Racial relations in the medical program at the Federal University of Pará: experiences of black and white students

ARTICLE

Josiney da Silva Trindade[i]
Universidade Federal do Amazonas (UFAM), Manaus, AM, Brasil
Vilma Aparecida de Pinho[ii]
Universidade Federal do Pará (UFPA), Altamira, PA, Brasil

Abstract

In this article, we analyze the perceptions of black and white students regarding race relations in the Bachelor's Degree Program in Medicine at the Federal University of Pará, Altamira *Campus*. We conducted a field study with a qualitative approach, collecting data through open interviews and simple observation. The results reveal the complexity of racial dynamics in the studied context, with harmonious coexistence and episodes of racial tension. In this context, silence is used as a strategy to avoid confronting racial issues. Furthermore, racism affects the subjectivity of black students, who face stigmas and stereotypes that question their legitimacy. There is also the formation of support groups and solidarity networks among black students as forms of resistance and strategies for remaining in the course, which highlights their resilience as well as the limitations of institutional policies in promoting a truly inclusive and anti-racist university environment.

Keywords: Higher Education. University. Medicine Course. Racial Relations.

Relações raciais no curso de Medicina da Universidade Federal do Pará: vivências de estudantes negros e brancos

Resumo

Neste artigo, analisamos as percepções dos discentes negros e brancos sobre as relações raciais no curso de Bacharelado em Medicina da Universidade Federal do Pará, *Campus* Altamira. Realizamos uma pesquisa de campo de abordagem qualitativa, sendo os dados coletados por meio de entrevista aberta e observação simples. Os resultados revelam a complexidade das dinâmicas raciais no campo investigado, coexistindo convivência harmoniosa e episódios de tensão racial. Nesse contexto, há a utilização do silêncio como estratégia para evitar o enfrentamento das questões raciais. Além disso, o racismo afeta a subjetividade de estudantes negros, que enfrentam estigmas e estereótipos que colocam em dúvida sua legitimidade. Há ainda a formação de grupos de apoio e redes de solidariedade entre estudantes negros como forma de resistência e estratégias de permanência, o que revela a resiliência desses discentes, assim como os limites das políticas institucionais na promoção de um ambiente universitário verdadeiramente inclusivo e antirracista.

Palavras-chave: Educação Superior. Universidade. Curso de Medicina. Relações Raciais.

1 Introduction

In the early 2000s, Brazilian society began to experience an important dynamic in the adoption of affirmative policies for the black population, particularly in the context of public universities, both state and federal. These policies have become one of the main demands of the Black Movement since its reorganization at the end of the 1980s.

However, despite pressure from the anti-racist movement for this agenda, which intensified in the first half of the 1990s, the Brazilian state remained resistant to such measures, so that the first experiment took place, initially, within the scope of the Rio de Janeiro state government, under Law No. 3,708 of November 9, 2001, which established "a quota of up to 40% for black and brown populations in access to the University of the State of Rio de Janeiro and the State University of Norte Fluminense" (Rio de Janeiro, 2001, p. 1).

In the course of this process, under significant pressure from various black organizations and entities, several other universities have been approving and adopting, through their governing boards, different systems of racial quotas, which establish racial markers (race/color, ethnicity) as selection criteria, or socio-racial quotas, which, together with racial criteria, use social markers for the selection of quota holders (school origin, income, etc.) (Trindade, 2023).

Despite constant and growing pressure from the Black Movement, only eleven years after the implementation of the first quota system in a university, the Brazilian government, under the presidency of Dilma Vana Rousseff (2011-2016), approved Law No. 12,711, of August 29, 2012, popularly known as the Quota Law, which "provides for admission to federal universities and federal technical secondary education institutions and other measures (Brasil, 2012, p. 1).

Although quotas were already widespread in many higher education institutions,

Law No. 12,711/2012 was important for the consolidation and universalization of this affirmative action policy. As demonstrated by the Survey on the Implementation of Racial Quota Policies in Federal Universities, conducted by the Federal Public Defender's Office (DPU) and the Brazilian Association of Black Researchers (ABPN), before the law was enacted, 36 of the 59 federal universities did not have any affirmative action policies aimed at black people. However, with the implementation of the legislation, all of these institutions began to adopt the quota system (DPU; ABPN, 2022).

Seventeen years after the first quota system was introduced, and six years after the implementation of Law 12,711/2012, the V National Survey of the Socioeconomic and Cultural Profile of IFES Graduates found that, for the first time ever, the number of self-declared black (black and brown) students exceeded the number of self-declared white students (FONAPRACE, 2018), demonstrating the impact and importance of this inclusion policy.

This process of democratization and expansion of access to IFES for public school students, particularly black students, and, consequently, the change in the profile of students at these institutions, has led to other important issues that have become increasingly prominent. Of particular note is the way in which relations between different racial groups are developing in the academic field, especially in courses considered to be of high social prestige, in which the black population has been significantly underrepresented for a long time. In this context, based on this question, in this article, we aim to analyze the perceptions of black and white students about race relations in the Bachelor of Medicine course at the Federal University of Pará, Altamira *Campus*.

With regard to the organization of this article, immediately following this introduction, it is structured as follows: in the first section, we present the theoretical and methodological procedures; in the second section, we provide a theoretical framework on black presence in medical courses; in the third section, we analyze the perceptions of black and white students on race relations in the Bachelor of Medicine course at the Federal University of Pará, Altamira *Campus*; and then we present our conclusions.

2 Theoretical and methodological procedures

In this study, we investigated the Bachelor of Medicine program at the Federal University of Pará (UFPA), Altamira *Campus*. In terms of approach, it is characterized as qualitative, as we focus on understanding a level of reality that cannot be reduced to quantifications, so that attention is turned to a sphere of meanings, values, ideas, habits, and other phenomena that constitute social reality (Minayo, 2007).

For data collection, we used the open interview technique, in which the informant is encouraged to speak freely about a topic, while the researcher's questions, when asked, aim to deepen their reflections (Minayo, 2007). Still on the subject of interviews, Lüdke and André (2013) emphasize that one of the most important characteristics of this data collection technique is that it allows researchers to immediately and continuously perceive the information they are seeking, and can be applied to virtually any type of subject and on a wide variety of topics.

Simultaneously with the interviews, we used the technique of simple observation – with notes recorded in a field notebook – which consists of observation in which the researcher does not participate extensively within the group being studied, observing it in a more spontaneous manner (Gil, 2008). However, as the author emphasizes, despite its spontaneity, it can be placed on a scientific level, since it goes beyond factual observations, applying control, followed by a process of analysis and interpretation of the collected data, that is, there is the control and systematization required in a scientific study.

Regarding the operationalization of data collection, we began fieldwork in early June 2022. Initial contact with potential participants was challenging, as classes are organized into small tutorial groups of up to 12 students. In view of this, we adopted the strategy of sending an online questionnaire via Google Forms, with the mediation of a medical student. However, despite widespread publicity, only six students volunteered, and of these, only three

agreed to be interviewed.

To expand the sample, we implemented two additional strategies: a face-to-face approach at the college building, which resulted in two new participants; and encouraging networking among participants, which enabled the inclusion of five more students.

In total, we have ten students participating, with the program ending in August 2022. However, in this excerpt from the study, we draw on the testimonies of six students: Interviewee A – white, aged between 20 and 25, enrolled in 2016, income/school quota, 12th semester; Interviewee B – white race/color, aged between 30 and 35, enrolled in 2020, color/income quota, 5th semester; Interviewee C – brown race/color, aged between 20 and 25, enrolled in 2018, color/income/school quota, 8th semester; Interviewee D – black race/color, aged between 25 and 30, enrolled in 2018, color/income/school quota, 8th semester; Interviewee E – brown race/color, aged between 20 and 25, enrolled in 2018, color/income/school quota, 8th semester; and Interviewee F – white race/color, aged between 25 and 30, enrolled in 2016, income/school quota, 9th semester.

After transcribing the interviews word for word, recorded on a digital device and supplemented by on-site observations, the data was sorted by general themes, such as: perceptions of race relations; perceptions of racism in the institution; perceptions of racial prejudice; and perceptions of racial discrimination. After organizing the material into general themes, we conducted an in-depth reading of the material, which enabled us to identify and classify some categories that recurred in the interviewees' narratives and were therefore important for our analysis, such as racism, discrimination, silence, permanence, and permanence strategies, among others. After organizing and classifying the data, as well as identifying these main categories, we began the analysis phase itself, in dialogue with the literature relevant to such analyses.

It is important to note that, in compliance with ethical guidelines, the research project that gave rise to this study was submitted to Plataforma Brasil and approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the Federal University of Pará (CEP/UFPA), under Opinion No. 5,688,040.

3 Literature review: the presence of black people in medical courses

In recent years, increased access to public higher education for black students, especially through affirmative action, has led to significant changes in medical courses offered by Brazilian higher education institutions, which have historically been marked by low representation of the black population, as well as an institutional culture aligned with whiteness as the norm. In this context, the significant influx of black students into these traditionally elitist spaces acts as a destabilizing agent for the prevailing academic logic, revealing historically naturalized mechanisms of racial exclusion. Thus, more than just occupying a greater number of places, black students have been at the forefront of symbolic and epistemic disputes that challenge the foundations of medical education in Brazil.

Studies of race relations in Brazilian universities, particularly in medical schools, show that the university environment, far from being a truly democratic space, has been permeated by practices of exclusion and symbolic violence (Trindade, 2023). Such practices manifest themselves in the form of suspicious looks, questions about the legitimacy of the presence of this "new" public, social exclusion, and veiled or explicit aggression, such as racist jokes directed at phenotypic characteristics, notably curly hair (Fredrich *et al*., 2022).

However, although these racially oriented practices are recurrent, they are often not labeled as racism, both because of the difficulty in recognizing their structural and institutional manifestation and because of the subjects' own attempts to minimize the psychological suffering resulting from discrimination (Fredrich *et al*., 2022; Trindade, 2023). As such, the persistence of this denial is also linked to the narrow conception of racism as an individual and intentional act, disregarding its systemic functioning.

According to Silviano and Moreira (2023), systemic racism manifests itself through collectively organized practices and values that operate an unequal distribution of opportunities based on individuals' race. In the university context, this logic is expressed both in the low representation of black people among faculty and students and in

institutional resistance to recognizing racial inequalities as a structural problem that requires equity policies. This resistance, as demonstrated by Fredrich *et al*. (2022), contributes to the rejection of reparatory measures and reinforces the idea of supposed neutral merit, ignoring the historical and socio-racial constraints that shape educational trajectories, especially for black, Quilombola, and Indigenous people.

However, the more significant presence of black students in medicine is not limited to denouncing exclusion, as it has produced forms of resistance and collective creation, such as collectives that introduce important political categories, such as acceptance, belonging, and resistance in university life (Rosa; Facchini, 2022). In this way, these collectives consolidate themselves as spaces for mutual support, empowerment, and political coordination, contributing not only to the retention of black students, but also to the reconfiguration of the very modes of knowledge production. Thus, the collective experience of blackness in the academic sphere becomes a catalyst for epistemological disputes that challenge Eurocentric curricula, pedagogical and institutional practices, and scientific references (Rosa; Facchini, 2022).

In this context, as observed in Rosa and Facchini (2022), the inclusion of black students has also broadened and diversified the scope of research topics, the agenda of academic events, and the focus of academic leagues, producing a broadening of the horizons of medicine. As a result, the health of the black population, for example, historically neglected in both medical training and practice, now occupies a central place, not only as an object of study, but as a field of political and ethical intervention (Rosa; Facchini, 2022), contributing to the emergence of a more pluralistic medicine, sensitive to racial inequalities and the social determinants of health.

However, it is necessary to consider that the stigma associated with the category "quota student," often used in a derogatory and indiscriminate manner toward any black student, highlights the persistence of stereotypes that intellectually disqualify racialized individuals (Trindade, 2023). However, this category has been progressively redefined by students who recognize this marker as an expression of collective struggle and political achievement (Rosa; Facchini, 2022). By subverting the negative meanings historically

attributed to its presence, these students affirm its legitimacy and contribute to the displacement of narratives of merit, competence, and belonging in the university.

In any case, it should be noted that the inequalities faced by black students are not limited to race, but are linked to other social markers, such as gender, class, and sexuality, as the narratives of these subjects indicate intersectional concerns and demonstrate how the production of health knowledge must consider the multiple oppressions that shape the experience of dissident bodies, non-white bodies (Rosa; Facchini, 2022).

In this scenario, we emphasize that, especially in relation to courses considered to be of high social prestige, affirmative action not only democratizes access, but also opens up new possibilities for the transformation of Brazilian higher education institutions, because, by denaturalizing white hegemony in the academic field, the presence of black people contributes to the expansion of the frontiers of knowledge, to the permanence of non-white racial groups, and to the construction of a more just, pluralistic university model committed to racial equality.

Therefore, medicine, as a field of practice and knowledge with a profound social impact, but which for a long time remained restricted to whiteness, has the potential for transformation with this shift that challenges its foundations, reorients its ethics, and broadens the range of beneficiaries (Rosa; Facchini, 2022).

4 Results and discussions: race relations in the UFPA medical school

In the research process, we identified distinctions, similarities, and parallels in students' perceptions of race relations in the course analyzed. While some reported harmonious interactions, others pointed out that, despite a certain stability and balance, such relationships are permeated by racism, which manifests itself in both prejudice and racial discrimination, whether subtle or explicit.

With regard to white respondents, when we asked them about the structure of race relations in the medical program at UFPA, Altamira *Campus*, some relevant issues arose, even when they chose not to delve deeper into the discussion, which in itself indicates how

this issue permeates the institution. Consider the statements of two interviewees: "*Normal. They are harmonious*" (Interviewee F, race/color: white, 9th semester);

> *This issue of superiority that white people have. It's in quotation marks because they think they have it. And there's this issue of prestige, because their skin color is more accepted in society than that of black people. So, that's it. I think white people always think they're superior and stuff. Generally, white people interact with each other without looking at their skin color, right? But when a white person interacts with a black person, they're looking at their skin color, you know? They're judging them. Some white people, you know! Not all of them* (Interviewee A, race/color: white, 12th semester).

Specifically, in the brief statement by Interviewee F, and considering the observations made *in loco*, what we noticed in the academic field investigated is the adoption of silence to avoid reflection and discussion about the racial relations established in the institution. These relationships, in turn, are permeated by racialized ideologies and practices. In this context, as corroborated by the studies of Bento (2002), Cavalleiro (2005), and Santos and Rocha (2022), silence is used, particularly by whiteness, as a strategy to avoid racial stress and thus remain comfortable in its social position, which is, in itself, a position of privilege.

Thus, we observe that silence functions not only as a mechanism of self-preservation, but also reinforces inequalities by preventing debate and questioning of existing racial relations. By avoiding these discussions, whiteness preserves its position of power (material and symbolic), of distinction, and maintains unchanged the unequal relations that sustain racism and, consequently, its privileges, contributing to the naturalization of oppression and inequalities that affect non-white groups.

This racial stress aforementioned is closely linked to what DiAngelo (2018) defined as white fragility, which is nothing more than an emotional state of discomfort and defensiveness that many white people display when confronted with issues related to racism and their own whiteness. Similarly, Bento (2002) points out that certain situations cause white people to react defensively, such as: when they have to acknowledge that access to opportunities and resources is different for various racial groups, that it is

unequal; when they encounter black people in leadership positions; when they participate in activities in which black people speak directly about racism, exposing the codes of whiteness; and when they are racialized, since white people see themselves and are seen as universal.

With regard to the perceptions of Interviewee A, the first question that arises is how white people see and feel about black people, that is, as "superior" (although they do not commonly publicize this). Therein lies the essential expression of the ideologies that constitute racism, namely that white people, from the height of their whiteness, not only believe in the existence of naturally hierarchical races (a hierarchy in which their race is at the top), but also that these hierarchies are determined by the close relationships between the physical and the moral, the physical and the intellectual, and the physical and the cultural (Munanga, 2003).

It is through this racialized way of seeing the other, "the inferior," that whites construct their "superior" racial identity and weave their social relationships, both with their white peers ("equals") and with non-whites ("the others," "the inferiors"). Thus, in one way or another, as we can see in Piza (2016), race is what defines the terms of these relationships. However, despite the belief in racial superiority being the guiding principle of racist ideologies that prevail in different societies, and despite this belief being decisive in race relations between blacks and whites, we need to consider the complex and dynamic nature that racism has had and continues to acquire in different territories.

In Brazil, it has developed with several specific characteristics when compared to racism in other countries. As a result, given its peculiarities, important underlying ideologies emerged that were equally racist and harmful, such as the ideology of miscegenation, whitening, and the myth of racial democracy. In this way, the racial relations established between blacks and whites are both the product and producers of a genuinely Brazilian form of racism.

Unlike what happened in countries such as South Africa (SA) and the United States of America (USA), there was no legal system of racial discrimination in our country. What occurred, and still prevails today, was the establishment of racial relations mediated

by racism based on racial prejudice (based on phenotype), as pointed out by Nogueira (2006). This racism is generally not publicized (veiled), but rather commonly denied, and similarly, discriminatory practices are generally concealed and covered up.

In Brazilian society, white people's belief in their racial superiority (a belief perceived by Interviewee A) is rarely publicized in the discourse of whiteness, remaining within the mind of the white individual or the racial group to which they belong, although there are exceptions, such as the Bolsonaro administration (2019-2022), during which explicit racist discourse and practices became more evident and frequent.

Furthermore, it is common for racism to only become evident through more subtle manifestations of prejudice and discriminatory practices, which, in turn, result in unequal race relations and ensure, at the same time: 1) the social distance between white groups and groups seen as "inferior," such as blacks and Indigenous peoples; 2) the maintenance of racial privileges for white groups; and 3) the maintenance of racial disadvantages for non-white groups. In other words, they contribute to the maintenance of racial inequalities between these groups.

At another point, still discussing his perceptions, Interviewee A reports:

> I think everyone has a little bit of racism in them, because racism is structural, right? From childhood, we are exposed to racism and we end up incorporating racism into ourselves. So sometimes even black people themselves are racist. Because some black people grow up hearing that their hair is bad, that their skin is ugly, and so on. And then they grow up hearing that and internalize that racism, really believing that their hair is bad, that they are dirty, I don't know. So, it turns out that the relationship between black people may be bad because of this racism that people have internalized. Do you understand? That black people themselves have internalized. And sometimes, things that they don't like about themselves, because they are black, they also won't like in others. Do you understand? (Interviewee A, race/color: white, 12th semester).

After "denouncing" the feeling of superiority that he perceives his white colleagues have towards black people, we observe that Interviewee A softens the weight of racism among his peers, adopting a strategy that has been widely used by Brazilian whiteness, both in interpersonal and institutional relations, which is to not actually assume his "racist self," but to project it onto a racist (super)structure. It is as if there were an unproduced

(super)structure, naturally given and untouchable, that creates racist individuals (its victims) at a moment of vulnerability, in this case, childhood ("From the time we are children, we are exposed to racism and we end up internalizing racism").

Thus, there is no longer the figure of the racist white person, but rather that of the "victim" exposed to an evil that he cannot contain or combat. Although white people do not see themselves as the real perpetrators but rather as "victims" of a (super)structure, racism is a reality, and consequently, there is a need to point to someone as the cause of this problem. At this point, the victim is usually turned into the perpetrator, as Cavalleiro (2005) notes in his study.

Following this process, it is possible to observe, in the speech of Interviewee A, that when he talks about the existence of structural racism (the primary perpetrator) at no point does the figure of the racist white person appear in a personified or explicit way. However, what emerges is the denunciation of the figure of the "racist black man" (the second perpetrator) (Bento, 2016). In this scenario, what Bento (2016), based on Adorno and Horkheimer (1985), defined as a type of false projection manifests itself, that is, it is a mechanism "through which the subject seeks to rid himself of impulses that he does not admit as his own, depositing them in the other. That which is familiar to him, therefore, comes to be seen as something hostile and is projected outside of himself, that is, onto the potential victim" (Bento, 2016, p. 42).

Despite the expression of this false projection, in which what is intimate and undesirable is projected onto the other constructed as "the guilty party," there is, in the interviewee's perceptions, an interesting issue to be discussed, as it interferes with and is, at the same time, a consequence of the unequal relations established between whites and blacks in various fields of social life. We are talking about the impacts of racism on the psyche and subjectivities of black people, who, as a result, are often led to attempt to nullify their bodies, their identities, and other negatively perceived elements. In other words, they are led to attempt to deny and nullify everything that deviates from the exclusionary and violent model of humanity developed in an ideologically white and racist society.

It is precisely these emotional experiences of being black in a society of white ideologies, aesthetics, behaviors, demands, and expectations that Souza (2021) discusses in his study. The author emphasizes that such experiences lived by black people, particularly those seeking socioeconomic advancement, result in adherence to white prerogatives, values, and status, that is, they result in the massacre of black identities and, consequently, black people take white people as a model of identification, understanding them as the only way to "become people." In fact, it is through this lens that whiteness is seen and presented as the only model of humanity, civilization, and "being human."

In this scenario, as highlighted by Costa (2021), violence lies at the heart of this process of self-annihilation and, consequently, alienation of black people. Thus, being black means "being constantly, continuously, and cruelly violated, without pause or respite, by a double injunction: that of embodying the body and ideals of the white subject's ego and that of refusing, denying, and nullifying the presence of the black body" (Costa, 2021, p. 25). The self-rejection and self-annihilation of the black body, followed by the attempt to incorporate the white ego, which is experienced by many black people and which was perceived in a certain way by Interviewee A, results in the rejection and opposition to all those qualities that black people have internalized as inferior and undesirable, because they are poisoned by racial/racist stigmas that have distorted and destroyed positive perceptions of that identity.

In this context, black people who are immersed in this process of self-alienation, when identifying in themselves or their peers those racial characteristics (physical, moral, and cultural) that have been stigmatized by white people, tend to despise them and view them with apathy or even revulsion. However, in this complex historical and psychological process of violence, it is important to consider that such a process – which results in the internalization of stigmas and, consequently, leads to the attempt to self-annul the black body, followed by the attempt to embody the white body and ego – is forged in a racialized society, founded on and under strongly racist ideologies.

In this context of deep racial stigmas created around black bodies, intellect, morals, and cultures, we need to consider the meaning and importance given to the ideology of

miscegenation, especially in political-ideological debate, because, as emphasized by Munanga (2016), it was this ideology that underpinned and guided both the development of national identity and individual identities.

As the author points out, miscegenation, which is in fact a biological phenomenon, was transformed into a political project through which we would build the much-desired Brazilian national identity. And the ideal of whitening became a fundamental part of this process, given that there was a belief that, through continuous miscegenation, a "new Brazilian race" would emerge, that is, more arianized or whiter phenotypically [and culturally], so that those "inferior" racial types that were harmful to the ambitious project of nation building, such as "Indigenous," "blacks," and "mixed-race" people, would disappear (Munanga, 2016).

Like all ideologies, whitening (phenotypic, moral, and cultural), presented to black men and women as the path to redemption, had to be propagated through socialization and education mechanisms, so that it was internalized by black and white populations. As a result, this movement focused particularly and mainly on "the process of constructing the identity of black individuals and communities, as well as on the formation of the generally very low self-esteem of the black population and the idealized overvaluation of the white population" (Munanga, 2016, p. 14).

Considering this whole chain of events, we must denaturalize the blame placed on black people and turn our attention to the roots of this process of internalization of stigma and alienation experienced by many black people. The feelings of contempt and apathy that many people display when they identify certain black racial qualities and characteristics (physical, moral, and cultural) in themselves or their peers were forged in an intense and continuous process of violent distortion and destruction of positive self-perceptions of black identities. This process was developed in a society that was strongly racist and oppressive toward racial types that it viewed and constructed as "inferior."

In any case, we also need to think about the practical implications of this whole process, making it clear who the real beneficiaries of this process are, namely whiteness, which, in turn, enjoys all the racial privileges that come with it. In other words, it is whiteness

that enjoys all the material and symbolic advantages accumulated through the instrumentalization of the social marker of race and/or ethnicity, by which the supposed inferiority of certain ethnic-racial groups is explicitly or implicitly justified, as well as the exploitation and, consequently, the accumulated losses suffered by such groups.

Continuing with our analysis, another interviewee reports the following perceptions about race relations in the course investigated:

> *There is a division. Black people live with black people and Indigenous people. But I think that's falling apart. The coordinator of CAMED [Academic Center for Medicine] is a quota student. So, I think it's falling apart a little bit. I think they [white people] are seeing that they [black people] also work hard and are capable. Generally, students who come through quotas, as they passed with lower grades, come with less learning, and this has kind of stigmatized those quota students, as if they were "dumber," less intelligent, less capable of being here in the medical program* (Interviewee B, race/color: white, 5th semester).

In the previous statement, we can see that a direct link is made between quotas and ethnic-racial background, as if every quota beneficiary were necessarily black or as if every black person were necessarily a quota beneficiary. Furthermore, we noticed in the testimony of Interviewee B, and other interviewees, that a correlation is made between quotas, lack of effort, and intellectual incapacity among black people.

In addition to undermining the real reasons for quotas, chief among them being the fight against racial inequality, we observe that the relationships forged in the institution's daily life reinforce stereotypes that have historically been imposed on black people, that is, the lazy black person who does not try hard enough and the intellectually limited black person or, as expressed in the previous statement, the dumb black person. In other words, even if implicitly, quotas are understood to be a paternalistic or populist measure for those who are cognitively and intellectually incapable and limited, rather than a measure to combat intransigent mechanisms of racial discrimination, which in turn result in brutal inequalities between blacks and whites.

Influenced by such stereotypes and racial prejudices, which commonly result in discrimination, "people who come from quotas," that is, black people, seen as "dumb," "less

intelligent," and "less capable," must first and foremost circumvent or deconstruct these stereotypes, proving their intellectual capacity and, with that, their merit to occupy a place understood by whiteness as naturally theirs. In other words, the black body, seen as an intruder, an impostor, or a usurper, must first be recognized by whites as capable and endowed with reason in order to begin to be accepted as an integral part of that space, even though its permanence is not on an equal footing, but always permeated by prejudice and racial discrimination.

As initially announced, together with the perceptions of white students, we sought to analyze how black students perceive the relationships established in the daily life of the medical course. In this regard, we note that the statements made by these students are very similar to those made by white students, differing only in minor details. Consider the following statement:

> In general, relationships are normal. Peaceful. There isn't much segregation at our college. There are small groups that end up separating themselves, but it's more a matter of affinity and experience. Like, I have a group of curly-haired girls (laughs). Then there's one girl who has straight hair. But I don't think it came about as a defense mechanism, I think it was more like something natural (Interviewee C, race/color: brown, 8th semester).

Unlike Interviewee B, who was categorical in affirming the existence of a division/separation between distinct ethnic-racial groups, and despite the racial stigmas and stereotypes that have been identified so far, Interviewee C perceives race relations in a more positive light, classifying them as "normal" and "peaceful" and emphasizing that "there is no serious segregation" in the course investigated. The student also reports the existence of small groups, which, despite having similar phenotypes (a perception similar to that of Interviewee B), are formed based on affinity and, in her perception, not as a defense mechanism.

In order to gain a broader understanding of this issue, let us consider the following statement:

In my class, there are very few black people. There's me and a few friends who are close to me, plus one other classmate. If you look closely, the women in my class form a close-knit group where everyone fits the same mold. They are all white women who fit the same mold. And I see that in my group, in my circle of friends, I don't know how it happened, but it just happened naturally, most of the girls in my group are black, or if they're not black and have light skin, they have black features and very curly hair. I have another friend who is Quilombola. Not that they all have the same profile, but most of them are concentrated in this group. I've never stopped to talk about it with them, but we realize it (Interviewee E, race/color: brown, 8th semester).

Based on the two previous statements, and also considering part of Interviewee B's testimony, it is possible to observe that, despite having different perspectives on the same issue, the interviewees perceive the existence of "divisions," "circle of friends," or "small groups" that "separate" blacks and whites, which in itself highlights the importance given to the social marker of race/ethnicity in that space.

In this context, we consider that the creation of "groups" or "circle of friends" by black students, although not in a conscious manner, constitutes not only a strategy for remaining in this space, which, in many ways, is still hostile to black people and other non-white groups. In this sense, to better understand this issue, it is essential that we understand the meaning and dimensions of permanence that guide us.

To this end, we agree with Santos (2009, p. 68), who defines permanence as:

> [...] the act of lasting over time, which should enable not only the constancy of the individual, but also the possibility of transformation and existence. Permanence must be characterized by constant action and, therefore, always be transformative. To remain is to be and exist as a continuum in the flow of time, transforming through dialogue and necessary, constructive exchanges.

Complementing this definition, the author posits that, particularly in universities, there are two dimensions of permanence: The first dimension, which she calls *material permanence*, relates to the material conditions of existence, that is, it concerns the conditions for bearing the costs generated during the course (even if it is public), such as housing, transportation, food, teaching materials, etc; the second dimension, referred to by the author as *symbolic permanence*, is related to the symbolic conditions of existence, that

is, it concerns access to pedagogical, emotional and psychological support, the enhancement of self-esteem, the existence of student and teacher references, the appreciation of the individual and their culture, etc. In other words, symbolic permanence refers to the possibilities that students, particularly black students, have to identify themselves, be recognized, and belong to the academic group and institution.

Based on these definitions, and considering the scenario presented by the students, the understanding of symbolic permanence becomes particularly relevant to our discussions, since racial relations, depending on how they are established, can positively or negatively affect the possibilities that black students have to identify themselves, be recognized, belong, and, above all, remain in the academic space.

Hence our understanding that the creation of "black groups" is a strategy for permanence, which, in turn, is a product of the relationships established in the course investigated. Although these relationships are not generally marked by overt displays of prejudice and racial discrimination, they are markedly permeated by racist ideologies that highlight the importance of race/ethnicity as a social marker in interpersonal interactions and in the very organization of the academic space of the medical course.

Black students, through relationships marked by racialized ideas and practices, and seeking to ensure their recognition as an integral and legitimate part of that space, end up mobilizing and establishing, usually unconsciously, some solidarity networks as a strategy to guarantee this symbolic permanence, or even material permanence. Generally, these networks are built and established with people who have similar realities, that is, who are faced with the same or similar problems, so that mutual support and strengthening is possible, as well as overcoming the adversities and obstacles that constantly arise in that space. Let's look at the following statement:

> *Relationships between black people are very friendly. I think it's because we have a lot of empathy, because, whether we like it or not, we put ourselves in each other's shoes. In particular, black Quilombolas and non-Quilombolas, because there is a difference in access and treatment, so we try to help each other. In fact, both are disadvantaged, but one should not suffer more than the other* (Interviewee D, race/color: black, 8th semester).

In this context, it is important to emphasize that access to higher education is not the only aspiration of students, but it is necessary to consider the need for quality permanence, particularly for those who entered through affirmative action (Santos, 2009). It is based on this demand that the government and higher education institutions themselves implement certain policies and actions aimed at ensuring that these individuals remain in education, such as the National Student Assistance Policy (PNAES).

However, as evidenced in the students' statements and observed during the research, when these formal strategies fail to meet or satisfy student demand, informal permanence strategies are established, such as the creation of solidarity and support networks, which are, in fact, strategies for material and symbolic permanence (Santos, 2009). This highlights the complexity of the challenge of ensuring not only the admission but, above all, the permanence of these students in the university environment.

In any case, empirically, it is clear that student permanence goes beyond the financial and material support offered by institutional policies, but also involves social and subjective aspects that directly influence students' academic trajectories, such as racism, racial prejudice, and racial discrimination. Furthermore, the solidarity and support networks created by black students themselves demonstrate the importance of bonds in building a more inclusive and welcoming university environment that enables this group to remain.

However, the existence of these informal strategies highlights gaps in institutional policies, emphasizing the need for continuous improvement in student assistance actions, particularly in their symbolic dimension. Therefore, ensuring the effective permanence of these students requires a broader approach that considers not only the provision of material resources, but also initiatives that strengthen belonging and integration into the academic space, particularly actions that prevent and combat racism and other related forms of violence.

5 Conclusions

In our analyses, we observed the complexity of race relations in the medical school we investigated, with both experiences of harmonious coexistence and situations marked by racial tensions. The perceptions of the students interviewed show that, although the academic environment is sometimes described as "peaceful" or "normal," there are unequal racial relations that permeate the daily life of the course.

In this scenario, one of the main aspects addressed was the adoption of silence as a strategy of whiteness to avoid directly confronting racial issues, especially with regard to the recognition of historically accumulated racial privileges. Another point to consider was how racism affects the subjectivity of black students, leading them to face stigmas and stereotypes that question their legitimacy in academic spaces. Therefore, the creation of small groups and solidarity networks among black students constitutes a strategy of resistance and permanence, which reveals the limitations of institutional policies, especially with regard to building a university environment that effectively combats racism.

In any case, we emphasize that, during its execution, this research faced significant limitations, especially with regard to access to the daily routine of the course, which prevented a more direct observation of educational practices related to racial issues, as well as limiting a more in-depth insertion into the field under investigation. However, based on the results of this study, which show the persistence of racism, prejudice, and racial discrimination in the UFPA/Altamira medical program, we suggest the adoption of truly effective anti-racist policies, such as the implementation of mandatory courses that address ethnic-racial relations and the health of the black population, continuing education for teachers and students to combat institutional racism, and the creation of psychosocial support centers for victims of discrimination.

In the same vein, we recommend expanding affirmative action measures, such as racial quotas in medical residency programs and promoting research that delves deeper into the intersectionalities between race, gender, and class in access to, permanence in, and success in medical courses. Similarly, we recommend future studies that seek to

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comparatively analyze the dynamics of racism in different campuses and medical courses in the Amazon, which will contribute to the adoption of more effective strategies in this region.

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[i] **Josiney da Silva Trindade**, ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5423-8466
Doutorando em Educação – Programa de Pós-Graduação em Educação (PPGE-UFAM); mestre em Educação e Cultura – Programa de Pós-Graduação em Educação e Cultura (PPGEDUC-UFPA); licenciado em Pedagogia – Universidade Federal do Pará (UFPA).
Authorship contribution: project management, formal analysis, conceptualization, writing – first draft, writing – revision, research, methodology.
Lattes: http://lattes.cnpq.br/8608683030751474
E-mail: josineytrindade@gmail.com

[ii] **Vilma Aparecida de Pinho**, ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2544-084
Doutora em Educação, docente na Universidade Federal do Pará (UFPA), atuando na Faculdade de Educação (FAE), no Programa de Pós-Graduação em Educação e Cultura (PPGEDUC), no Programa de Pós-Graduação em Estudos em Etnodiversidade (PPGEtno) e no Programa de Pós-Graduação em Educação e Culturas Inclusivas (PPGECI).
Authorship contribution: supervision, conceptualization, writing – revision, methodology.
Lattes: http://lattes.cnpq.br/2018069654110698
E-mail: vilmaaparecidadepinho@gmail.com

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