

The Perception of Individual and Institutional Racism in Brazil

Professor Paula Barreto

Universidade Federal da Bahia

Well, the topic of our class today is the perception of individual racism and institutional racism in Brazil. This topic is, of course, inserted in a more general discussion about the racism issue. Before directly dealing with this point it's convenient to consider some characteristics of the Brazilian context that help us understand why this is a relevant topic an important topic that deserves to be discussed.

First, there is the issue on the growth of public debate about the racism issue in Brazil that has been happening since the '80s and '90s. So, an example of this is the more constant presence of discussions on this topic whether thru the media, or by governmental organs or in the current language of people's daily routine who talk a lot more about this theme today than a few decades ago.

In order for us to understand why this happens is necessary to remember that Brazil was, for a long time, internationally recognized as it was also known here, as a country free from racism. It was proudly affirmed that there was a racial democracy in Brazil. And based on that belief the conclusion arose that the racism topic and the racial issue weren't relevant topics neither for public discussion nor as object of research. So, given recent changes of scenery this situation has changed a lot.

One example is in the number of researches carried out in these 25 years tackling more general aspects. Today, I'd like to mention to you specifically dealing with the issue of racism perception two researches, or surveys carried out in Brazil both of them using a probabilistic and representative sample of the population in general. One of them was carried out in 1995, the other, in 2003. They included various questions in their questionnaires aiming to measure prejudice and racial discrimination in Brazil aiming to capture the perception of the population on racism and aiming to evaluate population's support to the adoption of policies of affirmative action in Brazil. So, as you're going to check on Figure 1 for example there is a question in those two researches where objects are asked if whites have color prejudice in relation to Negroes in Brazil.

In the 1995 research 85% of white objects answered yes there was some or a lot of color prejudice in relation to Negroes in Brazil. Among the half-blooded, the same proportion, 85% stated that there was a lot or at least some color prejudice in relation to Negroes.

In the 2003 research, or nearly ten years later results were very similar but there was a small increase in that proportion. Among white objects, in 2003 87% stated that there was prejudice in relation to the black color, a lot or a little and among half-blooded, 88% stated the same.

So, an overwhelming majority recognized through those answers that they noticed the existence of racism specifically, of color prejudice, the term used in the question. We can still point out that there wasn't big variation between the two color groups. Among whites and half-blooded, there's very similar proportion.

As you are going to notice in Figure 2 when we compare this result to the other on another question that goes "Do you have color prejudice in relation to Negroes?" the result is nearly the opposite. Among white objects, 88% stated they had no racial prejudice in relation to Negroes. And among half-blooded, 89% said they also had none. It's interesting to emphasize this fact in these researches.

Other researches of smaller extension like the one carried out in Rio de Janeiro State and even other qualitative researches all of them have confirmed the same result. When asked, people show, they recognize that in general there is prejudice, discrimination, against Negroes. But when those individuals are questioned about an individual prejudice they would have most of them, nearly the same proportion, say no. So, it's as if they recognized it in the general population but didn't admit it, personally.

Another researcher referred to this result saying that it's as if Brazilians felt they lived on an island of racial democracy surrounded by racism all around them. That's the result those opinion researches have come to, and our task is to better discuss them. I'd like to mention to you, with the same orientation something which is in Table 4 or another opinion research carried out in Rio de Janeiro that also proves that there is a large proportion the great majority of the population recognize the existence of prejudice.

This research built an index of prejudice perception. This was published by a friend, Clóvis de Oliveira, and myself. And we verified, as can be seen in Table 4 we came to the conclusion, analyzing this research that 90% of the interviewed population admitted that there is prejudice of high or medium level in Brazilian society. These are results from another source, in the same direction.

These results have justified our statement that this issue.

Today when we talk about public debate about racism is no longer the discussion on whether there is racism or not whether there is or there isn't a racial democracy in Brazil.

That was an important discussion in the '80s eventually, even to the mid 90s. But, in this period also as a result of anti-racist mobilizations, organizations as a result of many researches like these and others carried out in the academic world and of the awareness of a larger number of social sectors there has been a change of public opinion on this topic. So that we come to the condition presented in these opinion researches where almost 90% of those interviewed admit that there is problem regarding the existence of racism.

The problem is that when the issue is to measure prejudice or discrimination, individually, results are totally opposite. These same researches I mentioned, carried out one by Datafolha, in 1995 the other by Fundação Perseu Abramo, in 2003 tried to measure racial prejudice. A scale was used, an index on racism. And, both in '95 and in 2003 they came to the conclusion that a small parcel of the people could be considered as having a high level of prejudice.

You'll see on Figure 3 that in the 1995 research among the white population 37% showed light prejudice 44%, medium prejudice. In 2003, among the same white population 53% showed they had light prejudice and 21%, medium prejudice. Anyway, regardless of our lack of time here to better analyze questions in items included to constitute this item of prejudice in my opinion to try and build more sophisticated means to measure this individual prejudice, or discrimination isn't a good research strategy.

Especially in the Brazilian context, where we have this long history of belief in racial democracy existence. And, at least when it is about trying to show that they are not racists this belief still influences people. So, though sophisticated another measure

might be I believe results will repeat themselves because objects interviewed will repeatedly try and avoid choosing options that, according to them would show that they're racists, that they have prejudice. They want to show the opposite, they believe they have no prejudice, that they don't discriminate.

So, there is no use taking it further on trying to elaborate measures for prejudice or discrimination indexes especially in the Brazilian case. And this is somewhat what results have shown. Now, I'd like to go back to the issue I presented about an apparent controversy in the interviewees' answers when they agree that there is prejudice against Negroes on one hand, in society but they state that they don't have it. How do we explain that?

First, these results can indicate that, in terms of attitude, there is in the people, great endorsement of anti-racist values something associated, as I said, to a belief in racial democracy. So, even when they state that there is racism in society individually, people try to show that they believe in racial democracy, at least as an ideal. And they want to present themselves and might believe it, as not prejudiced. Second these results invite us to think over on the way racism is understood by people.

Because, in this particular case the term used in the question was "color prejudice". In other questions that I haven't mentioned here the term "discrimination" might have been used. So, it's necessary to discuss a little more in my opinion, what definition of racism, in fact researchers are using and people are using. Because, in the case of the researches mentioned when interviewees say, they state that there is color prejudice against Negroes you don't know exactly what interviewees are referring to.

It isn't possible to check, in these researches what situations interviewees are considering what situations interviewees are referring to when they answer like that. So, it's hard for us to understand after all what people understand and define as color prejudice. And the same question applies to racism in general.

Moreover since racism isn't limited to individual manifestations it's also got a dimension that's structural, institutional the issue gets even more complex. I believe that we need to work more in terms of research in this sense. By now it would be convenient to mention that there are different definitions for the racism concept and that they have changed along the years, even in Brazil according to, or even in harmony with changes

that have occurred in a more theoretical debate about the issue, in general, internationally too.

In Brazil, in the first studies carried out about the issue right after Second World War racism was basically understood as prejudice. It would mean attitude. And as discrimination, which would be act, concrete behavior.

So, from this viewpoint racism was understood as an individual phenomenon. Many studies tried to measure with quantitative techniques individual discrimination and prejudice in Brazil according to very common procedures at the time for instance, in the social psychology field in the USA. Classical studies about the issue “prejudice” about racism, in practice or in empirical terms tried to measure individual prejudice sometimes even explaining such prejudice as originated from hatred or by its association to an authoritarian personality.

We have classical studies that go in this direction in social psychology. And that was the approach used in Brazil. This definition started being questioned by the end of 1950, 1960. As well as by studies carried out and sponsored by the so called “Unesco Cycle” an organization that Subsidized, then research accomplishment in various places in Brazil on racism in a very clear context, or rather when Nazism episodes still had a strong effect.

And Brazil was chosen as a country where it was believed that there was racial democracy a country that could teach the world a different formula or that could contribute for an international debate proving that different races could live peacefully together. So, based on this initiative from Unesco empirical studies were carried out at the time in various regions of Brazil.

And with results of some studies such definitions which up to then had been used, started being questioned. Particularly, in Escola Paulista de Sociologia. In researches carried out in São Paulo as well as in other states of the Southern region researchers started associating racism no longer to attitude to individual behavior but rather to power conditions existing in society to existing controversies among groups which were formed in society. They started using a more structural approach to racism. This approach went on, if you allow me to say so as of the ‘80s in something later called a school a line of studies on racial diversities.

Which were consolidated in Brazil as of the '80s, '90s and are still being carried out today with constant data update. Because such researches are usually based on information and socio-demographic data, they're of quantitative nature and they have been updated from the '80s to this day. So, in the beginning studies about racial diversity in Brazil were influenced by and benefited from the studies of Escola Paulista.

Presently, this field of studies is totally consolidated here. And, from then on, racism was more and more seen as a structural phenomenon or it was seen in its structural and institutional dimension. More recently, basically since mid '90s and 2000 the term institutional racism has become more present in academic literature and studies.

It starts being more present in speeches too and in implemented policies in governmental organs. But it still isn't present in popular speech. It hasn't become a term of current use outside the academic circle. We need to be careful, therefore when we state that there is people's ample recognition of the existence of racism. Because it's necessary to specify it's necessary to emphasize that, in my opinion when people admit to recognize it they're recognizing racism in its individual dimension.

This was proven on a research of qualitative nature I carried out with students from the São Paulo university using interviews with a script. In a group of 50 students they all stated there is racism in Brazil. Nobody denied it. When I asked them to describe situations to exemplify it in nearly every case, they mentioned situations that could be defined as prejudice or discrimination. Despite extensive disclosure of official statistics and of research results on racial disparities I've confirmed in that research that, even among students from a large Brazilian city whose level of education and information is higher than national average the conception or concept of racism used in their speech is the perception of racism in an individual dimension.

Basically not one student mentioned the absence of Negroes in positions of importance, salary difference existing among blacks and whites or even the absence or small proportion of blacks in Brazilian public universities as evidence of racism. And, when they discussed, for example proposals for creating quotas for black students in universities one of the proposals being discussed at the time, there were favorable and unfavorable positions but students usually were inclined to explain this small proportion of black students based on an argument of economics.

As a consequence either of bad quality of public schools or of blacks poverty. They didn't associate to nor explain that as racism. With that empirical research of qualitative nature I could confirm that too. Institutional racism still isn't widely noticed by the people who keep on working and using this definition of a more individual racism.

And despite questioned in the academic circle it's still very present in the media and popular speech. This discussion has become more and more important and is presently relevant when besides the existence of racism, we discuss what would be the anti-racism policies the most adequate strategies to face racism in Brazil.

Because, along this line of thought if we understand that racism has an individual dimension which is prejudice and discrimination as well as an institutional dimension which is the one regarding the existent disparity in the social structure and in its institutions necessary strategies to face racism would have to be differentiated according to each one of these dimensions.

Adequate strategies to face prejudice, discrimination that is, to face racism in its individual dimension aren't necessarily the same strategies that are adequate to face racism in its institutional dimension. I believe this is the core of the political debate in Brazil when implementation is discussed and how much of it has been actually implemented. There are also initiatives of implementation of policies of affirmative action in Brazil and more specifically in Brazilian universities. This is the issue that has been widely discussed a controversial issue in the center of the debate.

Going back to the researches an illustration of this issue's importance is the fact that opinion researches are including questions that test people's support, or not to these proposals of affirmative action policies. I'd like to finalize this class presenting an example that mentions that between the research carried out in 1995 by Instituto Datafolha and the one carried out in 2003, by the Fundação Perseu Abramo it is observed that there was tendency to increase people's support to affirmative action policies.

Even though there are divisions, divergences we notice this tendency to increase this support in this decade. And this result may be explained with the argument that debate has increased, it's been more frequent now and probably more social sectors are becoming more informed. I believe that is one reason to explain this increase. And I should also mention increasing mobilization of anti-racism organizations as well as

governmental initiatives. Because this renders it public, stimulates awareness more people are hearing about it they are coming closer to the issue and a policy of opinions on the subject is created.

For instance we can mention some questions included in these researches. In the research carried out by Fundação Perseu Abramo there is a question that tests interviewees' support to creating quotas for Negroes in universities and enterprises. And 59% of the interviewed objects said they agree whether totally or partially. I remember that, in the research carried out in 2000 in Rio de Janeiro State Professor Clóvis de Oliveira and I analyzed one of the observed results whereby nearly 70% of the interviewees had never heard of the proposal.

So, initially a filter question was included to check on the interviewees' awareness of the subject. And those who had already heard about the issue were asked if they agreed or not. The first thing that stood out at that time in Rio de Janeiro State is that more than half of them had never heard of it. There was much lack of information. Among those who had heard of it there was a tendency to support.

Even though opinions were divided more than 50% of them showed they'd support it. And in this research carried out in 2003, nationally we observed that 59% of the interviewees said they agreed, totally or partially with creating quotas for Negroes in universities and enterprises.

So, more than the result itself, which I believe is important because many times in a debate on policy creation we hear that Brazilian people disagree or that these proposals are being imposed on. In fact, there aren't any empirical researches proving it confirming it, or verifying people's real opinion. So, this research is important because a question of this nature was included. And the conclusion we reach is that there isn't disapproval as so many times we hear in the media and in articles where it's said that people are against it.

We see here that it's not really like that. In fact, it's the opposite the majority agree. On the other hand, this type of research, specifically is interesting for we notice a dislocation of focus from the attempt to measure prejudice and discrimination to the discussion of policies and the most adequate strategies to fight racism. In fact, in this area that we could call research on racial attitudes not only in Brazil, many were carried out in the USA the same tendency is observed. A focus dislocation from the attempt to

measure racism to an attempt to understand people's position regarding anti-racism policies to try to better understand what position they hold to try and move forward a bit in the analysis and to point ways to explain results found. I believe this is an issue present in the research agenda.

It's necessary to investigate better, in a systematic way through empirical research whether there is racism perception. And, as I tried to discuss it here today to take into account that racism is a phenomenon with more than one dimension. It's necessary, thus, to verify it, to go further. Something I believe quantitative researches, sometimes can't do very well. But to combine qualitative strategies and researches is highly recommended because in qualitative research it's possible to explore more the interviewees to analyze a bit more racism conceptions used situations that are referred to, examples that might be given when it's said that there is racism. And it'll be possible to understand, after all in what way, what conceptions are those that are used that are made popular. And move further the discussion about anti-racism strategies. That is the central issue the issue that has mobilized public debate in the moment. And more empirical researches are necessary to verify support, to explore reasons. Because many times you can have results like these showing that 59% support, or that 49% are against.

But we have to understand why, what motives are presented whether to agree, or to disagree with policies implementation. Because that supplies a very important subsidy for designing public policies in favor of racial equality formulated and implemented on a governmental level. And they also help public debate among non governmental agencies. No doubt, it's also very useful for the academic debate.