BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE. Current racial demographics in the physical therapy (PT) profession do not reflect the growing diversity of the United States population. Research has demonstrated that diversity in health care is imperative for patient satisfaction, quality service for underserved populations and addressing health disparities. The purpose of this research is to perform a qualitative analysis of the attitudes, feelings, beliefs, and experiences of underrepresented minority (URM) physical therapists, physical therapist assistants, and physical therapy students to provide a means of understanding the barriers limiting individuals from entering the physical therapy profession.

SUBJECTS. Nine individuals participated in this study, which included five physical therapists, one physical therapist assistant, and three physical therapy students who all self-identified as URM.

METHODS AND MATERIALS: An exploratory qualitative analysis utilized two separate 90-120 minute digitally recorded focus groups at Concordia University (St. Paul, MN). Focus group key topics included: choosing a career in PT; support or barriers faced within the educational system; experiences with the PT admission process; and views on the importance of diversity in PT.

ANALYSES: Audio from the focus groups was de-identified, transcribed, imported into NVIVO 11 software and coded.

RESULTS. The following themes were identified as important from coded transcripts: educational experiences, diversity, grit and imagination, and external support. Several sub-themes were also identified.

CONCLUSIONS: Multidimensional barriers that URM physical therapy students and clinicians encounter when entering the field of physical therapy were identified and are multifaceted. Participants mentioned barriers found in previous research, but also provided more in-depth perspectives affecting their pursuit of a career in physical therapy. Future research will focus on further identification of barriers limiting access to the PT profession.

IMPLICATIONS: The perspectives provided offer valuable information needed to begin to influence diversity trends in physical therapy education and physical therapy profession.