes:

Assessing the number of students who signed up for the group and the percentage who attended.

Outcome measure	Data to be collected	Point of collection
PRIMARY: Course completion	Does the individual complete their course? Does the individual progress to the next year? Data source: UoS Corporate Information Enquiry System (CIES). Binary: yes/no	● At the end of the academic year
SECONDARY 1: Progression to next year of study	Does the individual go on to their next semester/year of study? Data source: institutional records / data Binary: yes/no	● At the end of the semester and/or year
SECONDARY 2: **Interim or proxy:** Sign-up to the group	Assessing the number of students who signed up for the group and the percentage who attended.	● After each group session
EXPLORATORY 1: Mental wellbeing	Survey: Administer short Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale	● Baseline ● Follow-up sent one week after the intervention
EXPLORATORY 2: Perceived impact of intervention on academic outcomes	CIAO questionnaire measuring the perceived impact of problems on academic outcomes: 1. To what extent are you considering leaving your course because of your problems?	● Baseline ● Follow-up sent one week after the intervention

Outcome measure	Data to be collected	Point of collection
	2.To what extent would you say your problems are affecting your study (e.g. attendance/assessment)? 3. To what extent would you say your problems are affecting your overall experience at University? Ratings range from 0 (not at all) to 4 (most of the time).	
EXPLORATORY 3: Sense of belonging of participants at university	TASO four item post-entry sense of belonging scale comprising the following statements: 1. I made the right decision in choosing to study at this university. 2. I feel supported by this university. 3. I feel I belong at university. 4. I see myself as part of the university community Likert scale: 5-point Strongly disagree to strongly agree	● Baseline ● Follow-up sent one week after the intervention
EXPLORATORY 4: Better understand and respond to impact of racism on mental wellbeing	Participant feedback written and verbal. What did they find most helpful? What areas could be improved?	● After each group session

7. Sample selection

The study is in a university-based student counselling service (UCS) that forms part of the Student Mental Health, Counselling and Therapies Service providing mental health and psychological therapies for students at the UoS. The study will include all participants to Taking Space who identify as BAME or students of colour, undergraduate and postgraduate, part-time, and fulltime who are actively registered with the university from the 2023/24 academic year.

Each group session will have a maximum of 12 participants. The size of the group enables it to be small enough for people's voices to be heard allowing self-disclosure, feedback from others that enables group balance to be used therapeutically (Barnes, Ernst, and Hyde, 1999). Sample size will be dependent on the total number of students attending during the planned intervention over the course of the academic year. Since starting the initiative, we have worked with approximately 35 students, most attending multiple sessions. The ethnic background of attendees included Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Chinese, Bulgarian, Indian, Nigerian, Trinidadian, Jamaican, Ghanaian.

Taking Space is publicised through general student communications, targeted student communications based on eligibility criteria, word of mouth and flyers. We plan to include the group in the annual outline that the wider University Student Support Services aim to share across the year to students increasing reach. We aim to publicise within academic departments and their localised online newsletters. Other mental health professionals within the UoS mental health services will also promote the group to BAME students who are accessing mental health support.

8. Data collection

Data will be obtained from the UCS at the UoS for students attending the academic year 2023/24. Students will be required to register for Taking Space as part of routine practice where students complete a client equality data form on the IT clinical records system. The second data source will be the UoS Corporate Information Enquiry System (CIES) that provides information for staff on student registrations and admissions. The system enables you to access student, programme, module, and admission data held within the university corporate record.

The Short Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale is a validated measure for mental wellbeing (Stewart-Brown et al 2009). The TASO Sense of belonging scale is currently in the validation phase. CIAO is a quantitative questionnaire measuring the perceived impact of problems on academic outcomes, the perceived impact on counselling intervention on academic outcomes. However, the CIAO whilst used in university counselling services (Wallace, 2012, Scruggs et al. 2022) is currently not a validated tool.

Data item	Timeframe	Collector
Sex	Baseline	UCS, self-report client equality data form
Ethnicity	Baseline	UCS, self-report client equality data form
Age	Baseline	UCS, self-report client equality data form
Nationality	Baseline	UCS, self-report client equality data form
Disability status	Baseline	UCS, self-report client equality data form
Whether from an underrepresented group (Young carer, estranged, Gypsy, Roma, Traveller communities, refugees, children of military families)	Baseline	UCS, self-report client equality data form
Enrolment status Part-time Full-time	Baseline	UCS, self-report client equality data form, CIES
Year of study	Baseline	UCS, CIES
Faculty	Baseline	UCS, CIES

9. Procedure

A high-level project timeline is provided in the table below.

Timeframe	Action
May 2023- October 2023	● Complete research protocol
October 2023- July 2024	● Collect baseline registration data from CIES and client equality data form. ● Deliver Taking Space ● Collect Outcome data through CIAO, SWEMWS and Sense of belonging scale.
July 2024- January 2025	● Analyse data and complete report

10. Analytical strategy

The study will test for statistically significant differences in the pre-intervention and post-intervention scores on survey-based outcomes. Further descriptive analysis of the other outcomes will be provided.

11. Ethical considerations

Ethical decisions will be based on ethical principles focused on enhancing the benefit of the study while minimising harm to stakeholders. Ethical approval to be obtained from the UoS Ethics Review Procedure.

12. Risks

Part of evaluation	Risk	Mitigation strategy	Risk owner
Participant recruitment	We have to balance rolling the initiative out across UoS including marketing it at entry points but maintaining the safe Black-led space.	Prioritise partnering with existing BAME support networks in the University to spread the word about the group. Maintain group facilitators who represent the diversity of the BAME student population. Maintain online sessions to accommodate the diverse schedules of students. Seek the support of faculty and support staff to help promote and refer students. Feedback and adaptation to meet needs of participants	UCS
Data collection	Survey-based outcome measures- risk of low response rate which can lead to potential bias in the data. Survey fatigue resulting in incomplete or inconsistent responses.	UCS to clearly explain the purpose of the surveys to the participants before collecting any data. Group facilitators to periodically review response rate and survey timing to minimise survey fatigue.	UCS

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