

RACIAL DISCRIMINATION: PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES OF STUDENTS FROM HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS



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ABSTRACT

The impacts of racism in contexts such as the school environment, the labor market, and the prison system significantly affect young black people. Within this perspective, this article aims to analyze the experiences of racial discrimination experienced by students from five higher education institutions in the State of Ceará. The study is part of a broader research entitled "Racial Discrimination and Mental Health in Universities", characterized as an exploratory, descriptive and cross-sectional research, with a quantitative approach. The research was carried out with students regularly enrolled in undergraduate courses at five higher education institutions in Ceará, resulting in a final sample of 829 students. The instrument used was the "Racial Discrimination Scale". The results show a significant difference in the response to unfair treatment ($p = 0.016$), with the majority of students trying to react to racial discrimination, especially those from FIED, with 82.9%. Regarding concern about racial injustice in the last year, students from UVA and FIED had the highest rates, with 73.9% and 73.2%, respectively. Regarding the experience of having suffered racial discrimination, students from UVA and F5 were ahead of the other institutions, with 34.3% and 30%, respectively. It was found that while the majority of students from FIED 82.9% and UVA 77.4% tend to adopt an active stance, trying to react to unfair treatment, a considerable proportion of students from FLF 42.6% tend to accept this discrimination as a fact of life. These results indicate that there are differences in the way students perceive and react to racial discrimination in the institutions analyzed. While some adopt active postures of confrontation, others tend to accept discrimination as something inevitable, reflecting different approaches to racism. Concern about racial injustice is more pronounced in some institutions, suggesting that cultural and contextual factors play an important role in shaping these perceptions.

Keywords: Racial Discrimination. Higher Education Students. Everyday Racism.

INTRODUCTION

Most of the Brazilian population declares itself black, which includes blacks and browns, according to color and race criteria defined by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE). However, the geographical predominance does not match a reality still marked by traces of racism, which is pointed out as one of the main responsible for recurrent episodes of violence, social exclusion, and discrimination that still significantly affect the black population in the country (Eugênio and Lima, 2020; Oliveira et al., 2021).

The impacts of racism in various contexts, such as the school environment, the labor market, and the prison system are clear and persistent among young black people. In addition, this portion of the population is often exposed to multiple forms of violence, including verbal, moral, physical, and psychological aggression, composing a scenario of structural inequalities and systematic exclusion (Oliveira et al., 2021). This reality reflects the manifestation of racism through racial discrimination, characterized by actions, attitudes, or behaviors that target individuals or groups based on skin color (Almeida, 2018).

Such practices not only reinforce historical inequalities, but also perpetuate exclusionary social structures that maintain racism as a structural and institutionalized problem (Almeida, 2018). In this context, racism can be understood as a central element in the structuring of a system of social domination, which is based on the identification of differences between people. This system establishes scales of values and hierarchies, in which certain groups are positioned as superior while others are considered inferior, conditioned by characteristics such as perversity, ignorance, and ugliness (Cuevas-Calderón and Vargas, 2023).

Data from the National Health Council, in 2023, highlight racism as a significant social determinant of health, evidencing the vulnerability of the black population in accessing public policies. A clear example of this inequality is observed in the causes of death that disproportionately impact the black population, as in the case of COVID-19, which was one of the main causes of maternal death in Brazil in 2020. In this context, 63.4% of maternal deaths recorded that year occurred among black and brown women (Brasil, 2023).

In addition, multimorbidity, characterized by the simultaneous presence of two or more chronic conditions, has a higher prevalence, precocity, and accelerated progression in historically discriminated populations (Oliveira, 2023). Thus, it is reaffirmed that racism

and racial discrimination function as social determinants of health, accumulating throughout life and increasing the vulnerability of these groups to adverse outcomes (Almeida, 2018).

This dynamic of structural disadvantages is not limited to health alone, but is reflected in other spheres of society. Power, historically exercised by the dominant elites to perpetuate privileges for a select, predominantly white group, maintains racial inequality as a fundamental pillar for social exclusion and the continuity of the dominance of the elites, who, despite their transformations over time, continue to sustain this structure (Brasil et al., 2024).

In this context, this study becomes relevant when addressing the experiences of racial discrimination lived by university students, both in the academic environment and in their social interactions outside the institutions. Thus, the objective of this article is to analyze the experiences of racial discrimination experienced by students from five higher education institutions in the State of Ceará.

METHODOLOGY

This is an excerpt from a broader research entitled "Racial Discrimination and Mental Health in Universities", characterized as an exploratory, descriptive and cross-sectional research, with a quantitative approach. Cross-sectional studies are defined by the simultaneous analysis of exposure to a factor or cause and its association with the effect in a group of individuals, within the same period. This type of study allows the generation of data on the prevalence or frequency of diseases and risk factors at a specific time, in addition to enabling the analysis of the relationships between the outcome variable and the covariates (Polit and Beck, 2019).

The study was carried out with students regularly enrolled in undergraduate courses at five higher education institutions located in the state of Ceará. The institutions contemplated were: Vale do Acaraú State University (UVA), Federal University of Ceará (UFC), Luciano Feijão College (FLF), 05 de Julho College (F5) and IEducare College (FIED). The inclusion criteria required a minimum age of 18 years and complete completion of the data collection instrument.

Data collection took place between September 2023 and January 2024, through an online form and the Informed Consent Form (ICF), sent by email to the participants. Face-to-face approaches were also adopted in common spaces of the institutions, such as recreational areas and classrooms, university restaurant, in addition to individual

interactions. This strategy allowed for increased participation, resulting in a significant final sample of 829 participants.

The instrument used was the "Racial Discrimination Scale", which measures discriminatory experiences based on ethnicity, race or skin color. Originally published in 1990 in the Coronary Artery Risk Development in Young Adults study, it was later reformulated and revalidated for the North American population (Krieger, 1999). The scale covers five dimensions: response to unfair treatment, discrimination, concern, global issues and complaint lodged. The validity and reliability of the instrument are proven by its strong correlation with other scales that assess experiences of discrimination (Fattore, et al., 2018).

It is important to highlight that the study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Vale do Acaraú State University (UVA), in accordance with the ethical guidelines for research with human beings, according to Opinion No. 6,279,258.

RESULTS

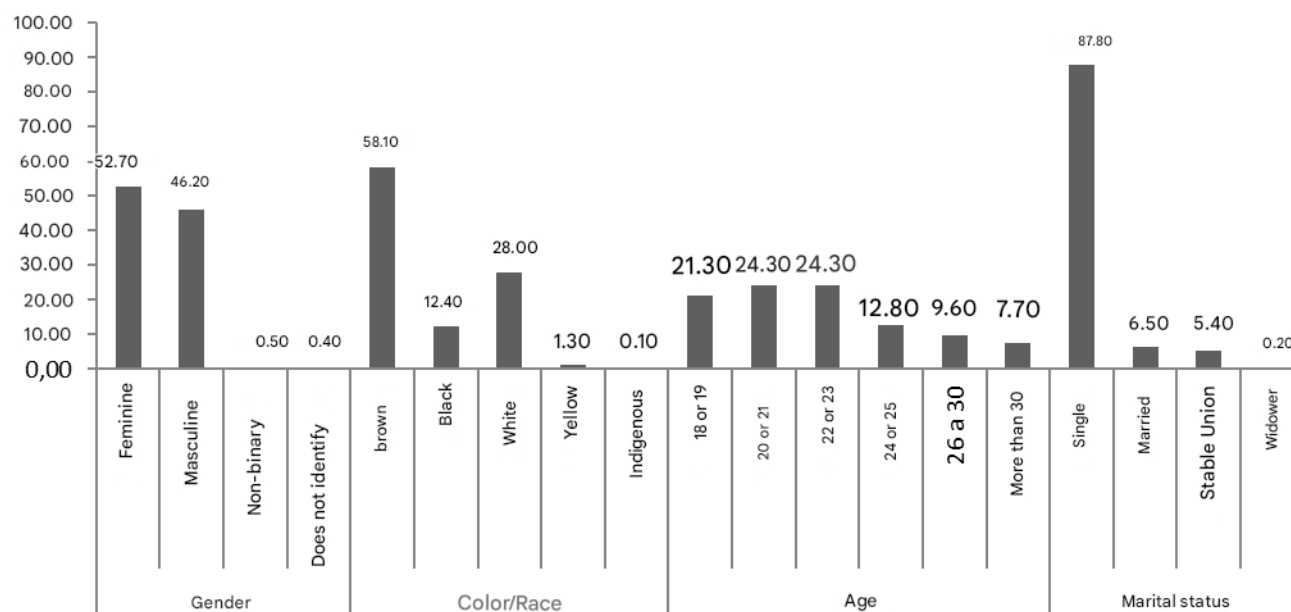
The sociodemographic data of the survey (Graph 1) indicated a predominance of female participants, with 52.7%, followed by males, with 46.2%. A small portion identified themselves as non-binary, 0.5%, or chose not to inform their gender, 0.4%.

Regarding color/race, most participants declared themselves brown, 58.1%, followed by white, 28.0%, and black, 12.4%, while the yellow categories, 1.3%, and indigenous, 0.1%, had lower representation.

The analysis of the age group revealed a mostly young profile, with 69.9% of the participants between 18 and 23 years old. Of these, 21.3% were between 18 and 19 years old, 24.3% between 20 and 21 years old and another 24.3% between 22 and 23 years old. Older age groups were less representative, with 12.8% between 24 and 25 years old, 9.6% between 26 and 30 years old, and 7.7% over 30 years old.

Regarding marital status, the vast majority of participants were single (87.8%), while 6.5% were married and 5.4% lived in a stable union. Only 0.2% of respondents identified themselves as widowed.

Graph 1. Distribution of sociodemographic data of university students, Ceará, 2024.



Source: Prepared by the authors, 2025.

Table 1 shows significant variations in participants' responses regarding the perception of unfair treatment, with notable differences between higher education institutions (HEIs). Most participants stated that they take active actions in these situations, with percentages ranging from 82.9% in the FIED to 57.4% in the FLF, a statistically significant difference ($p = 0.016$).

In addition, it was observed that the sharing of experiences of discrimination was more frequent among the participants of the UVA (77.4%) and the FLF (66.7%), suggesting different coping strategies and the search for support between the institutions.

Table 1. Relationship between the items of the Scale of Experiences of Discrimination with the Higher Education Institution, 2024.

RESPONDING TO UNFAIR TREATMENT

	UVA (N=574)		CFU (N=140)		F5 (N=20)		FIED (N=41)		FLF (N=54)		x24	p
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%		
I) If you feel that you are being treated unfairly, you usually:											12,164	* 0,016
a) Accept this as a fact of life	130	22,6	37	26,4	5	25,0	7	17,1	23	42,6		
b) Try to do something about it	444	77,4	103	73,6	15	75,0	34	82,9	31	57,4		
II) If you are being treated unfairly, you usually:											3,289	0,511
a) Talk to other people about it	444	77,4	107	76,4	16	80,0	31	75,6	36	66,7		
b) Keep it to yourself	130	22,6	33	23,6	4	20,0	10	24,4	18	33,3		

DISCRIMINATION

	UVA (N=570)		CFU (N=140)		F5 (N=20)		FIED (N=41)		FLF (N=54)		x24	p
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%		
... suffered the experience of discrimination, ... Because of your race, ethnicity, or color?											12,589	* 0,013
No	377	65,7	101	72,1	14	70,0	31	75,6	47	87,0		
Yes	197	34,3	39	27,9	6	30,0	10	24,4	7	13,0		
a) At school											9,635	* 0,047
Low exposure	376	66,0	103	73,6	12	60,0	29	70,7	45	83,3		
High exposure	194	34,0	37	26,4	8	40,0	12	29,3	9	16,7		
b) When looking for a job											4,967	0,291
Low exposure	498	87,4	125	89,3	17	85,0	38	92,7	52	96,3		
High exposure	72	12,6	15	10,7	3	15,0	3	7,3	2	3,7		
c) At work											11,257	* 0,024
Low exposure	492	86,3	130	92,9	19	95,0	37	90,2	53	98,1		
High exposure	78	13,7	10	7,1	1	5,0	4	9,8	1	1,9		
d) When buying a house											1,073	0,898
Low exposure	553	97,0	135	96,4	20	100,0	40	97,6	53	98,1		
High exposure	17	3,0	5	3,6	0	0,0	1	2,4	1	1,9		
e) Seeking medical care											5,294	0,258
Low exposure	519	91,1	129	92,1	20	100,0	37	90,2	53	98,1		
High exposure	51	8,9	11	7,9	0	0,0	4	9,8	1	1,9		
f) Requesting service in a store or restaurant											6,622	0,157
Low exposure	452	79,3	117	83,6	15	75,0	37	90,2	48	88,9		
High exposure	118	20,7	23	16,4	5	25,0	4	9,8	6	11,1		
g) When applying for credit or bank loan											3,943	0,414
Low exposure	544	95,4	138	98,6	19	95,0	40	97,6	53	98,1		
High exposure	26	4,6	2	1,4	1	5,0	1	2,4	1	1,9		
h) On the street or in a public establishment											15,606	** 0,004
Low exposure	416	73,0	110	78,6	17	85,0	36	87,8	50	92,6		
High exposure	154	27,0	30	21,4	3	15,0	5	12,2	4	7,4		
i) By the Police or in the Forum											5,974	0,201
Low exposure	514	90,2	131	93,6	19	95,0	40	97,6	52	96,3		
High exposure	56	9,8	9	6,4	1	5,0	1	2,4	2	3,7		

WORRY

UVA (N=574)	CFU (N=140)	F5 (N=20)	FIED (N=41)	FLF (N=54)
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	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	x24	p
a) When you were a child or teenager (under 18 years old), did you worry about people in your racial group being treated unfairly because of their race or skin color?											31,65 8	*** 0,000
Low exposure	184	32,1	80	57,1	8	40,0	1	29,2	2	38,9		
High exposure	390	67,9	60	42,9	1	60,2	2	70,9	3	61,3		
b) In the last year, have you been concerned about people in your racial group being treated unfairly because of race or skin color?											15,31 1	** 0,004
Low exposure	150	26,1	56	40,0	7	35,0	11	26,8	2	42,3		
High exposure	424	73,9	84	60,0	1	65,3	3	73,2	3	57,1		
c) In the last year, have you worried about experiences of unfair treatment because of your race or skin color?											9,598	* 0,048
Low exposure	233	40,6	74	52,9	1	55,1	1	41,7	2	51,8		
High exposure	341	59,4	66	47,1	9	45,0	2	58,4	2	48,6		

COMPLAINT LODGED

	UVA (N=574)		CFU (N=140)		F5 (N=20)		FIED (N=41)		FLF (N=54)		x24	p
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%		
Have you ever filed a complaint about racial discrimination?											2,43 5	0,656
No	564	98,3	138	98,6	2	100,0	41	100,0	52	96,3		
Yes	10	1,7	2	1,4	0	0,0	0	0,0	2	3,7		

* p<0.05 ** p<0.01 *** p<0.001

Source: Prepared by the authors, 2024.

Table 2 presents the relationship between the global questions of the Scale of Experiences of Discrimination and the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), highlighting the means (M) and standard deviations (SD) of the participants' responses. The perception of discrimination against non-white people (Question A) had the highest average in CFU (M = 3.40; SD = 0.90) and the lowest in the LFF (M = 2.98; SD = 1.16). However, the differences between the institutions were not statistically significant (p = 0.078). Although this difference is not statistically relevant, the variations in the means suggest that the perception of discrimination may vary between institutional contexts, being influenced by cultural and structural factors specific to each HEI.

On the other hand, the perception of personal discrimination (Question B) showed statistically significant differences between the institutions ($p = 0.043$), with the highest mean in the UVA ($M = 1.88$; $SD = 0.97$) and the lowest in FIED ($M = 1.51$; $SD = 0.84$). This result indicates that, contrary to the perception of discrimination against groups, individual experiences of discrimination are more influenced by the institutional environment, reflecting both the level of awareness of students and the presence of mechanisms that facilitate the recognition and reporting of these situations.

Table 2. Relationship between the Global Issues of the Scale of Experiences of Discrimination with the Higher Education Institution, 2024.

GLOBAL ISSUES												
	UVA (N=574)		CFU (N=140)		F5 (N=20)		FIED (N=41)		FLF (N=54)			
	M	DP	M	DP	M	DP	M	DP	M	DP	F	p
a) How often do you feel that people who are not white are discriminated against?	3,2 8	0,9 7	3,4 0	0,9 0	3,1 5	0,7 5	3,1 5	0,9 6	2,9 8	1,1 6	2,10 4	0,078
b) How often do you feel that you personally have been discriminated against because of your race or color? ^{PH}	1,8 8	0,9 7	1,7 1	0,9 4	1,8 0	1,0 6	1,5 1	0,8 4	1,6 5	0,9 9	2,47 4	* 0,043

^{PH} – PostHoc tests: UVA > FIED

* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$ *** $p < 0.001$

Source: Prepared by the authors, 2024.

Table 3 presents the means (M) and standard deviations (SD) of the dimensions of the Scale of Experiences of Discrimination in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), highlighting statistically significant differences between the institutions analyzed.

In Dimension 1, which assesses the frequency of experiences of discrimination experienced, the UVA had the highest mean ($M = 14.9$; $SD = 22.6$), while the LFF had the lowest ($M = 5.6$; $SD = 14.6$). Statistical analysis indicated a significant difference between the institutions ($p = 0.014$), suggesting that the institutional environment can influence both the occurrence and the perception of these experiences.

In Dimension 2, which addresses concerns about discrimination, the highest averages were observed in FIED ($M = 67.5$; $SD = 42.5$) and UVA ($M = 67.1$; $SD = 39.6$), indicating a greater apprehension of students from these institutions in relation to discrimination. In contrast, CFU had the lowest mean ($M = 50.0$; $SD = 41.3$), suggesting a lower level of concern among its students. The high standard deviation at UFC reflects the great variability in individual perceptions, showing that the experience of discrimination is not uniform among students at this institution. The difference between the institutions in this

dimension was highly significant ($p < 0.001$), evidencing the impact of the institutional context on the way these concerns are experienced.

The results show that, in addition to the frequency of discrimination, its emotional and psychosocial impacts vary considerably between HEIs. UVA, for example, had significantly higher averages in both Dimension 1 (experiences of discrimination) and Dimension 2 (concerns about discrimination), when compared to FLF ($p = 0.014$) and CFU ($p < 0.001$), respectively. This pattern suggests that institutional, historical, and sociocultural factors can directly influence the way students experience and interpret discrimination in the academic context.

Table 3. Relationship between the Dimensions of the Scale of Experiences of Discrimination with the Higher Education Institution, 2024.

	UVA (N=574)		CFU (N=140)		F5 (N=20)		FIED (N=41)		FLF (N=54)		F	p
	M	DP	M	DP	M	DP	M	DP	M	DP		
Dimension 1. PH	14,9	22,6	11,3	21,4	12,2	19,0	9,5	19, 7	5,6	14, 6	3,14 6	* 0,014
Discrimination Dimension 2. PH Concern	67,1	39,6	50,0	41,3	56,7	34,4	67,5	42, 5	55, 6	43, 4	5,85 9	*** 0,000

Dimension 1^{PH} – PostHoc tests: UVA > FLF Dimension 2^{PH} – PostHoc tests: UVA > CFU * $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$ *** $p < 0.001$

Source: Prepared by the authors, 2024.

DISCUSSION

The gender analysis of the participants (Graph 1) revealed a greater participation of females, which corresponded to 52.5% of the total. This female predominance follows a pattern observed in similar studies, such as "Racism and Career Construction: Coping Strategies Adopted by Black University Students", in which, among the 27 self-declared black undergraduates interviewed, 16 were female and 11 male (Benedito; Fernandes, 2020).

These results also corroborate the data from Oliveira et al. (2022), who identified that 71.4% of the participants in their research were women, evidencing the trend of greater female adherence in quantitative and qualitative studies, especially in contexts that address social and identity issues.

Regarding color/race, the results indicated a significant ethnic diversity among the participants, reflecting the racial composition of the Brazilian population. The implementation of affirmative action in 2005 led to a progressive increase in the admission of students through quotas, considering criteria such as income, race, and disability. This

advance demonstrates the effectiveness of inclusion policies in access to higher education for historically marginalized groups. In 2015, the proportion of quota entrants reached 42.5%, stabilizing between 48% and 49% in the period from 2016 to 2018 (National Forum of Pro-Rectors of Community and Student Affairs – FONAPRACE, 2019).

Regarding the age group, the data in this study dialogue with previous research on work and education, entitled *"Slave-like labor and structural racism: a portrait of the rescues of Bahian workers"*, which identified a predominance of young people between 18 and 24 years old among workers rescued from conditions analogous to slavery in Bahia, both male and female (Lima, 2023).

With regard to marital status, the results of this study diverge from the findings of a survey conducted in 2019 on the perception of racism in higher education. In this study, most participants were married (56%), while single and common-law individuals accounted for 18% each, and divorced individuals accounted for 8% (Jardim, Júnior, Schott, 2022). This discrepancy may be associated with the sample profile, since the present research focuses predominantly on university students, while the 2019 study focused on university professors.

The variations in the participants' responses presented in Table 1 reflect different forms of reaction to discriminatory situations, evidencing a predominant tendency of resistance and confrontation. These behaviors are directly related to the historical struggle against oppression, reinforcing the understanding that racism in Brazil is a dynamic phenomenon in constant transformation. In this context, the black population is particularly impacted, since discriminatory practices often silence those who seek to denounce them (Jesus, Silva and Nascimento, 2020).

The sharing of experiences of unfair treatment, identified as a striking characteristic among students, evidences the search for social and collective support. This behavior goes back to historical traditions of resistance, such as those practiced in quilombos, which, since the colonial period, have functioned as spaces for denouncing and confronting oppression (Oliveira et al., 2024). In this sense, the exchange of experiences and mutual support become essential practices in the fight against racial and structural inequalities. However, it is essential to recognize that discrimination often manifests itself in a subtle and unconscious way, occurring when the aggressor is not fully aware of the impact of his actions on the victims (Pereira, 2018).

The data analyzed reveal a higher incidence of racial discrimination among the participants of the UVA (34.3%) compared to the FLF (13.0%), with a statistically significant difference ($p = 0.013$). In the school environment, exposure to discrimination was more frequent among F5 students (40.0%) and less recurrent in FLF (16.7%), also with statistical significance ($p = 0.047$). These findings reinforce the importance of the educational role played by the Brazilian black movement, whose work goes beyond the struggle for access to education, also covering the confrontation of racial inequalities within educational institutions (Oliveira et al., 2024).

Historically, the universalization of public schools in Brazil occurred gradually, since, in its origin, education was mostly aimed at the middle and upper classes (Ribeiro and Gaia, 2021). This process of structural exclusion reflects the persistence of coloniality in the educational system, in which racism and racial inequalities are often naturalized and little problematized, making it difficult to understand their historical and structural roots (Gomes, 2021).

The research by Oliveira et al. (2024) highlights the severity of racial discrimination both inside and outside the academic environment, pointing out that 81.7% of black students reported having faced discriminatory situations throughout their university career. These data highlight the urgency of implementing effective institutional policies to combat racism in higher education institutions.

In the work environment (Table 1), discrimination presented low rates among the study participants, with the exception of F5, where 5.0% reported discriminatory experiences, in contrast to 1.9% in the FLF, a statistically significant difference ($p = 0.024$).

For Ribeiro and Gaia (2021), in the case of the black population, this inequality is not restricted only to socioeconomic factors, such as the need for early entry into the labor market, but is also related to internal aspects of the educational system that reinforce barriers to access and permanence in professional opportunities.

In relation to public spaces and interactions with the police (Table 1), the incidence of discrimination was higher among the participants of the UVA 9.8% compared to the FLF 3.7%, although this difference was not statistically significant, this data raises reflections on the reasons that lead to the recurrence of excessive use of force by the security forces, especially against certain populations.

Despite the growing prominence of anti-racist discourse on social networks, in politics, in art, in religion, and in public demonstrations, this mobilization has not yet

translated into significant structural changes that concretely impact the life, work, and safety of the black population (Gomes, 2021). This reality is even more critical for Black women, who face the intersection of racial and gender discrimination, remaining among the most vulnerable and precarious workers in the Brazilian labor market. Even when they reach higher levels of education, many continue to occupy jobs below their formal qualification, which highlights the persistence of racial and gender barriers in professional insertion and progression (Santos, 2023).

This reality is not limited to the Brazilian context, but is part of a broader pattern of impunity that reinforces the persistence of these discriminatory practices. International studies suggest that impunity may be a determining factor in the perpetuation of these practices. In Portugal, for example, the Commission for Equality and Against Racial Discrimination recorded that, over a decade, 75% of complaints of racism involving security agents were filed, and the only conviction recorded was later annulled in court (Gomes, 2021). This scenario highlights the difficulty of holding security forces accountable in cases of racial discrimination, which can contribute to the maintenance of disproportionate approaches and to the feeling of vulnerability among historically marginalized groups.

The institutional and social sensitivity to the issue is highlighted in the report of the Subcommittee on Equality and Non-Discrimination, which identifies public security as one of the areas in which the mention of practices of racism, xenophobia and ethnic-racial discrimination meets resistance (Assembleia da República, 2019). At the same time, the Commission for Equality and Against Racial Discrimination, in its 2020 report, observes a growing trend in the number of complaints, totaling 405 complaints of discrimination. Of these, 43 resulted in administrative offence proceedings and 14 involved security forces (Canarias, 2023).

The analysis of concerns about discrimination (Table 1) revealed that exposure to discriminatory episodes in childhood or adolescence was significantly more frequent among UVA participants (67.9%) compared to CFU 42.9% ($p < 0.001$). In addition, concern about unfair treatment in the last year was more prevalent in UVA 73.9% than in FLF 57.4% ($p = 0.004$). However, the formalization of complaints for racial discrimination was rare, ranging from 1.7% in the UVA to 3.7% in the FLF ($p = 0.656$), which suggests challenges in the effectiveness of complaints.

Azevedo and Feliciano (2022) state that, during the school period, black children and adolescents often face various forms of racial discrimination by peers. This can lead

them, as an unconscious defense mechanism, to reject their own racial identity, due to the daily context of devaluation and stigmatization of blackness.

Contemporary sociology has highlighted the importance of understanding racial inequalities in childhood and adolescence, as these experiences directly influence concerns and strategies for coping with discrimination throughout life (Quiroga and Paolucci, 2022). The differences observed between higher education institutions (HEIs) reveal that the way they deal with racial discrimination directly impacts the perception and experience of students in relation to this reality.

The low formalization of complaints, even in institutions with greater awareness of racial discrimination, reveals the persistence of institutional and cultural barriers. Factors such as distrust in the effectiveness of institutional mechanisms, fear of reprisals, and lack of knowledge about formal reporting channels contribute to this reality. In addition, when discrimination occurs outside the university environment, in spaces of social coexistence, the formalization of the complaint in police stations can be equally difficult due to these same factors, in addition to the lack of support and the criminalization of racism in some situations. The results indicate the urgent need for institutional policies that, in addition to promoting awareness, strengthen safe and effective reporting mechanisms, both inside the university and outside it, ensuring protection and support for students (Oliveira et al., 2024).

In addition, the difficulty in formalizing complaints reflects not only institutional obstacles, but also historical and contextual aspects that shape perceptions about discrimination and the forms of coping adopted (Ataíde, 2020). In this way, the findings reinforce the importance of initiatives that go beyond awareness, ensuring effective institutional support and effective mechanisms to combat racism in the academic environment and beyond.

The data found in Table 2 are corroborated by the study by Williams and Priest (2015), which highlight the direct impact of institutional factors on the way individuals recognize and interpret their experiences of discrimination. While the perception of collective discrimination is linked to broader social discourses, individual experiences are influenced by daily interactions and the particularities of each institution. Thus, the understanding of institutional contexts becomes essential for the formulation of effective strategies to confront discrimination, contributing to the construction of academic environments that are more sensitive to diversity.

The analysis of the answers to the first global question (Table 2) reveals that, although the perception of racial discrimination is present in all institutions, its intensity varies according to the sociocultural context and the institutional policies in force (Fialla et al., 2022). The UFC recorded the highest average perception of discrimination, followed by the UVA, while the FLF obtained the lowest score. Although there is no statistical significance ($p = 0.078$), this pattern suggests that collective experiences of discrimination can be modulated by cultural and structural factors specific to each HEI.

On the other hand, the second question (Table 2), which addressed discrimination experienced personally, revealed significant differences ($p = 0.043$), with UVA students reporting a significantly higher frequency of personal experiences of racial discrimination, compared to those from FIED. This result may be related to greater racial diversity at UVA, which, paradoxically, can expose black students to more situations of discrimination in a predominantly white environment, as pointed out by Ribeiro and Mendes (2023). In addition, the naturalization of racism in HEIs contributes to the perpetuation of these experiences, which are often treated as individual issues, rather than structural ones (Oliveira et al., 2024).

The results in Table 3 highlight the importance of deepening the analysis of the impact of racism in the university environment and the effectiveness of institutional inclusion policies. The persistent sense of judgment experienced by Black students, as discussed by Fanon (2020), can have significant implications for the permanence and academic performance of these students. Therefore, it is essential that the HEI not only expand access, but also adopt concrete actions to build less challenging and more welcoming environments for students who are victims of racial stereotypes.

Studies such as Atapide (2020) and Leão and Lando (2024) corroborate this interpretation, since they point out that young black people face specific challenges in higher education, with racial discrimination being a determining factor for their permanence and academic performance. In addition, the university adaptation of these students tends to be hampered by the absence of effective institutional policies that combat racial inequalities (Guerra et al., 2024). In the case of UVA, the high rates of discrimination and concern may be associated with geographic and socioeconomic factors, which intensify structural inequalities and make the academic environment more hostile to certain groups.

Thus, the results of the study reinforce the urgent need for institutional interventions that promote more inclusive and safe academic environments for black students. As Fialla

et al. (2022) argue, a truly anti-racist higher education requires structuring policies that, in addition to recognizing racial discrimination, act effectively to mitigate its impacts on the academic trajectory of these students. In this sense, institutional measures focused on welcoming, representativeness, and psychosocial support are essential to overcome barriers and promote greater equity in higher education.

In addition, Oliveira et al. (2025) highlight that the fight against racism is a collective responsibility, which should involve the active engagement of society, especially white people, in supporting anti-racist causes. This includes the promotion of racial literacy, essential to confront the veiled forms of racism still present in Brazil, as well as the construction of a more robust and supportive support network.

CONCLUSION

Discriminatory practices in the university context show a structural pattern that perpetuates the marginalization of black students, compromising both access to quality education and the full exercise of academic citizenship. In this sense, considering the role of universities as spaces for the production of knowledge and promotion of social inclusion, it is essential to implement more incisive structural measures that guarantee racial equity. Such an approach requires not only the strengthening of affirmative actions, but also the creation of genuinely inclusive academic environments that promote equal opportunities and the appreciation of diversity.

Thus, this study contributes to the discussion by highlighting the different institutional and geographical realities, highlighting the urgency of more effective policies to confront racial discrimination. In addition, it encourages the formalization of complaints and the adoption of concrete actions to mitigate these inequalities in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). In this way, it can subsidize the implementation of training programs on racial diversity, the development of policies to combat institutional racism, and the strengthening of support networks for racialized students.

For future research, the importance of deepening the investigation on pedagogical practices that promote the decolonization of the curriculum and the effective inclusion of the racial perspective in higher education is emphasized. In this sense, the fundamental role of researchers, both black and non-black, in confronting epistemic racism is highlighted, contributing to the construction of a more plural and representative knowledge.

In view of the above, it is concluded that racial discrimination in universities is not an isolated phenomenon, but rather a manifestation of broader social inequalities, which requires continuous and integrated efforts to overcome it. Addressing this issue must occupy a central place in academic, political, and social agendas, aiming to ensure that all people, regardless of their race or ethnicity, can fully exercise the right to education with dignity, respect, and equality.

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