Resisting Racism: Life and Career Narratives of Black Undergraduate Students

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Abstract

The present study aimed to identify how racism appears in the lives and careers of Black undergraduate students in a Brazilian Public Higher Education Institution. For this purpose, this study conducted 27 narrative interviews with self-declared black undergraduates, which were analyzed using the technique of thematic Biography and Narrative Analysis. The results indicated that despite the existence of distinctions between the undergraduates' trajectories, usually caused by socioeconomic differences, racism similarly impacts their lives and careers, presenting itself in three frequent themes, named by the researchers as: "Experiences with Racism", "Awareness of Racism", and "Management of Racism". It was found that, although there are distinctions between experiences, motivated especially by socioeconomic origin and available opportunities, all participants manage the effects of racism, individually and collectively, leading them to changes in career prospects, to enable the construction of viable professional trajectories to achieve their ambitions.
Keywords: Racism; Professional development; College students.

Resistindo ao Racismo: Narrativas de Vida e Carreira de Universitários Negros

Resumo

O presente estudo objetivou identificar como o racismo se presentifica na vida e na carreira de universitários negros de uma Instituição Pública de Ensino Superior brasileira. Para tanto, foram conduzidas 27 entrevistas narrativas com graduandos autodeclarados negros, analisadas por meio da técnica de Análise de Biografias e Narrativas do tipo temática. Os resultados indicaram que, apesar da existência de distinções entre as trajetórias dos universitários, habitualmente ocasionada por diferenças socioeconômicas, o racismo impacta similarmente suas vidas e carreiras, apresentando-se em três temas frequentes, nomeados pelos pesquisadores como: "Experiências com o Racismo", "Conscientização sobre o Racismo" e "Manejo ao Racismo". Constatou-se que, embora existam distinções entre as vivências, motivadas, sobretudo, pela origem socioeconômica e oportunidades disponíveis, os efeitos do racismo são manejados por todos os participantes, individual e coletivamente, levando-os a alterações nas perspectivas de carreira, a fim de possibilitar a construção de trajetórias profissionais viáveis às suas ambições.
Palavras-chave: racismo; desenvolvimento profissional; estudantes universitários

Resistiendo al Racismo: Narrativas de Vida y Carrera de Estudiantes Universitarios Negros

Resumen

El presente estudio objetivó identificar cómo el racismo está presente en la vida y carrera de universitarios negros de una Institución Pública de Educación Superior brasileña. Para ello, se realizaron 27 entrevistas narrativas con universitarios autoproclamados negros, analizadas mediante la técnica de Análisis de Biografías y Narrativas del tipo temática. Los resultados indicaron que, aunque hay distinciones entre las trayectorias de los universitarios, generalmente causadas por diferencias socioeconómicas, el racismo impacta de manera similar sus vidas y carreras, presentándose en tres temas frecuentes, denominados como: "Experiencias con el Racismo", "Concientización sobre el racismo" y "Manejo del racismo". Se encontró que, aunque existen distinciones entre las experiencias, motivadas, especialmente, por el origen socioeconómico y las oportunidades disponibles, los efectos del racismo son manejados por todos los participantes, individual y colectivamente, llevándolos a cambios en las perspectivas de carrera, a fin de posibilitar la construcción de trayectorias profesionales viables para cumplir sus ambiciones.
Palabras clave: Racismo; Desarrollo profesional; Estudiantes universitarios.

Introduction

Racism can be understood as a process of hierarchization, discrimination, and exclusion against an individual or a social category established as different based on some external physical characteristic (real or invented). These are resignified as an internal cultural mark that determines behavioral patterns (Lima & Vala, 2004). According to Gouveia and Zanello (2018), if, initially, the systems of racial domination were justified based on phenotypic differences, which established a hierarchy of moral, intellectual, and cultural attributes among different ethnic-racial groups, currently the term race is no longer linked to biological aspects, but based on an ideology that contributes to the maintenance of a system of domination and exclusion.

This system of domination becomes noticeable when considering data such as that of the Census of

Higher Education, conducted, in 2019, by the National Institute of Educational Studies and Research Anísio Teixeira (INEP, 2020). According to this census, blacks and browns aged between 18 and 29 years have, on average, 11 years of study, less than the average of the white (12 years), urban (11.8 years), and Brazilian (11.4 years) populations. Such discrepancy in the length of schooling of the black population, that is, black or brown, according to the criterion adopted by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE, 2011), is also reflected in the percentage of individuals aged 25 years or older who have completed higher education, so that while 24.9% of white Brazilians are graduates, only 11% of blacks have such title, lower than identified among women (19.4%) and men (15.1%) of the general population (IBGE, 2020).

When considering the percentage of blacks to the total number of students enrolled in Higher Education, although there is an increase of 9.5 percentage points over five years, from 37.8% in 2012 to 47.3% in 2017, this number does not yet correspond to the prevalence of this group (blacks and browns) in the Brazilian population, which represented 56.3% in 2019 (IBGE, 2020). In addition to the difference in years of study and access to graduation, when graduated, blacks remain with an average income per hour worked 30.67% lower, receiving R$ 23.50 compared to R$ 33.90 for whites (IBGE, 2020).

Despite remaining present in Brazilian society and noticeable through statistics and daily reports, part of the population denies the existence of racism, believing that a racial democracy prevails in the country (Nascimento, 2020). This perspective, which may appear to be an advance towards equality, represents, in practice, a setback in the conquest of the rights of the group, becoming a justification for different social sectors to exempt themselves from creating policies that promote racial equity, leaving few concrete conditions for improving the quality of life (Mendonça & Aranha, 2020).

Despite the recognized importance of understanding the production and perpetuation of racism, it is equally relevant to understand its effects on the psychological and behavioral processes of minorities (Lima & Pereira, 2004). Among such effects is depersonalization, which can be understood as disinterest in evaluating and forming impressions or judgments about another person so that they are not even included in going through the subsequent exclusion process. Thus, although the process of dehumanization, that is, denial of humanity, is a factor that contributes to the production of racism,

depersonalization, produced daily and generally not in violation of the Antiracist Code, assumes a powerful role of legitimizing violence (Lima, 2016).

In this perspective, Teixeira and Dazzani (2019) observe that the social rise of black people recurrently requires them to "whiten", that is, submit to Eurocentric standards and constantly seek to prove their ability to be, think, and behave like a white individual. The process involves, however, a double denial to the individual: of his identity and belonging to the racial group, resulting in violence that robs black people of the possibility of exploring their full creative potential because their thinking becomes restricted to the pain of reflecting on their identity.

In contemporary times, higher education is a decisive factor in the process of stratification and social mobility, so graduates have a greater chance of getting jobs with better pay and working conditions than those who have not completed the program. Higher Education (Carvalhaes & Ribeiro, 2019). The effect can also be seen among blacks, who, despite receiving a lower average wage per hour worked than whites, earn more than individuals of the same color who have not completed graduation (R$ 23.50 compared to R$ 9.80 per hour; IBGE, 2020). However, to achieve such income, in addition to entering higher education, the subject must remain and develop a quality academic trajectory to achieve their professional goals (Zoltowski & Teixeira, 2020).

In this sense, recent international studies focused on black American college students, demonstrating that the process of academic formation involves multiple hindering factors (Abrica et al., 2019; Griffith et al., 2019; Lewis & Shah, 2019). Among them, we can mention the appropriation and rejection, by educational institutions, of their knowledge and bodies and their collective modes of organization and claim (Abrica et al., 2019), the feeling of non-belonging motivated by the superficiality of diversity and the absence of inclusion in the university environment (Lewis & Shah, 2019) and the presence of race-related stressors, such as manifestations of racial stereotypes and blatant and veiled discrimination (Griffith et al., 2019). The coping responses employed in the management of different hindrances include dealing with situations individually, talking about them with others, expanding the performance in the institution in order to refute negative stereotypes, and adopting a professional posture that allows the claim of space in a predominantly white environment (Griffith et al., 2019; Jackson, 2018).

Brazilian scientific production, in turn, when investigating black individuals whose trajectories involved Higher Education (Carvalhaes & Ribeiro, 2019; Gouveia & Zanello, 2019; Teixeira & Dazzani, 2919), demonstrates that their challenges go beyond learning, requiring the managing of psychologically unhealthy situations caused by racism, which makes the path towards qualification and professional success more complex. However, considering that the literature deals mainly with the context of American undergraduates and knowing the particularities of the Brazilian educational reality, this study aims to identify how racism is present in the life and career of black university students from a Brazilian Public Higher Education Institution (HEI).

For this work, the subjective perspective becomes relevant, and, in view of this, the Career Construction Theory (CCT) is an interesting approach, for it considers, for the understanding of the career, both the aspects of context and the individual questions (Savickas, 2005). In this way, this approach will allow us to understand the process of building the career of black university students in a context in which racism is present.

Thus, it is intended to contribute to a more detailed understanding of the professional trajectory of black university students who experience specific circumstances in various areas, including at work. It also aims to contribute to the expansion of Analytical Perspectives on career construction, expanding the field of research towards qualitative studies, in general, and narrative analysis, in particular, which, although they are contemplated by the propositions of CCT, have not yet been sufficiently deepened (Rudolph et al., 2019).

The Career Construction Theory focuses on processes of interpretation, interaction, and imposing meaning, conceiving careers from a contextualist perspective. In this way, CCT understands the development of the individual as a result of the ability to adapt to the environment. In this theoretical perspective, careers result from the construction that occurs as individuals make choices that express their self-concepts and goals in the social reality circumscribed to the field of work (Savickas, 2005).

In CCT, three social challenges produce career changes: professional development activities, occupational changes (moving from one job to another, desired/expected or not), and work trauma (painful, unpredictable, or unwanted situations). Such challenges help the subject develop their capacities to anticipate their future in change contexts and find ways to achieve their expectations through involvement in different activities (Savickas, 2013). This career-building process, according to the theory, would involve three central aspects: the characteristics of the individual (his vocational personality), the development process of the capacities that favor its development during his career path (career adaptability), and the understanding of the reasons for their career moves to occur in a particular direction (life themes; Maree, 2013).

The third foundation of CCT, the life themes, provide a reflective construction that guides thinking about the continuity of self in the past, present, and future. The themes directly suggest how a particular individual is solving a problem or advancing towards self-realization while building his career; at the same time that he indirectly points to a pain or an underlying problem that he seeks to overcome as the protagonist of his life story (Del Corso & Rehfuss, 2011).

Career stories express the uniqueness of a particular person in their particular context, i.e., integrative themes unify this set of narratives, which organize professional life experiences into a storyline. Because of this, by consciously organizing and uniting different experiences, it is possible to identify a significantly coherent pattern of life themes in the long term. This pattern becomes essential to understanding the subject's way of being, as it indicates how he perceives himself and establishes what is relevant in the world (Savickas, 2005). This is what this study proposes: to understand the life themes present in the life and career narratives of black college students and identify how racism, as a system of domination and exclusion that transcends individual actions (Gouveia & Zanello, 2018), becomes present in them.

Furthermore, the investigation of life themes becomes relevant in light of the still scarce national and international studies dedicated to this issue (Del Corso & Rehfuss, 2011; Maree, 2016; Rudolph et al., 2019), since recent production based on CCT, in addition to not sufficiently contemplating the black population in its specificities, has been dedicated to the study of Career Adaptability (Cammarosano et al., 2019; Hui et al., 2018; Ladeira et al., 2019; Wehrle et al., 2019). This interpretive prism will then allow for a deeper understanding of the impacts of one of the structuring phenomena of Brazilian society, racism, on the experiences of the group that negatively experiences it, also allowing, as the theoretical framework guides, to understand the implications in the professional sphere.

Method

Participants

Twenty-seven self-declared black individuals, that is, black or brown, participated in this study. All were undergraduate students at a public higher education institution in Brazil's southeast region. The participants were aged between 20 and 53 years, with an average age of 23.96 years ($DP = 6{,}07$). Of these, 16 identified as female and 11 as male.

Instruments

The data collection used two instruments: a sociodemographic questionnaire and a Narrative Interview. The sociodemographic questionnaire consisted of questions about race-ethnicity, gender, age, period and year of enrollment in the higher education institution, course, mode of admission (through a quota system or not), situation with Student Assistance (whether receiving the offered aid), number of residents in the household, total gross income of residents, and city/state of residence.

The narrative interview included an open-ended trigger question - "Please tell me the story of your career" - and a request that the interviewees include in their accounts, if possible and desired, three aspects: memories since childhood, dreams or aspirations, and any changes in professional interest over time. The narrative interview, which has a free structure, aims to stimulate the individual to tell the story about a significant event in their life and social environment (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2002), whose analysis of topics, style, content, and context will reveal the subjects' view of the fundamental events in their lives and the reality they live in (Gibbs, 2011).

Procedures

Access to participants occurred through convenience sampling (Flick, 2009). This resulted from disseminating an online form spread through instant messaging apps and inviting students from a public higher education institution in the southeast region to volunteer. This form contained, in addition to a presentation about the researchers and the study's objectives, space for recording contact information, and the sociodemographic questionnaire.

The access link to the document was sent to the researchers' contact network affiliated with the higher education institution in focus, accompanied by a request to forward it to potential participants. Following the

order of receipt of the information, volunteers who met the prerequisites (self-declared black and undergraduates of the institution in question) were invited to the narrative interview.

The collections occurred virtually, through a free video call software, with an average duration of 30 minutes. Before starting the interview, the researcher would request consent for audio recording and, after approval, proceed with reading the entire Informed Consent Form, whose consent was recorded by audio. After the guidelines on the data collection procedure, which involved reading the trigger question ("Please tell me the story of your career") and requesting that the interviewees try to include (a) memories since childhood, (b) dreams or aspirations, and (c) any changes in professional interest over time, the narratives occurred freely so that the participants could provide all the information they deemed relevant to answer the trigger question. Once completed, any questions the interviewer had about the content were clarified. At the end of each collection, a copy of the signed Informed Consent Form by the responsible researcher was sent to the participant by email. It is worth noting that four pilot interviews were conducted beforehand to ensure the relevance of the instrument for the proposed data collection. The first two interviews allowed us to identify the need to request that the participants include memories since childhood, dreams or aspirations, and any changes in professional interests over time. The following two collections indicated that the changes in the instrument allowed it to meet the research objectives satisfactorily.

Data analysis

The data obtained was fully transcribed and systematized using thematic narrative biography analysis (Gibbs, 2011), which proposes a focus that goes beyond what is said or described by individuals, taking into account the reason and the way they say it and what they feel and experience, making it possible to share the meaning of the experience for the interviewees and translating the way they view life (Gibbs, 2011). In practical terms, the analysis began with an exhaustive reading of the material, and then the content was organized based on four common axes to the narratives: (1) Childhood/Adolescence; (2) High School; (3) Undergraduation; (4) Career.

The first axis included the categories: a) Context, b) Dreams, and c) Memory. The second was composed of: a) Institution, b) Delineation and Changes

in Professional Interest, c) Interest in Entering Public Higher Education Institutions, d) Barriers to Accessing Other Institutions, and e) Determining Factors for Entering Public Higher Education. The third included: a) Admission, b) Course, c) Knowledge About the Course, d) Experiences with Racism, e) Experiences During Undergraduation, and f) Participation in Collective Spaces. The fourth axis covered: a) Professional Ambitions and b) Perceptions About the Career.

Based on the narrated material and following the systematization developed from the axes, three narratives were developed as a way to group similar stories and cover the main distinctions between the experiences of the participants. All of them were composed of the information described during the collection, organized chronologically, starting in childhood and extending to the university experience The characters and their respective stories are presented in decreasing order of correspondence to the data; that is, the protagonist has the trajectory with the most frequently mentioned subcategories by the 27 participants in each of the categories mentioned above. Similarly, based on the coding of the content of the interviews, the narratives of the secondary and tertiary characters are based on the divergent subcategories of the main plot that were most frequently mentioned by the interviewees. As an example of the process, it is possible to mention the category "Institution" of the Axis "High School," whose three most frequently mentioned subcategories were: "Public school considered a local reference" (mentioned by ten interviewees), "Public school with limited structure, close to the place of residence" (mentioned by six participants), and "Private school" (described by two participants). Therefore, the subcategory "Public school considered a local reference" was included in the story of the central narrative, "Public school with limited structure, close to the place of residence" was inserted in the second story, and "Private school" was part of the third story.

To ensure confidentiality, the names of the interviewees were replaced with those of Brazilian black researchers, as symbolic codenames. The other mentioned data changed only in the points that would facilitate the identification of the participants, such as the names of cities, educational institutions, workplaces, courses, and similar.

Ethical Aspects

All procedures adopted complied with the criteria of ethics in research with human beings, according to Resolution No. 510/2016 of the National Health Council, evaluated and approved by the Ethics Committee in research with human beings under Protocole number 4.329.256.

Results

Characterization of participants

The group of participants consisted of students from 14 undergraduate courses, distributed as follows: Administration (2 interviewees), Architecture and Urbanism (2), Accounting Sciences (1), Social Sciences (6), Social Communication (1), Law (3), Nursing (1), Computer Engineering (2), Electrical Engineering (1), Physiotherapy (1), Geography (2), History (2), Portuguese/Spanish Literature (1), Psychology (2). In terms of the time of affiliation, interviewees were subjects who were between one and thirteen periods in the institution, with an average of 6.7 (SD=3.20) and a median of 7.

As for the reservation system, aimed at people who have fully studied High School in Public School, six individuals did not choose it. Among the optants, 20 applied for the places designated for blacks, browns, or indigenous, of which 14 chose the ones reserved for students with a family income higher than 1.5 minimum wages per capita, and six applied for the ones aimed at those with a family income lower than 1.5 minimum wages per capita. Only one ran for a vacancy not directed to blacks, browns, or indigenous people, opting for the reservation for students with a family income of less than 1.5 minimum wages.

Considering the incomes declared at the time of the research, the students had an average per capita income of R$ 1038.67 (SD=615.56), that is, lower than the minimum wage of the time (R$ 1,045.00). When questioned about the Student Assistance service, which includes students with a per capita income lower than 1.5 minimum wages and is renewed annually, 12 participants declared themselves assisted. However, based on the income criterion adopted by the university policy, 20 students would be eligible to apply for such a resource.

Narratives

Below, three stories will be presented. They were constructed from the analysis of data obtained through the Narrative Interviews of 27 participants. The names given to the characters, Ana Flávia, Osmundo, and Regina Maria, are symbolic codenames given to the participants to ensure anonymity. The compilation and organization of the data were operationalized

through the categorization of the information around four thematic axes ("Childhood/Adolescence", "High School", "Undergrad", and "Career"), which serve as guides for the plots.

Since she was born, Ana Flávia has lived in the same place, a peripheral neighborhood of a city near the capital. Her house was built over the years with the financial resources that her family could save, a particularly challenging task, given that her father worked as a bricklayer in temporary jobs and her mother as a maid. Despite the financial restrictions present throughout her life, Ana Flávia believed that she would have a future with fewer economic obstacles than her parents, dreaming, during childhood, of becoming a doctor and in adolescence of becoming an architect, as she was interested in the work her father did in the construction industry.

Education was always valued by her parents, who, although they had a large workload, sought to provide support to their daughter, encouraging her to stay in school, as they believed it was the most likely means of social advancement. And that is what she did: She studied Elementary School at the best public school in the region where she lived and High School at the state public school of reference in the capital. Before that, she participated in the selection process to study High School at the Federal Institute in her municipality but was not approved.

During High School, she made an effort to participate in all the extracurricular activities she could, including the English course offered by the State Government and the film club project organized by her sociology teacher, who was also black, in the afternoon. At this time, she had her first contact with ethnic-racial discussions through internet pages dedicated to the subject, although she was discouraged by one of her school teachers, who claimed that racism was an unfounded belief of the black population. Given her growing interest in deepening issues related to racism and other social phenomena, she realized that her area of affinity was the Humanities and decided to try studying Law. However, upon completing secondary education, she was not approved for the undergraduate courses available in the Unified Selection System (SISU), promoted by the Ministry of Education (MEC), even in the less competitive ones.

Disappointed with her result in the entrance exam, Ana Flávia decided, with the support of her family, to take a public preparatory course for the National High School Exam (ENEM), a test whose score is used for admission, via SISU, in most public higher education institutions. In it, she had more in-depth contact with the subjects of the school curriculum, being strongly interested in history, a course that became her first option after giving up Law School, a decision made because she understood that it was an elitist course and with a low presence of black students, like her, which, in her perception, would make the student experience more challenging. At SISU, she obtained a grade to be approved in a disputed institution located in another state of the federation. However, since her family did not have the means to bear the costs of the move, she then enrolled in the Federal University of her state, becoming the first person in her family to enter a university. Public higher education institution.

In the history course, she got to know the curriculum with the help of the senior students of his course, and it was also through them that she began to participate in the Student Movement. In addition to classes and commitments to militancy, she joined the teaching initiation program as a way to help cover her expenses at the University, partially covered by the aid of Student Assistance. However, the experience in the classroom made her identify with the profession of Teacher, which she wants to follow after completing the course in peripheral public schools because she wants to make a difference in the training of students with a similar reality to hers.

After experiencing episodes of racial discrimination, in which her skills and abilities were discredited by professionals and students of the school where she performed her initiation activities to teaching, she joined the Black collective of the University, where she met and became friends with Osmundo. He, who was born in the interior of the state, moved to the capital when he entered the University's Social Sciences course; however, this was preceded by numerous obstacles.

Born in a context of intense financial constraint, Osmundo helped, during part of his youth, his parents in the informal jobs that they developed as a means of family subsistence. Although none of his relatives had attended higher education, he dreamed of being a teacher, a position of apparent prominence in the public schools near his home, where he completed elementary and Middle School. During his schooling, he heard insults from his classmates due to the color of his skin, the texture of his curly hair, and his behavior, which was considered effeminate.

Upon completing secondary education, he took the ENEM exam, but with his result he was not

approved for any courses available on SISU. He then started a Technical Course in Mechanics at night, which he combined with his job in the production sector of a small industry in the region where he lived. After completing the course, he realized that higher education represented the opportunity to be better paid, which motivated him to enroll in a community preparatory course for the ENEM, attended by him at night, after work.

With the score obtained when taking the ENEM exam for the second time, he sought some course that would guarantee his approval on SISU, with the only criterion being the Human Sciences area. He was approved in the course of Social Sciences, in the third call made in the second semester, of lesser competition. In possession of the result, he was informed by his parents that they would not be able to help him financially, so, with the financial reserve he had, he moved to the capital, enrolling in the university. To be able to stay in the course, he lived in a fraternity far from the institution, paid for with the money from his new job in the commercial sector.

Exhausted by the need to balance work and study, he sought scholarships provided by the University, getting one linked to the development of administrative activities. To complement his income, he worked as a freelancer on weekends and, for this reason, he was unable to participate in the research activities so desired by him since the teachers demand, even for volunteers, availability in the after-hours, the time of his work as a scholarship holder. With the help of two university friends, Ana Flávia and Regina Maria, he is seeking scholarship opportunities in extension or teaching initiation projects, which are usually less competitive. He still doesn't know what he wants to work with, his focus is to complete the graduation, but he would like to practice a profession where he could discuss ethnic-racial issues, which have become especially important since he started participating in debates on the subject in graduation, which contributed to his recognition as a black person, to the understanding that the insults he heard throughout his life, related to his phenotype, were the expression of racism, and to his identity strengthening, mediated by an approach of his ancestry, supported by his peers at the institution.

Regina Maria, although she shares negative racial experiences with Ana Flávia and Osmundo, caused by racism, has had some benefits, especially financial, throughout her life. She lives in a low-middle-class neighborhood in the capital with her parents, who are public servants and graduates. Her mother studied at the Federal University. She studied elementary and high school in a private institution with a partial scholarship due to her good academic performance. However, she was disturbed by the fact that she was one of the few black students in the school and was afraid of being disrespected by her peers for wearing traditional African braids in her hair.

Since childhood, she was encouraged to study engineering because her family believed that it would provide financial stability and social status. In high school, she changed schools to one with a greater tradition in college admissions. Unsure of which engineering to study, she attended a university fair hosted by the Federal University she wanted to attend and decided to study Computer Engineering based on the information she received. Later, with the support of a relative, she met a professional in the field and was able to understand the possibilities of the profession.

With her ENEM score, she was approved in her first attempt at SISU. However, when she entered the university, she realized that the professors did not provide the support she needed to pass the classes and decided to focus solely on her studies. After finishing her introductory courses, she started searching for extracurricular internship opportunities but has not been successful. In this process, she noticed that other black students in her course, including those with high academic performance, did not engage in professional activities related to their course in organizations.

Her goal after graduation is to pass a public exam, as she believes that it will provide her, as a black woman, with better job market opportunities. She wants to work in a field outside of her field of study because her experience with the course was different from her expectations. She seeks a job that provides financial comfort and satisfies her beliefs and ideals, not focusing her career ambitions on obtaining social status.

Although she was approved for a vacancy under the open competition, she felt more comfortable with the quota students, and it was through one of them that she met Ana Flávia and Osmundo at a party. Since then, the three have gotten closer, keeping in touch through a group created on an instant messaging app. Moreover, although Regina Maria does not attend the university's black collective, she discusses with her friends, among other topics, the impacts of racism observed in daily life.

Discussion

The narratives presented allow us to identify that, although racism is present throughout the life of black university students, in some situations, it manifests itself as limitations that are not explicitly linked to race, such as socioeconomic status and access to high-quality formal education. These obstacles are also observed in other national studies dedicated to investigating the living conditions of black undergraduate students (Carvalhaes & Ribeiro, 2019) and abroad (Lewis & Shah, 2019).

Concerning the relationship between career and life, for Savickas (2013), it is a process of accumulation of incidents and insights that endorses the plot and expands its meanings, thus requiring changes in life themes to establish a viable trajectory to achieve professional goals. In this sense, the emergence of the life theme "experiences with racism" (LT1), named by the researchers (as well as the others), in the trajectory of black university students leads them to an insight, propelling two other themes: "awareness about racism" (LT2), responsible for expanding the perception capacity of subjects about the phenomenon and its effects, and "handling racism" (LT3), representing the ways developed by them to deal with the limitations experienced, resulting in changes in professional interests and, consequently, in the career.

Concerning the process of choosing the course, Carvalhaes and Ribeiro (2019) indicate the existence of a strong relationship between race, social class, and the educational level of the student's family members, with an alignment between individual preferences and an objective assessment of the possibilities of access to higher competition courses, as occurred with Ana Flávia and Osmundo (LT1). Lewis and Shah (2019), in turn, contribute to the understanding of this process by stressing that the fight against racial inequality is maintained as a conceptual goal instead of focusing on practical actions, contributing to the maintenance of racism and the privileges granted to whites, which involve educational and financial benefits.

As proposed by Savickas (2005), the conscious organization of the different experiences of the individual makes it possible to establish a consistent pattern of life themes over time, which indicates how he perceives himself and delimits what is important in the world. Given this, racism, despite composing the life themes of black students since childhood, as described in Osmundo's story, comes to be understood later (LT2), according to the narrative of Ana Flávia, becoming central after entering higher education. Its incorporation is due, in part, to events in which racism produced explicit manifestations, such as the insults heard by Osmundo, or veiled, such as the demonstrations of distrust of Ana Flávia's competence during her performance at school (LT1), since they have become striking situations in the trajectories of the characters (Savickas, 2005, 2013).

These episodes converge with the literature, where Abrica et al. (2019) observe that, although physical violence does not compose the experiences of the interviewed black university students, the participants reported a constant sense of threat, as they identified an effort on the part of individuals in society to highlight the supposed differences between races. Similarly to that experienced by Ana Flávia, the most commonly identified anti-black manifestations in the study by Abrica et al. (2019) were related to the denial of black intellectuality, that is, the constant questioning of the intellectual abilities of the respondents, who even when testifying to their intelligence, were treated as inept and dishonest.

On the other hand, Regina Maria's fear, in childhood and adolescence, of being belittled for using traditionally African braids (LT1) and her perception of the difficulty of insertion in the labor market during graduation (LT2) reveals the strength of racism in the formation and maintenance of society, silently interfering in different dimensions of black life, causing damage, equally harmful, by restricting the life and career possibilities of this group. The fear of suffering offenses based on aesthetic aspects, it should be noted, is not restricted to the character's narrative, as demonstrated by Griffith et al. (2019), by signaling that experiences with racial insults were common among black undergraduates and were usually related to physical appearance or personal hygiene.

On the other hand, concerning the limitations faced by the black population, Carvalhaes and Ribeiro (2019) observe that even though choices can be made individually, the available opportunities are beyond the control of the subject since they are distributed differentially based on aspects that they have no control over, such as skin color. This context is similar to that observed by Jackson (2018), who, although he conducted a study with black American university students, reports the adoption of forms of racism management based on the search for professional opportunities in workspaces occupied mostly by white people. However,

unlike what he reported, which identified the use of a policy of respectability among participants, Regina Maria seeks to occupy spaces that use objective evaluation criteria, such as public exams (LT3). In addition, the character, at the beginning of her graduation, adopted a tactic of exclusive dedication to her studies (LT3) consistent with what is predicted by foreign literature, which signals commitment and persistence in the academic space as means of responding to stressors linked to race (Griffith et al., 2019). It is emphasized, however, that this format of handling racism present in the career (LT3) was possible only for the student who had better financial conditions, not reflecting the reality of the other characters, as well as a significant portion of the Brazilian black population.

Knowing that the life themes make explicit how the subjects solve their problems (Del Corso & Rehfuss, 2011), it is possible to perceive that the investigated university represents a point of transformation in the way in which black students deal with their experiences associated with racism (LT3) since it includes spaces of social support and identity strengthening, materialized, above all, in the Black collective. In this perspective, Teixeira and Dazzani (2019) describe the university as a space for changing choices, values, and perceptions about the social context in which one lives, which occurs not through the formal activities promoted by it but through extracurricular academic spaces, which allow broader discussions than provided for in the course curriculum. The authors point out that this university experience allows the assimilation of the role of racism in the construction of social values and its deconstruction, as occurred with Osmundo and Ana Flávia after their insertion in the Black collective (LT2).

Griffith et al. (2019) also reported collective management of racism-related stressful events so that, after experiencing such situations, the black undergraduate students selected other subjects with whom they had a supportive relationship to discuss the event. According to the interviewees, dialoguing helped them to process the experience and validated the interpretation of the event as discriminatory and the emotional response to it, in addition to providing a resonance space that helped them cope with racism when they felt exhausted (Griffith et al., 2019). However, before dealing with the situation collectively, reports of handling individual episodes of stress related to race through practices such as imagining situations, writing about them, and trying to plan ways to solve them, were also observed in the study by Griffith et al. (2019).

These measures are similar to those adopted by Regina Maria, who, despite not being part of the Black collective, incorporated ways of responding to the perceived impacts of racism into her life themes (LT3), such as in Career Planning away from her training course and private organizations. It should be noted that although the character has dealt alone with some of the impacts of her race/color on her life and career, her group of black friends has also represented relevant support to their experiences in a racialized society, illustrating what is predicted by Teixeira and Dazzani (2019), who point out that recognition as black produces isolation in certain contexts, which tends to be minimized through the friendship relationships developed at the University.

Finally, it is noteworthy that Ana Flávia's professional choices, which involve teaching in schools with people in a social context similar to hers, and Osmundo's, who aims to be able to discuss ethnic-racial relations at work, illustrate how racial and socioeconomic experiences help shape career prospects so that the life themes come to include otherness (LT3). Thus, the other becomes an indispensable figure for the realization of their professional aspirations, which are based on the transformation of social reality. These aspirations corroborate what Griffith et al. (2019) point out about the existence of an intergenerational commitment of groups composed of blacks to confront stressors linked to race so that there is an effort to transmit knowledge and ways of handling racism to subsequent generations to instrumentalize them so that they can deal with and combat existing inequalities in spaces predominantly occupied by white people.

Given the above, it is possible to deduce that racism, in its different ways of materialization, affects the experiences of all black graduates, regardless of the social context in which they are inserted. Thus, the life theme "experiences with racism" involved both situations of explicit discrimination, such as insults and mistrust about skills, and subtle impacts, although equally harmful, such as limitations on access to undergraduate courses with greater competition, insertion in research activities promoted by the institution and professional opportunities in the private sector.

When they experienced these effects, the students had insights about the phenomenon, revealing a second life theme: "awareness of racism". This assimilation occurred through different processes but usually involved experiences during high school and, especially, Higher Education, stages in which reflections about the career became more frequent. From

them, black university students identified the need to manage the impacts of racism so that their professional goals, reoriented after becoming racially aware, were achieved. Thus, the third theme of life emerges, "handling racism", consisting of individual actions, such as the exclusive dedication to studies and the decision to pursue a teaching career or in the Civil Service, and collective actions, such as participation in student and black movements, which contribute to the subjects conducting their careers, despite racism, according to their interests, which are in constant transformation, due to the accumulation of experiences, linked directly or indirectly to race.

Final Remarks

This study, which aimed to identify how racism is present in the life and career of black university students of a Brazilian Public Higher Education Institution, indicates the existence of three life themes linked to the phenomenon, named by the researchers as: "experiences with racism" (LT1), "awareness of racism" (LT2) and "handling racism" (LT3). The analysis of the data allowed the understanding that, although there are distinctions between the experiences of black university students, motivated, above all, by their socioeconomic origin and by the opportunities available throughout life, racism emerges as an expressive phenomenon for the life and career of all characters (LT2), impacting their narratives, either by inferiorizing them and restricting their possibilities (LT1) or by mobilizing them to establish means of managing the damage caused by it (LT3). Thus, the black, before, during, and potentially after the university experience, makes choices considering, directly or indirectly, the effects of racism, seeking to achieve their personal and professional aspirations, with collective support, despite them.

The findings of this research contribute to the recognition of the complexity of the effects of racism on the life and career trajectories of black undergraduate students, which should not be dissociated, given that the impacts of this phenomenon are widespread. It is also emphasized that many of the damages caused by racism are not explicit, and combating it requires specific public policies so that the confrontation does not remain exclusively in charge of students, individually or collectively. Finally, it is necessary to recognize the limitations of the study: the adoption of narrative interviews partially compromised the deepening of some of the issues relevant to the understanding of the theme; and the investigation of the trajectory of university students from a public institution who had spaces for intergroup exchanges, such as the Black collective, unusual in private colleges, representing a reality that is not common to most black undergraduate students. Therefore, it is suggested that further investigations should be carried out with semi-structured interviews and that they contemplate students regardless of the nature of the institution.

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