

PERCEPTIONS OF RACIAL DISCRIMINATION AMONG BLACK PROFESSIONALS IN RIO DE JANEIRO

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Abstract: Most Brazilians believe that racial and socioeconomic inequalities tend to overlap—in other words, blacks are poorer because they have less education and worse jobs. In the past few years, however, several quantitative studies have presented an interesting puzzle: racial inequalities are strongest among those at the top of the socioeconomic hierarchy. This article explores the “elitist profile” of racial discrimination through eighty in-depth interviews with black professionals in Rio de Janeiro. The results show that interviewees describe their trajectories of social mobility through mechanisms that involve both socioeconomic and racial exclusion. Their perceptions of injustice, however, are more directly related to experiences of racial discrimination. In narrating incidents of discrimination, interviewees stress the distinction and tensions between what we call generalized prejudice and particularized universalism.

Racism is cowardly. You know it is there, but it always takes you by surprise. It's like someone hitting you from behind.

—*Journalist, director of a telephone company, forty-year-old-male*

INTRODUCTION

The existence of racial inequalities and racial prejudice is nowadays largely accepted in Brazil (Bailey 2004; Datafolha 2008).¹ Most Brazilians, however, believe that racial and socioeconomic inequalities go hand in

1. Readers should keep in mind the conceptual distinctions among negative stereotypes, prejudice, discrimination, and racism. Although many Brazilians acknowledge the existence of racial inequality, stereotypes, and prejudice against blacks, not so many are willing to accept the existence of racial discrimination (i.e., the active exclusion of blacks from resources and institutions) and racism (i.e., the existence of a racialized social structure with whites at the top). Our interviewees, however, rarely drew this distinction, and used these concepts as synonyms. We discuss a few implications of this conceptual distinction in our conclusion.

hand—in other words, blacks are poorer than whites because blacks have less education and worse jobs. Several recent quantitative studies on racial inequalities have challenged this shared belief: they show that racial inequalities are stronger among those at the top of the socioeconomic hierarchy.

Our study aims to better understand what has been called the elitist profile of racial discrimination through eighty in-depth interviews with black professionals in Rio de Janeiro. Our results do not support any separation between class and race dynamics: interviewees interpret their trajectories of social mobility through mechanisms that involve both socioeconomic and racial exclusion. Their perceptions of injustice, however, are more directly related to experiences of racial discrimination. In narrating incidents of discrimination, interviewees distinguish what we call generalized prejudice and particularized universalism. Those concepts illustrate that the more public and anonymous is the interaction, the greater is the probability of identifying discrimination, whereas in more private realms and personal relationships, discrimination and racism are invisible or silenced. Interviewees also stress the difficulties in reacting to Brazilian racism.

We begin with a brief literature review of the studies about the black middle class in Brazil. We then discuss the findings of recent quantitative studies on racial inequalities in Brazil and their limitations in measuring racial discrimination. We then turn to our methods and findings, focusing on the perceptions of interviewees about racial discrimination in different realms of social life: educational institutions, job search, workplace, public space, and personal relationships. In our conclusion, we review our main findings, further explaining the distinction between what we call generalized prejudice and particularized universalism.

STUDYING THE BLACK MIDDLE CLASS

Until the 1980s, the study of racial inequalities was almost synonymous with the study of poverty or of the effects of class and race in placing blacks in lower socioeconomic positions. More recently, however, the growing importance of a black middle class provides a new angle to study the interface between race and class. The rising number of blacks in professional occupations is particularly evident in the United States, which has triggered several studies with mixed results about the inclusion or persistent discrimination of upwardly mobile blacks (Feagin and Sikes 1994; Hochschild 1995; Lacy 2007; Patterson 1998).

In Brazil, a few books have been published since the 1950s focusing on the so-called *élites de cor* (color elites). Initially, social mobility among blacks was used to prove the existence of a racial democracy in Brazil.

Azevedo (1955) and Pierson (1942) argued that social mobility for Brazilian blacks meant interracial marriage and integration—in other words, once a black person moved up, he or she would not be discriminated anymore. Challenging the racial democracy perspective, Fernandes (1965) identified social mobility as assimilation into the white mainstream society or as differentiation from other blacks who did not share the same class mobility. Guerreiro Ramos (1995) was also very critical of upwardly mobile blacks, whom he saw as sharing the pathologies of whites, especially when accepting their aesthetic values. In his famous theory of the mulatto escape-hatch, Degler (1971) argued that those blacks with lighter skin could easily assimilate into white society, thus giving up their black identities. Finally, Costa Pinto (1952/1995) differentiates between the old and the new black elite in a way similar to Frazier's (1957) black bourgeoisie—while the old elite were of lighter skin and would try to pass as white, the new elite were more militant about racial identification and suffered more with discrimination because of the growing competition in the increasingly capitalist Brazilian society. Both groups, however, would be very disconnected from the large black working class, who were likely to organize around class rather than racial identities.

In spite of its constant growth, research on the black middle class disappeared between the 1960s and 1990s. Only more recently, a few mostly qualitative studies have analyzed the experiences of a solid Brazilian black middle class. The studies have focused on black organizations, mostly cultural (Giacomini 2006; R. Soares 2004); on the strategies and difficulties of social mobility (Figueiredo 2003; G. N. Souza 2008; N. Souza 1983); and less systematically on the experiences of racial discrimination (Figueiredo 2002; Lima 2001; Praxedes 2006). Figueiredo's (2002, 2003) works are the most recognized studies about the Brazilian black middle class. Her empirical research is based on Bahia, the Brazilian state with the largest percentage of black population (more than 80 percent). In her analysis, Figueiredo constantly relies on the differences between the experiences of the Brazilian and the American black middle class. She argues that, similar to the American black middle class, "the majority of the [Brazilian] black middle class is part of a first generation that does not hold as much consolidated economic, social and symbolic capital as most whites in the same class position" (Figueiredo 2003, 92). But in contrast to the upward mobility of the American middle class, which initially happened as a result of racial segregation and the refusal of whites to offer services to blacks, the Brazilian middle class's social mobility happened in a process of close interaction with whites, which created distinct mobility strategies.

In our study, we further explore social mobility trajectories of black professionals. In addition to conducting interviews in Rio de Janeiro, instead of Bahia, our approach differs from Figueiredo's in a few ways.

First, where Figueiredo relied on education and income to select her interviewees, we focus on traditionally prestigious occupations (especially engineers, lawyers, doctors, economists, and journalists). By using a mix of education and occupation definitions, we focus on black individuals who are solidly in the middle class or even in the upper middle class and forced to work in white-dominated spaces in which they are a minority. Second, because most interviewees did not know that racial identity was the central topic of our interview, we allowed race to emerge (or not emerge) spontaneously. We further explain our methods and sampling strategy in the “Methods” section. First, we address a central issue in the quantitative literature: how to differentiate racial inequality from racial discrimination.

IDENTIFYING RACIAL DISCRIMINATION THROUGH THE PERCEPTIONS OF THE BLACK MIDDLE CLASS

In the past few years, several studies on racial inequalities have presented an interesting puzzle to those who believe that socioeconomic and racial inequalities overlap: racial inequalities are strongest among those at the top of the socioeconomic hierarchy and in the most developed states of the country.

S. Soares (2000) was the first to emphasize that discrimination against blacks is stronger among those with higher incomes. In his study comparing gender and race income discrimination, he states: “Poor black men would not gain much with the end of discrimination—something around 5% to 7% [of income increase]; in turn, rich black men would suffer reductions of 27% in their income when compared to the income structure of white men. These findings support the thesis that Brazilian society does not accept blacks in good positions in the income structure, in other words, the more blacks advance, the more they will be discriminated against” (S. Soares 2000, 15). Similarly, Campante, Crespo, and Leite (2004) show how income differences are more marked among racial groups in the top occupation ranks. Santos (2005) argues that, although different class positions can explain most race-based income inequalities, racial and class inequalities reinforce each other by giving higher returns to whites in the middle classes than to blacks in the same class positions. Ribeiro (2006) focuses on educational inequalities, showing how, despite the democratization of access to education at lower levels, access to higher education is racially unequal, even after controlling for education of parents. Similarly, Osorio (2008) acknowledges that, although race is not the most important explanation for inequality among racial groups, it plays a more important role in explaining inequalities in the more selective positions. In short, these studies have unanimously identified an elitist profile of racial dis-

crimination: “blacks who are well positioned in society are those who face the greatest obstacles to maintaining their positions and the greatest difficulties in passing their advantages on to their offspring” (Osorio 2008, 35). All the studies rely on the National Household Survey (Pesquisa Nacional por Amostra do Domicílios, or PNAD), the most reliable national data source in Brazil.

Studies relying on aggregated socioeconomic data, however, hardly differentiate racial inequalities from racial discrimination. What they call discrimination is the variance or residual that remains unexplained after differences among racial groups are controlled by measurable status and social class variables (e.g., education, education of parents, occupational group), as well as by context (e.g., regional differences, public versus private sector). They do not measure discrimination itself directly, which makes it impossible to exclude the existence of other “hidden variables” that could explain the remaining differences between blacks and whites (e.g., differences in educational institutions, university majors, prestige of occupations). In other words, as Osorio (2008) acknowledges, what these studies identify is the upper threshold of racial discrimination, not discrimination itself. In addition, if statistical methods can measure correlations between positions of origin and destiny, they hardly identify causation and mechanisms. Survey results showing that blacks with higher incomes and university degrees identify discrimination only slightly more often than blacks from other socioeconomic backgrounds further complicate the picture (Datafolha 2008; Turra, Venturi, and Datafolha 1995).

These criticisms are not new. Social scientists have long acknowledged that measuring racial discrimination is not an easy task—in a recent literature review of the topic, Pager and Shepherd (2008) argue that this has been one of the most fascinating and frustrating topics of the social sciences. It is fascinating because of its persistence through different historical and national contexts, but frustrating because of the evasiveness of its measures. They discuss the pros and cons of different methods used to measure racial discrimination. In their review, they identify the strength of statistical studies—the most common method for studying discrimination—as the ability to recognize group differences using large samples (e.g., censuses, national household surveys) in real contexts rather than laboratory experiments. The weakness of such a method is the inability to identify causal mechanisms that cannot be attributed to alternative variables.

Pager and Shepherd (2008) also stress the importance of experimental field studies (e.g., audit studies) that allow researchers to create job candidates with similar curriculum vitae that differ only with respect to race. Experimental field studies have provided consistent evidence of racial discrimination in the United States. Studies of this sort have never succeeded

in Brazil—possible reasons for this include high costs, distinct contexts of racial classification, and differences in intellectual traditions.² In the case of discrimination among professionals, conducting audit studies would be almost impossible: job search in such arenas usually relies on networks and direct references that would be very difficult to reproduce or fake.

We use perceptions of black professionals as the proxy for discrimination itself. This method has its shortcomings—also identified by Pager and Shepherd (2008)—the most important of which is that perception is not reality. Relying on perceptions can underestimate or overestimate discrimination. Perceptions, however, are an important way to capture cognitions (nonevaluative understandings), norms (internalized ideas about appropriate roles), and values (ideals about what might be) (Reis and Moore 2005, 3). In the Brazilian context—in which the importance of racial discrimination in defining life chances is still disputed—understanding how black professionals identify discrimination and how it permeates (or does not permeate) their lives will contribute to understanding the dynamics of racial discrimination.

METHODS

During 2007 and 2008, together with a team of five other interviewers, we conducted eighty in-depth interviews with black professionals in Rio de Janeiro.³ This study is part of a research project on comparative destigmatization strategies in Brazil, Israel, and the United States coordinated by Professor Michèle Lamont. The Brazilian sample included two hundred blacks: eighty professionals, eighty working class, and forty shantytown residents. Here we rely exclusively on interviews with black

2. We found one pilot study conducted by Guimarães and Araújo Guimarães (2000). In a work document (*documento de trabalho*), the authors discontinued the study as a result of methodological difficulties and high costs.

3. As pointed out by one of our reviewers, the interviewer and interviewee bias in these types of research is inevitable. For example, the fact that most interviewers were graduate students also raises the issue of the interviewee bias—interviewees might have tried to establish their equality, which might have led them to underplay experiences of discrimination. Another issue that needs consideration is the possible bias of white interviewers conducting interviews with black professionals. Because all the interviewers, except Graziella Silva, were black, the authors were able to compare the patterns of responses that the black interviewers received to those of Graziella Silva. Our comparison of the reports showed that, although there are interviewer biases (e.g., interviewees tend to declare their pride in being black more often with the white interviewer than with the black ones), all types of interactions can bring interesting contributions. As Twine (2000) has argued, it is important to problematize the insider-outsider problem because it can vary according to context. In other words, matching interviewer and interviewee by color does not necessarily create the most interesting results. More important, we should be aware of the role of race but also consider other differences, like socioeconomic similarities and differences.

professionals. In this section, we discuss site selection, sampling method, and interview procedures.

Interview Site Selection

According to the 2006 National Household Survey, the population of Rio de Janeiro is 33.6 percent brown (*pardo*), 12.3 percent black (*preto*), and 53.5 percent white (*branco*)—a similar distribution to that of the entire country (from the 2000 Brazilian census). Unquestionably, race experiences vary considerably in different local contexts, and focusing on a specific city raises the issue of national generalization of our results. Previous studies have shown that the meaning and boundaries of blackness vary considerably across different regions (Telles 2004). There are, however, a few reasons we think our results offer insights into understanding racial dynamics in the rest of the country, even if local differences create particular dynamics.

Rio de Janeiro was the political capital of Brazil until the 1950s, and even today the city has a high concentration of public offices. Therefore, until recently, Rio was a center that attracted migration from most states. Currently, Rio is the second-largest economy of the country. The largest Brazilian oil company has its main office in Rio, as does the largest Brazilian mining company. In addition, Rio is home to important telecommunications firms and offices of the largest national banks. In researching highly qualified professionals, there are only two possible metropolitan sites that allow for a large-enough universe: Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. Because Rio has public and private services on a significant scale (and Santos [2005] argues that public services have been one of the most important avenues of mobility for blacks in Brazil), a considerable black population (São Paulo is almost 70 percent white), and a history of black organizations (e.g., Teatro Experimental do Negro; black newspapers like *Quilombo*, *Redenção*, and *A Voz da Negritude*; and the historically black club *Renascença*), it is a good candidate for studying black professionals—though a study in São Paulo might find distinct but similarly relevant results.

Finally, Rio de Janeiro was one of the first Brazilian states to implement affirmative action, in the form of racial quotas, in its state universities. This implementation has been the focus of several studies and was highly visible in the media (Bailey 2004; Fry and Maggie 2002; Peria 2004; Silva 2006). Studies have also shown that the affirmative action public debate increased the racial awareness and identification among blacks in Brazil (Bailey 2008). Several interviewees raised the issue of racial quotas—a few were radically for or against it, but most were ambiguous toward the issue. Although we do not address this topic directly here, this debate certainly has influenced how our interviewees think about their racial identity and discrimination experiences.

Sampling

Our study focuses on black professionals, that is, people who classify themselves as black (*preto*) or brown (*pardo*) according to census categories, hold a university degree, and have a professional occupation. The fact that relatively small proportions of the population in Brazil have college or advanced degrees (less than 7 percent according to the 2000 census) makes education a strong predictor of income. Our initial goal was to focus uniquely on professionals working in traditionally prestigious occupations (e.g., lawyers, engineers, doctors) and in mainstream economic areas (e.g., health, civil service, banking, telecommunications, oil, mineral exploration). The choice to initially focus on traditional careers in mainstream economic areas adds a component of social distinction; it avoids occupations that might require higher education but are not as prestigious. In addition, by focusing on mainstream economic areas, we avoid the liberal bias of the cultural industry, in which the presence of black professionals has been more constant, although blacks are still underrepresented at the higher levels.

To select interviewees, we used snowball sampling. Because there are no data sets on black professionals in Brazil, this is the only way to identify Brazilian interviewees. We started by contacting human resources offices in large public and private corporations in Rio de Janeiro for referrals to blacks in managerial (or higher) positions. The strategy of focusing on different occupations as well as on different economic sectors allowed us to have different starting points (about twenty-five) and to maximize our sample diversity. In asking for referrals (a maximum of two from each interviewee), we established three criteria: (1) interviewees should be aged between twenty-five and sixty-five; (2) interviewees should have university degrees and be currently employed, self-employed, or own a business (to make sure they are professionals and have job experience); and (3) interviewees should self-identify as black or brown, according to the Brazilian official categories.⁴ (A complete list of interviewees' race, age, gender, occupation, and education is available from the authors on request.)

Because people in the initial sample referred us to their friends, not all interviewees have the initial targeted professional profile: a minority are teachers, social workers, and university professors. In addition, five inter-

4. In asking for referrals, we insisted to interviewees that this was a study about social mobility among blacks and whites and therefore we were interested in interviewing people of all colors. We also, stressed, however, we were particularly interested in oversampling among blacks, because they were a minority in professional occupations. Although some of the referred interviewees did know beforehand that race was one of the focuses of the study, most respondents only mentioned race halfway through the interview, in questions about unfairness.

viewees had actively participated in different black organizations at some point in their lives.

We decided to sample men and women because previous studies have shown that men and women experience discrimination differently. For example, women might experience both gender and race discrimination, and it may be difficult to distinguish the two. Men might experience more negative stereotypes of violence. We justified our age requirement by the fact that we wanted to sample people with a university degree who were already in the job market. Including a broad age range also allowed us to make comparisons between cohorts (half of our sample was younger than forty).⁵

Scholars have traditionally analyzed racial inequalities relying on racial self-classification according to the official census categories. Following public policies and black movement definitions, our sample includes people who define themselves as preto (black) and pardo (brown) according to the official census categories. Pretos and pardos have much lower socioeconomic indicator levels in comparison with whites, and both can be considered stigmatized racial groups (Silva 1979). However, the official classification has its shortcomings, and interviewees largely criticized it. To overcome some of these limitations, each interviewee confronted two different racial questions and/or criteria: (1) interviewees' open-ended self-classification (i.e., what is your color/race?), (2) interviewees' classification according to official precodified census categories (preto, pardo, branco, amarelo, and indigena).

When asked about their race, most interviewees (seventy-two of eighty) self-defined as *negros*. In the official classification, most interviewees self-classified as pretos (fifty-eight of eighty). There are a few possible reasons for the overrepresentation of negros and pretos in the professionals' sample: a racial consciousness process that upwardly mobile blacks in Brazil have identified (Souza 1983) and a consequence of our snowball sampling strategy. Because we relied on referrals, people directed us only to negro professionals. Interviewees commonly expressed a worry about their referrals becoming "offended" by being classified as black or browns—another reason we did not mention race as the main focus of the study.

Interview Procedure

To accurately capture the salience of race in our interviewees' narratives of social mobility, we did not directly mention race as the reason for the interview. We received permission from the Harvard University Human

5. Because of the lack of space, we have not explored these age and gender differences in this article.

Subject Review Board to inform interviewees that they were participating in a study about social mobility of people of all colors. In addition, a direct reference to race did not appear in the interview until the middle of the interview schedule.

The interview schedule was semistructured, and interviews lasted on average two hours—the shortest lasted one hour and the longest eight hours (divided into four two-hour meetings). We initiated the interview by asking questions about current and recent jobs, educational history, family background, and associative participation (e.g., unions, churches, residents' association). Then we presented a set of questions about symbolic boundaries: about the people they like and/or dislike, whether they feel superior or inferior to others, and whether they have any heroes. Then we moved on to their perceptions of Brazilian society, including pros and cons, and most important challenges. At that point, we added a question on experiences of unfairness—if race had not appeared spontaneously by that point, we asked interviewees whether their “color” was related to any unfair treatment they had experienced.⁶ From then on, we asked questions about the meanings of race, racism, and racial discrimination, as well as sources of racial awareness and identification. By the end of the interview, we also asked respondents to fill out a questionnaire about experiences of discrimination in different contexts (e.g., school, job search, workplace, housing, banks, public spaces, services, police), and at that point, some interviewees recalled other incidents of discrimination. (The sampling instrument, interview schedule, and questionnaire are available from the authors on request.⁷)

FINDINGS: UPWARD MOBILITY AND CONTEXTS OF RACIAL DISCRIMINATION

Upward Mobility in Black and White

Previous studies have emphasized that the narratives of upwardly mobile blacks usually rely on what are known as family projects of social mobility through education (G. N. Souza 2008). Figueiredo (2002, 82) identifies four common characteristics of the social mobility narratives of her black middle-class interviewees: centrality of education, family influence on professional trajectory, pride in coming from a lower socioeconomic background, and the importance of holding public and stable jobs. We found similar results among our interviewees,⁸ who almost

6. Unless the interviewee used the term *race*, we conducted the interview asking questions about his or her color, as this is the main category in the official classification.

7. All interviews were coded using Atlas TI.

8. The main difference is that not all our interviewees hold a public job. This difference can be attributed to our sampling strategy, which focused on traditional occupations and areas dominated by the private initiative. Yet half of interviewees worked as civil servants.

unanimously stressed how their parents had always encouraged them to study hard and to be the first in their families to earn a university diploma. Interviewees usually presented their parents as heroes, as people who pushed them to work hard. It is through their parents and their own efforts that respondents believe they achieved what can be called a comfortable life.

Once professionals reach this comfortable position, however, they usually report “antisocioeconomic values,” that is, they reject what they see as snobbish, spoiled middle-class people who did not have to work hard to get what they have. Previous studies about the Brazilian black middle class have also stressed how members feel that they do not fit in middle-class environments and are ambiguous toward identification with their group of origin (usually poor) and destined group (middle-class and professional environments). They usually report feeling lonely at the top, as the following interviewee illustrated:

You become very much alone. Look at my case. I went to study a prestigious MBA program . . . because my job paid for it. There I got in touch with people like A, B, C, and made friends with a group of people, all with a very different history from mine. In other words, I was the only negro there out of more than forty people. And this has been my life since I entered [the program], which was a high-middle-class public school, and I was the only black in my class. In my undergraduate cohort, the same thing, and in the MBA as well. . . . You start to live in a world in which there is no one similar to you, you do not find anyone who has a history similar to yours, and you end up feeling very lonely. . . . At the same time, you lose not your identity, but your references. . . . My family, for the most part, still lives in Caxias [a mostly low-income city in Rio's metropolitan area], in other words, you are neither one thing nor another. . . . I am now part of this group, I entered this group, but I did not study in [high-middle-class private schools], I studied in a municipal school and here I am now. And at the same time, I am starting to have a lifestyle that I am ashamed to tell to my cousin in Caxias about. —Journalist and director of a telephone company, forty-year-old male

These contradictions in the experience of the black middle class, however, are not significantly different from the general experience of upwardly mobile individuals of all racial and ethnic backgrounds. In the case of Brazil, many professionals are first-generation university graduates, a consequence of the strong structural mobility in the country between the 1950s and 1970s (Scalon 1999). Worldwide, experiences of upward social mobility experiences are understood as tense and full of contradictions: there is pressure to forget the group of origin but also a moral and emotional force pulling one back to his or her group of origin. The consequence of the tension between these opposite forces has been defined as a double absence or seclusion, or *double isolement* (Bourdieu and Clough 1996). In addition, the value of education does not seem to be specific to the group—it is widespread in Brazilian society, especially among those in higher socioeconomic positions (Reis and Moore 2005; Scalon 2004).

To better understand the specificity of black-middle-class social mobility, it is important to understand how interviewees interpret the distinction between race and class. We argue that this distinction can be better understood through the narratives of experiences of discrimination. Interviewees can talk for hours about the difficulties of mobility and achievement without mentioning race, but once asked whether they have ever been treated unfairly, they usually bring up racial discrimination.

In the remaining sections of this article, we discuss how interviewees have identified and interpreted racial discrimination in different realms of their social mobility trajectory: education, job search, workplace, public spaces, and personal relationships.

Educational Environments

As mentioned earlier, interviewees cite education as a key driver of their upwardly mobile trajectories. However, they maintain a remarkable silence about their racialized experiences in educational environments.

Although many interviewees, like the journalist cited earlier, reported being the only black in a prestigious educational environment, only a few reported being underestimated in schools during their childhood. Such experiences include teachers who did not pay attention to them or reinforced racial stereotypes, as well as colleagues who would make jokes about their color. These memories, however, would come out only when we probed interviewees about having ever experienced discrimination in schools. In addition, recollections of racist teachers were as frequent as references to teachers—usually white—who were role models and who allowed them to move up the mobility ladder. In short, although the experiences of interviewees confirm the existence of racial stereotypes at schools, as discussed in the literature on racial discrimination in educational environments, interviewees also recognized education, teachers, and schools as key mechanisms that allowed their social mobility. For example:

I had these two teachers, and they were the ones who really gave me support while my father was working. It was from them that my mother learned about the possibilities of better educational prospects. And that is how we [his brothers, who graduated in law and medicine, and himself] made it. I owe great gratitude to these two schools. —Doctor, fifty-one-year-old male

Almost all of our interviewees mentioned being among the best students in their cohorts, this exceptionality usually coming from parents' encouragement and projects, as reported earlier. Being a good student usually allowed them access to better educational environments: technical or elite high schools.

It is in accessing university, however, that the difficulties of educational achievement are greater, both statistically and in our interviewees'

narratives. Most interviewees reported dreaming about entering public universities—the most prestigious in Brazil. In our sample, however, only slightly less than half obtained access to those public institutions. The barriers identified were mostly related to class and not so much race. First, there was the issue of selection—some interviewees could not pass the entrance exams, especially for the most prestigious careers (e.g., medicine, engineering). Many reported having taken the entrance exams multiple times, while they were working and studying simultaneously. Others opted to go to private schools, and others decided on less prestigious careers than their initial option, such as social sciences over journalism, or chemistry over engineering. In addition, the fact that many interviewees worked and studied simultaneously also proved a barrier to enrolling in public universities: most public universities have full-time day courses that do not allow students to have day or even part-time jobs. One of our interviewees managed to be among the top ranked in the selection exam for the public university, but he chose a private university, despite the lower quality, because he had to work:

I got into [Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ), the most prestigious public university in Rio] to study physics, but the courses were during the day and I had to work. At that time, I was working in a factory and could not afford to quit, which is why I opted for a private school. When I got to [the private university], they used my grades from the UFRJ selection exam—I was among the forty best placed in the general selection exam, not only in physics. I could have chosen anything. In those days, there was no orientation about student support or housing, and they needed my income at home. I studied at night for four years, and lost a lot because of it. —Federal university professor, fifty-nine-year-old male

Because most blacks who gain access to university are from families of low socioeconomic status, class barriers might help explain black professionals' lower return on educational credentials: many black professionals have to negotiate their educational credentials, either by choosing private over public university education or by picking a lower-status major to gain access to a public university. These might be some hidden variables in the statistical models. This type of narrative confirms the theories of cumulative disadvantages: racial disadvantages happen in a context of class exclusion (Hasenbalg 1979).

Once inside the university, however, the most interesting feature of our interviewees' experience is their silence on (or perhaps denial of) racial discrimination in higher education. On the one hand, almost all interviewees reported having never felt discriminated against in the university, a finding very different from that in the United States and even more so in comparison with South Africa. On the other hand, interviewees often reported university as the space or period in which they gained racial consciousness. Racial consciousness, however, emerges not as a result of discrimination but more from the affirmation of students'

distinctiveness and individual self-esteem. The following interviewee, a psychoanalyst, was the only black in her cohort at Universidade Federal Fluminense (another public university in Rio), and she identified different episodes of discrimination in her trajectory. In the following quotation, however, in response to a question on the university experience with professors and friends, she stresses that there was no racism in the university environment:

Very good, especially two professors who were very radical. They were the first ones to talk about racism. Both were white and founders of the Workers' Party. I was very attached to them. . . . It was also the first time I had interacted with class A people [VIP]. My friends had houses that looked like soap opera homes to me. And I would tell them so. These houses were unimaginable to me, so it was a great debut, because when you are young you have no boundaries. . . . The university was when the world opened up to me. I never felt racism from these people, and, indeed, there was no racism there. —Psychoanalyst, fifty-year-old female

Other interviewees similarly reported realizing that there were both class and race exceptions in the university environment—which caused them to gain racial consciousness—but did not identify racial discrimination. Once more, the few reported instances of discrimination from university experiences conflate race and class—as in the case of a female doctor who studied at Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro (another public university) and felt she did not fit in with her upper-middle-class classmates; she became part of what she calls the “excluded group,” people from low-income neighborhoods and backgrounds.

The positive evaluation of university experience is especially true among those who studied at public universities—the most prestigious and most selective in the country, and tuition free. The importance of gaining access to public university should not be underestimated—among our interviewees, the experience of studying in a public university was central to their entry into the professional environment and to defining their circle of personal relations.⁹

Getting a Job

As in the case of university environments, we were surprised by the lack of narratives about incidents of discrimination during job search.¹⁰ Even if interviewees acknowledge the existence of discrimination and racism in access to jobs—and use the lack of blacks in managerial and other

9. As mentioned earlier, we asked our interviewees their opinions about the recent implementation of racial quotas in access to university, and they were split. This is an interesting topic for analysis, but we will save it for further research.

10. Because we also conducted eighty interviews with working-class respondents for the comparative project, these episodes might be much more common among the working class.

top positions as evidence of racial exclusion—few interviewees reported being personally excluded from job positions or promotions.

Although one could argue that this is the consequence of a reporting bias (interviewees tend to accept the existence of discrimination but deny personal experiences of discrimination), we argue that these same professionals identified discrimination in other realms of social life. Another possible reason for this absence of perceived discrimination is that employers make job decisions behind closed doors—which might lead interviewees to underestimate this type of discrimination (Pager and Shepherd 2008). This is an obvious limitation of our method.

One interviewee, however, reported an interesting natural experiment. The interviewee was a young female economist who was looking for jobs through headhunter agencies on the Internet. She uploaded her curriculum vitae to two Web sites—to one she uploaded her picture, and to the other she did not. She reported receiving significantly more phone calls and e-mail responses from the Web site without her picture, but she never received any job offers after the interviews. In her interpretation, she was not sure that she was not hired because she was black. She was finally hired by a company that had selected her through the Web site where she had posted her picture:

To this [site], I could not upload my picture, so there was only my CV, and many people called me. Once, a guy called me. He was from an investment bank, and he called me like five times to schedule interviews, asking, "Will you want it?" and I would say, "Yes, sure." He called me asking to go there, and usually they just call once, but he called five times to confirm! When I got there, he interviewed me normally, but, as he was so insistent, I was confident I was going to be offered the job. I do not know why he did not, but maybe it was because I am black. —Economist, twenty-eight-year-old female

Another explanation for the scarce reports of discrimination in job search is the high frequency of professionals in the public sector—slightly less than half of interviewees. The literature has already established that, since the 1950s, blacks have benefited from new job opportunities in the public sector—many of them through the official selection process (nationwide tests) (Silva 1996). More recent studies also have shown that racial income differentials are smaller in the public sector than in the private sector (Santos 2005). As mentioned earlier, Figueiredo (2002) also identified this preference for public jobs in her study. Despite the high preference for public jobs, our interviewees never framed this choice in terms of race. Instead, they usually preferred public jobs for their stability—a reason that most people probably share, especially those who do not have a family safety net to rely on. Therefore, it is impossible to fully attribute this preference to racial discrimination in the private job market.

Another interesting peculiarity of our data is that one of the firms from which we sampled several interviewees used to be a public company that

was privatized in the 1990s. All of our interviewees, however, were hired while the company was still public. This might indicate that it is harder for blacks to gain access to networks of professional jobs in the private sector (which are advertised much less in newspapers and official networks). However, the fact that all interviewees reported having friends of all colors—who they rely on during job search—makes this racialized hypothesis less likely. Again, this might be an effect of socioeconomic networks and exclusion.

Among those in the private sector, reports of race discrimination in applying for jobs was similarly low. They view their achievements and opportunities as evidence that they overcame any possible barriers. Interviewees usually identified any other variables as attributable to personal relations rather than race discrimination. The following quotation, from an interviewee who strongly denied having ever been discriminated against, illustrates this narrative. Although his overall attitude toward discrimination in his life was an exception, his narrative of his individual trajectory of success was common among interviewees. Here he explains a situation in which he was rejected for a promotion:

I did not think I was excluded for being black, and she was chosen for being white. If there were other issues considered—in addition to technical competence—I believe it was more about personal relations, or the connections [the person chosen for the promotion] had with the manager. I did not think about the color of my skin. I did not consider this as a possibility. I have had so many opportunities in my life, exposed to so many important projects and jobs, opportunities for career growth, that if I had ever thought my skin color would be an obstacle, I would never have experienced all this. If I tell you I felt prejudiced and that at any moment I was excluded because of the color of my skin, I would be unfair. I do not take the issue to this side [of racial discrimination]. —Economist and marketing manager in a telephone company, thirty-four-year-old male

Workplace

The workplace, together with the public space, is the most common context of discrimination among our interviewees. Most reported incidents of stereotyping in the workplace, which together with offense and disrespect, are the most common types of discriminatory incident interviewees reported. Because interviewees were high-status professionals, they reported many incidents in which people did not realize the positions they had: a director was treated as a computing technician, a journalist was taken for a prostitute, a university professor for a janitor, and a doctor for a nurse:

When I go to X, which is believed to be an elite hospital, sometimes people will ask if I am a physiotherapist or nurse, because these are occupations in which you see more black professionals. They never ask if I am a doctor, as there are very few black doctors, so people are not used to seeing them. So, this is not necessarily

discrimination, but it is a way to stereotype—you, as a black female, cannot be a doctor is never the first option. But these are the only types of incidents. They are very isolated, but once a routine is established, there are no more problems. Nothing remarkable at least. —Doctor, forty-six-year-old female

Even though they took place in the workplace or while working, nearly all work-related incidents happened in interactions with strangers (e.g., teachers and new students, doctors, new hospital staff), not coworkers. Interviewees reported good relations with coworkers, who acknowledged and respected their high position. This indicates the importance of differentiating between public and private contexts of discrimination—incidents are more common in anonymous interactions, but once intimacy or personal relations are established, prejudice and discrimination disappear or at least are silenced.

There are few incidents among coworkers of blatant racism—offense or disrespect—and even fewer cases of exclusion from jobs or promotions. According to one interviewee, it might be harder to identify discrimination among coworkers, as it might happen behind closed doors and with no mention of race. In addition, a few interviewees refused to acknowledge discrimination and feared that some might use it as an excuse to underperform.

Another possible explanation for the absence of discrimination in the job context is that we sampled from the dependent variable; that is, the professionals we interviewed are ones who successfully broke the glass ceiling. Yet, once again, the Brazilian case contrasts with the American case, where black professionals much more commonly perceive cases of exclusion (Feagin and Sikes 1994).

Public Spaces

It was in public spaces—streets, restaurants, malls—and anonymous interactions that interviewees most commonly identified discrimination. Most incidents involving being stereotyped as low status, uneducated, poor, or dangerous are the most common types of incidents. In the case of shops and restaurants, interviewees also perceived that they received worse service. In her study, Figueiredo (2002, 74) similarly identified interviewees who emphasized prejudice in situations when they were trying to “enjoy the social benefits that their social position allowed them—for example, buying in fancy shops, having a luxury car, going to nice restaurants.”

Most interviewees identified the exclusion of blacks from public spaces as institutional—in other words, it is not only ignorant receptionists or salespeople who exclude blacks; business policies do not identify blacks as consumers or equal citizens. Our interviewees, however, rarely defined such incidents in public spaces as barriers to their upward mobility, even

if they did identify the institutional nature of racism in such spaces. Interviewees considered such situations extremely annoying, products of the entrenched prejudice of most Brazilians, especially ignorant ones, and of institutional policies that stereotype blacks as poor and uneducated. Many interviewees mentioned strategies they use to avoid such situations, like signaling their class by dressing in a certain way or acting against the stereotype (e.g., talking very softly, being overpolite):

The first time I went to [an upper-middle-class mall] was four years ago. I had never been there, and since then I have only been three times. I feel highly intimidated and I do not dress like myself—with flip-flops and all—I need a “crutch.” I have to wear designer jeans, carry a fancy bag, and whatever. . . . Hospital is the same. I have found out that, if you are not well dressed, you get bad service, even if you are with a sick child. —Journalist, thirty-nine-year-old female

Interviewees’ explanations of such incidents tend to conflate race and class—they feel they were discriminated against because others thought that, because they are black, they were also poor, uneducated, or dangerous. According to interviewees, the main consequence of such discrimination is the constant reminder that they do not belong in a public space. Interviewees stressed the loneliness of upward mobility together with a feeling of powerlessness, which can bring insecurity and low self-esteem:

I never felt like giving up, but there were places I went past two or three times before gaining courage to enter, hoping not to suffer discrimination. Because suffering discrimination is terrible. Your self-esteem goes down, even if you react. When you are young, not any more. . . . I have never given up anything, but sometimes I think, “God, how will I get there, get into this place.” It can ruin your day, your plans. It is terrible. I have never given up, but I believe other people might have. —Economist, forty-six-year-old male

Even if interviewees did not attribute any major consequences to their upward mobility from this type of discrimination, it might have caused them to avoid certain spaces in which they felt stigmatized—and those spaces might be important for networking in a professional world. An interesting aspect of our sample is that, despite having higher incomes, most interviewees lived in the North Zone of the city, and many reported feeling uncomfortable in the South Zone. This distinction of north and south was frequent among interviewees, and is also a conflation of class and race.

Relationships

Personal relationships was the third realm in which interviewees most often identified racialized incidents, even if they did not always define them as discrimination. In agreement with statistical data, multiracialism was widespread in our sample. More than two-thirds of interviewees had multiracial parents, and of those who were in a relationship, two-thirds were in multiracial relationships. In addition, all interviewees reported

having close friends of all colors. In other words, all interviewees engage in multiracial spaces. Here again, the contrast of the Brazilian and the American experiences is remarkable, as multiracial experiences of American black professionals are commonly limited to their work environments (Lacy 2007).

Widespread multiracialism, however, is not a synonym for lack of racism, as several analysts have claimed (Sansone 2003). It was very common for all interviewees to report racism in their own families and in their partners' families. These initial tensions, however, tend to disappear or at least become silent over time, which might explain why interviewees did not recognize such incidents as discrimination. For example, in response to questions of the acceptance of interracial relationships, one interviewee answered the following:

There are people who hesitate to take a black boyfriend home. As a friend, it is OK, but in an intimate relationship, it is more complicated, depending on the racial space, and the relations with the family.

[It has happened to me.] Yes. Openly. Obviously it is very complicated. After a while, the person who was with me decided to face them. Now we are married and have a child. . . . Today, the relationship is good. Like all marriages, it has its problems. But not in relation to [race]. It is the same old story, in time you can prove you are good. So, you take attitudes that make people realize you are competent, capable, that you have a place in society, you are a professor, a professional. Then people start to rethink. They start to see you more as a professional than as a black. . . . [They do not refer to color], neither directly nor indirectly. —University professor, fifty-six-year-old male

Similarly, multiracial friendships are the rule among our interviewees—some were even offended by our question about the color of their friends. When asked whether they talk about race with their friends, however, nearly all interviewees acknowledged that race and racism were uncomfortable topics, especially among white friends. In several cases, interviewees classified some of their friends as racist or as racially insensitive. In general, interviewees acknowledged that when race-related topics are brought up, they create tension and discomfort, and they prefer not to discuss them:

We [interviewee and white university friends] tried to talk about it once, and it was in an unpleasant situation. We were in a group around a table in a bar, and I was the only black. A friend, who I really like, but on that day was very unpleasant, said, "You are the black with the whitest soul I know," and that hurt me. I ended up arguing with him and leaving the bar, really upset with him. He called me later, and I tried to explain, but he thought I was joking. And I was not. . . . Since then, nobody has talked about it. This topic is far too sensitive. —Engineer, twenty-six-year-old male

Again the impact of such tensions on the upward mobility of black professionals is hard to assess—they sometimes mentioned impacts on their self-esteem, especially in relation to romantic relationships.

Despite all these tensions, interviewees generally held an optimistic view of interracial relationships and marriages as a core and positive feature of Brazilian society. It was as if they believed that multiracialism in the private sphere could help attenuate racism in the public space. In response to a question on the “good things” about Brazil, one interviewee responded:

Our [interracial relationships and marriages]. It is funny how prejudice in many ways is bad, but I think [interracial relationships are] good in terms of making new people. Brazil is made of new people. I once worked for two years in Angola, and Brazil has a lot to show to the world in this respect. It is the question of tolerance, of which Brazil has a lot. Even if we have hidden racism, we have a lot of tolerance, especially in cities like Rio de Janeiro. But it is getting better. My daughters are in a better situation than I was in my childhood. Brazil is evolving regarding this matter. —Economist and financial analyst, forty-six-year-old male

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In this article, we have aimed to contribute to a better understanding of the extent to which black professionals are aware of, or willing to speak about, the effects of racism and discrimination on their upward mobility. Similar to statistical results, however, this article does not tell the whole story about actual levels of discrimination. To better measure discrimination, future research should focus on experimental methods that can measure acts and experiences of discriminators and the discriminated. The experience of the young economist with job-search Web sites shows that such studies might not be that difficult to execute.

Mapping perceptions of discrimination is crucial to a better understanding of race relations in Brazil. When black professionals in Rio de Janeiro describe, for example, how they experience daily interactions with blacks and whites in public or private, they inform us as to how they identify and experience racism in real life. Our results have identified several strategies that professionals use to navigate between what we call generalized prejudice and particularized universalism.

Generalized prejudice refers to the acknowledgment of negative stereotypes about blacks that shape interviewees’ everyday experiences in anonymous interactions, mostly in public spaces. Particularized universalism refers to interviewees’ denial or downplaying of the importance of race or discrimination in private spaces where personal relationships are established. Other studies have made a similar distinction: Telles (2004) speaks of horizontal versus vertical racial inequalities, whereas Sansone (2003) refers to this as soft versus hard inequalities. These studies, however, have not explored how black Brazilians experience and understand the tensions and complementarities among prejudice, discrimination, and inclusion mechanisms in the two spaces.

In narrating their social mobility, interviewees identified many difficulties and tensions, most of them related to their low socioeconomic background. They recognized racism, prejudice, racial inequality, and negative stereotypes about blacks in Brazil. Negative stereotypes about blacks are widespread in Brazil. Racism is identified through structural inequalities between blacks and whites, which many interviewees illustrate by being the only blacks in upper-middle-class environments. They also identified personal experiences of stigmatization but were hesitant to identify the objective impacts of discrimination on their mobility.

To be sure, interviewees did acknowledge the existence of widespread prejudice, as well as several incidents of personal discrimination. In other words, they acknowledged the existence of generalized prejudice in situations where they were stereotyped as dangerous or low status. Generalized prejudice is commonly identified as part of Brazilian institutional racism—for example, the discomfort of blacks in upper-middle-class spaces is understood not only as a product of an ignorant salesperson or security personnel but also as overarching policies and ideologies that stereotype blacks as poor and uneducated, thus denying them equal rights.

However, interviewees did not identify most of these incidents as having a major impact on their own social mobility and strategies. Their uncertainty about the impact of discrimination on black professionals' mobility is in itself a finding. They understand their difficulties as class exclusion—black professionals describe their mobile paths parallel to whites from poor backgrounds: lower-quality education, the need to simultaneously work and study, and a lack of personal networks. Their narratives of social mobility, similar to findings of statistical models, conflate socioeconomic inequality and racial discrimination.

Conflating race and class, however, does not mean rejecting race as an important element of their lives. By exploring how interviewees negotiate race and class in their everyday lives, we contribute to a better understanding of the Brazilian dynamics of racial discrimination and exclusion. Our interviewees refused—in practice and ideologically—the possibility of whitening, thus rejecting Degler's (1971) mulatto escape-hatch theory. Interviewees did acknowledge their exceptionality as black professionals and the consequent loneliness. Being a black professional in Brazil means constant questioning of your socioeconomic position—and as the epigraph at the beginning of this article illustrates, racism can “hit you from behind” at any point.

In the public space and in anonymous interactions, ignoring race and racism is impossible. In anonymous interactions, prejudice is generalized and discrimination naturalized. The constant remainder to black professionals that they are “out of place” is institutionalized in negative stereotypes that exist with or without individual prejudice, and thus expropriate black professionals' socioeconomic status by categorizing them

according to skin color, which in turn reproduces durable inequalities (Tilly 1998).

This generalized prejudice, however, goes hand in hand with a particularized universalism in the private space, which reassures our interviewees of a sense of inclusion. In personal relations, racial differences are silenced—sometimes after initial tensions. Relations with coworkers, friends, and partners are color blind and based on competence and merit. Together with the value of education and the rejection of racial separation, this particularized universalism reinforces the positivization of a mixed and tolerant society, values our interviewees share with most Brazilians. In addition, these experiences are key to understanding interviewees' ambiguities in framing many of their experiences in racialized terms. In short, the celebration of this particularized universalism might explain the silence or denial of racial discrimination in certain realms of social life in which talking about racism is still taboo.

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