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Black women's narratives in the pursuit of representation and resistance during undergraduate education

Narrativas de mulheres negras na conquista de espaços de representatividade e luta durante a graduação

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Abstract

This article aims to reflect on the educational journey of Black women psychologists, focusing on the strategies of resistance and coping with inequalities during their undergraduate studies. It is based on a qualitative study involving five self-identified Black psychologists who graduated from the same federal public university in Brazil. Open-ended individual interviews were conducted, recorded, and transcribed. Thematic analysis highlighted the challenges of being a Black woman in higher education. The results point to various coping strategies, revealing the importance of affective networks, the strengthening of identity, exhaustive academic dedication, and the struggle to occupy space in academia as both personal and collective empowerment. These strategies were found to shape the academic training of Black women psychologists, influence student retention, and impact their future professional trajectories. These experiences provide insight into the realities faced by Black university students and underscore the need for actions to combat racism and inequality in academic settings.

Keywords: Professional training; Psychologists; Psychology; Racism; Students.

Resumo

O objetivo deste artigo é refletir sobre a formação de psicólogas negras, abordando os recursos de resistência e enfrentamento às desigualdades durante a graduação. Trata de pesquisa qualitativa com participação de cinco psicólogas autodeclaradas pretas, formadas na mesma universidade pública federal. Foram realizadas entrevistas individuais livres, gravadas e transcritas. Após análise temática destacaram-se desafios de ser mulher negra na graduação. Os resultados apontam estratégias de enfrentamento, revelando a importância das redes afetivas, do fortalecimento da própria identidade, a exaustiva dedicação aos estudos e a luta por ocupar espaços na academia, como fortalecimento pessoal e coletivo. Conclui-se que tais estratégias atravessam a formação de

psicólogas negras, interferem na permanência estudantil e refletem na perspectiva futura de atuação profissional. As experiências informam sobre a vivência de universitárias negras e indicam a necessidade de ações em combate ao racismo e às desigualdades no ambiente acadêmico.

Palavras-chave: Capacitação profissional; Psicólogo; Psicologia; Racismo; Estudantes.

The concept of race, historically shaped by theories of biological determinism, has significantly influenced racial relations in Brazil. Studies conducted between the late 19th and early 20th centuries claimed that human inequalities stemmed from innate aptitudes, thereby justifying the notion that certain races were inferior while others were superior. This line of thought associated Black individuals with psychiatric pathologies and violent behaviors (Schucman & Martins, 2017). This foundational view of Black people as objects of Brazilian science established an epistemic legacy rooted in racism, which became increasingly structural over time.

Between the 1930s and 1950s, the introduction of psychology as a discipline in higher education curricula challenged the biological determinism of race. The influence of Gilberto Freyre's work, which framed race as a cultural rather than biological determinant, shifted the rationale for racism toward the misguided belief in a hierarchy of cultures. These debates contributed to the construction of Brazil's racial democracy myth, which promoted a supposed harmonious coexistence among diverse peoples and cultures (Schucman & Martins, 2017).

Amid these debates, in 1945, Virgínia Leone Bicudo defended the first master's thesis on ethnic-racial relations at a Brazilian university. She argued that color-based prejudice persists in the country, highlighting its traumatic effects, its restriction on the social interactions of Black Brazilians, and its role in limiting their upward mobility (Santos et al., 2012).

Within this context, psychology was officially recognized as a profession in 1962. Initially, it was characterized by a privatized practice focused on continuous psychotherapeutic care for the upper classes. During the 1970s and 1980s, the consolidation of social psychology, along with other preexisting fields, helped shift the profession toward a more critical and socially engaged stance (Conselho Federal de Psicologia, 2017). Moreover, changes brought about by Brazil's psychiatric reform drew psychologists closer to public policy, making a transformation in their practice inevitable.

Important contributions at the intersection of psychology and race relations began to emerge, including the seminal work *Becoming Black* by psychoanalyst Neusa Santos Souza, first published in 1983 (Souza, 2021). However, it was not until 2002 that these discussions reached the *Conselho Federal de Psicologia* (CFP) with the launch of the campaign entitled *Racial Prejudice Humiliates and Social Humiliation Causes Suffering*, alongside Resolution No. 018/2002, which established professional guidelines for addressing racial prejudice and discrimination. This context highlighted the need to address racism within psychology training programs, underscoring the importance of structural changes in the profession.

An analysis of Brazil's 2004 National Curriculum Guidelines for psychology education reveals the continued predominance of a technical model, posing challenges to the implementation of a more critical education. Such an education would integrate theoretical and epistemological foundations that account for historical, cultural, political, and economic dimensions.

In 2013, the CFP responded by calling for a deeper reflection on the professional training of psychologists, emphasizing the need to critically examine the ideological components of the curriculum and to align educational content with Brazil's social realities (Conselho Federal de Psicologia [CFP], 2013). This perspective became a key driver of curricular reforms aimed at developing professionals committed to social transformation and to addressing inequality.

In 2012, Brazil also instituted an affirmative action policy – Law No. 12.711 – establishing a quota system in federal universities, intended to address historical and social disparities (Presidência da República, 2012). This policy highlights the need for academia, professional organizations, unions, and regulatory bodies to remain vigilant and proactive in monitoring institutional practices and participating in ongoing debates on the topic. Such engagement is essential for ensuring a more inclusive, critical, and socially responsive psychology curriculum (Ribeiro & Soligo, 2020). The CFP has since maintained a strong commitment to addressing these societal demands.

As a result of these efforts, in 2017 the CFP published the first edition of *Racial Relations: Technical References for the Practice of Psychologists*, a document that discusses the importance of addressing racial issues during professional training. It emphasizes the need for reflection on the psychological impacts of racial discrimination, while noting that such topics are rarely included in university curricula or required coursework (CFP, 2017).

It is reasonable to assert that the lack of engagement with Black subjectivity in undergraduate education impacts future professional practice. Veiga (2019) notes that one consequence is a reduced capacity to recognize and respond to the psychological suffering caused by racism.

According to Fanon (2008), in the social imaginary, a Black person's humanity is acknowledged only to the extent that they approximate whiteness, by assimilating dominant cultural values and rejecting their Black identity. In universities, the experiences of Black students often reflect this dynamic, as strategies to gain acceptance within academic and intellectual spaces.

In addition to revisiting curricular content, it is essential to examine the positionality from which listening and interpretation occur. For Veiga (2019), understanding the particularities of Black subjectivity requires greater representation of Black professionals in psychology. While access to higher education has expanded, exclusion, both explicit and implicit, remains prevalent within academic environments. It manifests in speech, behavior, evaluation practices, and discourses that attempt to obscure discrimination and inequality (Portela et al., 2020). Thus, it is necessary to consider both access to and retention in higher education, especially as inequalities often masquerade as mere differences.

One strategy universities use to address inequality and the challenging conditions faced by Black women is to frame them as “warriors,” a narrative that overlooks the extensive obstacles they confront in facing racism (CFP, 2017). This highlights the contrast between those who recognize their Blackness and the systemic denial of their existence and those who do not perceive such historical inequities. In other words, becoming Black involves reclaiming one's history and constructing a new social position (Souza, 2021).

This article's central hypothesis is that Black women psychology students develop distinct coping strategies and resources to face the intersectional discrimination related to race and gender, stemming from institutional racism in higher education. These strategies shape not only their educational experience but also their professional practice.

Examining the training of psychologists through the lens of racial discrimination experienced by Black women during their undergraduate studies helps to reveal institutional racism within universities and underscores the need for structural change. These experiences have two primary implications: they require coping strategies during student life and influence the professional practice of Black women psychologists.

By shedding light on this issue, it becomes possible to advocate for the transformation of university spaces, especially psychology programs, so they can train professionals who are better

equipped to respond to the suffering caused by racism. The importance of this theme also lies in its capacity to deepen understanding of collective realities through individual experiences.

This article foregrounds the experiences of Black women in higher education, illustrating their efforts to overcome numerous barriers imposed by a society that seeks to diminish and silence their identities. At the same time, it calls for greater support and empowerment of this population within academic settings. In doing so, it challenges the cultural logic described by Hooks (1995, p. 468) as the “capitalist patriarchy of white supremacy”, which systematically denies Black women the opportunity to be recognized for their intellectual contributions.

In light of this context, the objective of this article is to analyze the professional training of Black women in higher education by examining how they confronted issues of race, class, and gender during their undergraduate studies in psychology.

Method

A qualitative approach was adopted, as the topic involves a socially complex issue requiring in-depth analytical understanding (Minayo, 2002). Data were collected through open-ended individual interviews, which were recorded and transcribed to gather narratives about the participants’ experiences. The free-flowing dialogue allowed participants to revisit their undergraduate experiences, enabling thematic content analysis based on the assumptions of qualitative research.

This article presents partial findings from a subproject of a broader study on psychology education. All ethical guidelines for research involving human participants were followed, and the study was approved by the university’s research ethics committee under protocol number 00256818.0.0000.5505, with approval number 2.967.706 Federal University of São Paulo. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who authorized the recording, transcription, and use of their interviews for research purposes, ensuring confidentiality and adherence to ethical standards.

The participants were five women who graduated with a degree in Psychology from a Brazilian federal public university and self-identified as Black or Brown, according to the racial and color categories used by the Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (IBGE, Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics).

A snowball sampling technique was used to identify potential participants through preexisting social networks formed during their undergraduate studies. Each participant referred others who met the same criteria, and these referrals led to further participants. To preserve anonymity, the following pseudonyms were assigned: Angola, Benin, Ghana, Guinea, and Nigeria.

The interviews were conducted remotely throughout 2020 and lasted approximately 60 minutes each. Once transcribed, content analysis was conducted using Bardin’s (2011) three-phase method: pre-analysis, thematic organization, and analytical interpretation.

The first phase involved a comprehensive reading of the transcripts, identifying initial ideas that shaped the analytic plan. Three main themes emerged from the analysis: “From Displacement to Belonging”, “The Place of Competence”, and “Representation”.

After identifying the three main themes, the analytical phase enabled the examination of relevant aspects of the participants’ experiences, which were then explored and interpreted through the lens of Black feminist thinkers and scholars of intersectionality, such as Grada Kilomba, Neusa Santos, Bell Hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, and Djamila Ribeiro. A literature review further supported the interpretation of findings.

Results

From Displacement to Belonging

Entering university was marked by a profound sense of displacement and non-belonging. Upon recognizing the academic space as shaped by racial, class, and gender boundaries, participants reported an immediate sense of exclusion. Collins (2019) uses the term outsider within to describe the historical position of Black women since the era of enslavement. For instance, Black domestic workers often live in intimate proximity to white families while remaining perpetual outsiders. The participants' narratives echoed this concept as a structural reality that manifested early in their academic journey.

I always felt like a fish out of water. I never fit in. Then you start wondering, why? Is it my age? My reality? Is it my skin color? Is it my social class? We keep asking ourselves, why... Later, through theory, we understand it's about intersectionality and all the elements that put me in that position. Honestly, those were the worst years of my life. (Ghana)

Guinea also used the "fish out of water" metaphor to describe her similar sense of not fitting in. This expression, read analogously, reflects the experience of inhabiting a space that fails to respond to one's needs. The solitude of Black women in public universities is deepened by unequal access to certain opportunities and experiences, particularly when classmates come from vastly different economic and social backgrounds (Lima, 2019). This generates a sense of isolation from the majority in the classroom, as pointed out by Benin, who noted that the feeling of not belonging stemmed not only from distinct life trajectories but also from the inability to access the same spaces due to financial constraints.

Conversely, a sense of belonging emerged from interactions with other Black individuals, whether within the university or in Black student movements beyond campus. These encounters offered comfort and connection. Nigeria described belonging as:

That warm feeling. Like when you get home and feel that warmth. Like, wow, okay, I found my crowd. That was it, because I had been feeling so scared.

Ghana similarly shared:

With Black people, I felt really good, really comfortable. I felt like talking, it was such a relief... That's when I got involved in the Black movement. It was a huge relief. That was my way of coping... being with my people.

Collins (2019) describes such gatherings as spaces where Black women can relate as sisters and friends, affirming their humanity and right to exist through both serious conversations and humor. Ribeiro (2018) emphasized the safety she felt among her peers at home, contrasting it with her school environment, where she felt the need to repress her natural expression. The solidarity among Black students strengthens both individual and collective identity, allowing for a redefinition of one's presence in the university, which in turn supports both persistence and strategic resistance (Oliveira et al., 2019).

The sense of belonging, fostered by affective bonds among Black individuals, positively influences self-empowerment and the assertion of one's place within the university and in collective struggles. As Berth (2019, p. 36) suggests, there is a feedback loop of mutual empowerment: "Empowered individuals create empowered communities, and empowered communities, in turn,

are made up of individuals with a strong awareness of their social identity.” This dynamic also serves as a strategy for well-being and anti-racist resistance, as Ghana concludes:

Just occupying the space is already a battle, but we can be more, more active. And the most important thing is: gather with your own, stick with your people, white folks may have a lot to offer, but real comfort, social well-being, and mental health come from a good relationship with yourself as a Black woman and with others who share your struggle.

Considering the factors contributing to the sense of displacement and the strategies employed to achieve belonging, it can be inferred that the reported displacement has structural roots, particularly in racism, classism, and the cisheteropatriarchy. Therefore, the pursuit of belonging may be directly linked to maintaining the right to occupy the university space, fostering empowerment both individually and collectively through affective relationships shaped by identity.

The Place of Competence

Beyond the issue of belonging within the university, participants also addressed the social construction of competence, closely tied to racial power and authority, determining what kinds of knowledge are valued in academia, who is recognized as a legitimate holder of knowledge, and who is not (Kilomba, 2019). The constructed inferiority of Black women is intimately linked to the silencing of their voices. Many discouraging experiences contributed to feelings of inadequacy, shaping how participants positioned themselves among their peers. Benin described how these experiences affected her confidence:

Most of my classmates didn't feel uncomfortable speaking in class. For me, it was extremely hard to raise my hand. And I started to realize that for other people, many Black or non-white people, it was also more difficult. Because they didn't come from a background where they were always told, 'You have potential, you're creative, go ahead, do it.' On the contrary.

When class-based issues are added to this dynamic, unequal access to educational resources further widens the gap. The existence of a “competence hierarchy” rooted in a white, cisheteropatriarchal system makes it clear that university environments can reproduce structural inequalities. Angola shared how this affected her:

The professors insisted that we had to read in English and so on. And I thought, man, I barely had money to pay for prep courses. How would I have been able to take English classes and start university already fluent in reading and speaking English? No one saw where I came from.

This marginalization was compounded by the pressure to assimilate, also generating unpleasant feelings. Souza (2021) argues that attempts to belong to non-Black social groups can cause deep emotional wounds, as the goal of becoming white is inherently unattainable. This experience was especially pronounced in Nigeria's testimony:

So, I entered university at 17, with straight, flat hair down to my waist which made me avoid doing lots of things because I was afraid to show my natural roots. I didn't go out in the sun because I didn't want to get darker... It's bizarre, the things we do because of social pressure. (Nigeria)

“Whitening” oneself can be a response to this pressure, a desire to escape the imposed inferiority of Black identity under racism. In this case, the strategy involves building a new ego ideal, capable of providing an identity aligned with one's values, using History as a reference and perspective (Souza, 2021). Within this context, Benin, Guinea, and Angola all described how seeking

support from safe spaces and affirming relationships helped strengthen them. They emphasize that these experiences represented a form of persistence:

Doing undergraduate research with professors who encouraged me, who challenged the narrative of worthlessness with, 'You can do it, let's go this way,' was essential for building a different story, so that I wouldn't identify with that really negative place. (Benin)

Contrasting the initial attempt to "whiten" herself, Nigeria emphasizes that "much of my stance as a student was related to my stance as a Black woman, to seeing myself this way, to recognizing myself this way." For the interviewee, strengthening her racial identity emerged as a strategy to claim her own place as a competent individual, transcending the socially imposed limits on her Black body. It is also in the pursuit of an alternative narrative that Benin acknowledges the support of faculty members who acted as allies.

According to Souza (2021), becoming Black involves experiencing the violence inflicted on one's identity, being confused in one's perspectives, subjected to demands, and compelled to meet alienated expectations. As in the stories of the five participants, becoming Black was also a delicate process in which they perceived their identity through a new experience of committing themselves to reclaim their history and to reinvent themselves according to their potential. It can be understood as a form of reconstructing an identity affected by racism; as the author asserts, this experience may be considered one of the key factors in the development of resistance strategies employed by Black women in response to racial discrimination.

In contrast, Guinea and Angola described a different coping strategy: hyper-compensation through academic overachievement. Their efforts to distinguish themselves were a way of reducing the effects of structural inequalities. These varied strategies all served a common purpose: overcoming the traps that racism sets for Black intellectual development. According to Hooks (1995), Black students in academia are constantly required to prove their intellectual worth, including their capacity for logical reasoning, collective thinking, and articulate writing. This defense of intellectual capacity is inherently tied to the defense of their very humanity.

It becomes evident, therefore, that there is an interrelationship between the sense of displacement/belonging discussed in the previous theme and the place of competence, understood through the dimensions of structural racism. Both themes concern the defense of humanity and intellectuality, as well as the affirmation of Black women's right to occupy academic spaces.

Representation and the Construction of Collectives

The lack of representation of Black individuals in psychology programs was a significant issue for all five participants. This absence was already present throughout their earlier education, well before university. The participants described how this lack of representation was made tangible during their undergraduate years, as stated by Ghana:

I think it was in my fourth or fifth year that I found out that the first psychoanalyst in Brazil was Virgínia Bicudo, a Black woman. And no one ever mentioned Virgínia Bicudo. Why don't we talk about Virgínia Bicudo? Why don't we talk about Neusa Santos?

According to Kilomba (2019), the lack of Black representation in academic spaces is not due to the absence of discourse or contributions from this group, but rather the systematic

disqualification, invalidation, and erasure of their presence. The contributions of socially prestigious white individuals are far more emphasized. As Ghana pointed out, it was only in her fourth or fifth year of study that she heard of Virgínia Bicudo and Neusa Santos, key figures in the sociological and psychoanalytic understanding of Blackness.

This issue also appears in Benin's critique of the pathologizing lens applied to both trans identities and racism in psychopathology courses. She noted how harmful it was to be viewed as inherently pathological:

The first time a professor discussed trans issues, it was to present the diagnosis of gender identity disorder from the DSM-IV. How can you belong to a field that, from one of its core perspectives, sees exactly who you are as a pathology?

Beyond the discourses, there is also another dimension of representativity, highlighted in Guinea's account, in which she reflects on the spaces where Black people are typically found. She reflected on how, outside of academia, public health and welfare services tend to absorb poverty and Blackness:

In general, most people who use the public health system are Black. They're vulnerable. Around the campus, you see people experiencing homelessness, being marginalized, while looking like us. Like the outsourced campus workers. There are no Black professors, so how do I even talk to a professor with a Ph.D.? How would that even work, could I do that?

Borba et al. (2020) emphasize that seeing Black individuals teaching at universities is still rare in Brazilian society. Seeing them in positions of authority or leadership is even more uncommon, which is a reality shared by the participants. Angola was the first Black woman in her family to enter a federal public university. She had never even heard of public universities while attending public schools. As she emphasized:

It starts right there. I had no idea how valuable it was to attend a public university. (Angola)

Ghana echoed this sense of distance from higher education:

I thought maybe I'd get a partial scholarship or something. And wow, I got into psychology! That was huge for my reality. Studying at a federal university was something only my parents' employers did. (Ghana)

For many Black individuals, there is often no encouragement or even awareness that pursuing public higher education is a possibility. Ghana's testimony illustrates how class plays a key role in maintaining this distance, marked by social class. As the participants reflected on their current positions, it became clear that representation was intimately tied to their professional trajectories. These are stories of Black women claiming their place in academia and paving the way for others to follow, in Benin's words:

We need to start talking about other things, to shift the analytical lens a bit. And to question psychology itself, and the production of knowledge... That's where I come from. So, fine, let's write. If I like being in this space, then let's produce from within it. And more than that, let's try to produce something that can actually reverse certain processes.

In response to this need, participants sought ways to represent others. Ghana, for example, pursued graduate studies and now focuses her research on the experiences of Haitian immigrants in Brazil. Likewise, Benin found a path to becoming a trans person within

psychology, producing and sharing knowledge that seeks to dismantle systems of exclusion and erasure. Nigeria stated:

I didn't feel represented, now that's my flag. I'm a Black woman in academia. Is it hard? Yes. But I believe that, while I'm on this path, I can be a source of resistance. I can show others that we can do it. Because if we don't do it, we won't have our own space, we won't have our own place, and we'll always be on the sidelines. And that's not where we belong, we belong in the center, showing everything that needs to be shown.

Guinea's professional work also draws from racialized experiences. As a public servant, she provides services to people experiencing homelessness, who, she notes, are predominantly Black. Nigeria, too, has adopted representation as a personal mission and hopes to become an example for other Black women within academia.

Collins (2016) offers a key insight into the trajectories of the participants: Black women in academia often find themselves at the margins. For Collins, the margin is not just a place of exclusion, but also of power. The intellectuals who occupy this space develop the ability to analyze what lies both inside and outside the dominant structures, allowing for a critical stance toward both realities and their intersections.

Ultimately, strategies for resisting systemic and structural violence are shaped by context and experience. For the participants, professional practice also becomes a form of both individual and collective resistance. Guinea provides care to a mostly Black homeless population with the hope of contributing to change. Nigeria carries the banner of representation she once lacked to reaffirm her position as a Black woman in the academia. Benin views academic knowledge production as a means of addressing trans and racial issues. Ghana uses the experiences of other Black individuals as a lens for understanding her own. Angola is proud to have opened doors as the first Black woman in her family to attend a federal university and to inspire others.

In all of these cases, there is alignment with Borba et al. (2020, p. 138), who emphasize the collective effort of Black individuals to claim space in academia "not only because it has historically been denied to them, but also due to the pressing need to challenge the notion that this space is unattainable". The struggle is imperative.

Conclusion

Given the topic addressed, this study expanded the understanding of how Black women confront racial issues during their undergraduate education in psychology. The findings support the hypothesis that a variety of resistance strategies are developed to confront racism in higher education, while these strategies shape the participants' professional trajectories.

The research also drew on technical references related to racial relations, emphasizing the importance of amplifying evaluations of university experiences shaped by race. The study successfully met its objectives of identifying challenges, reflecting on the impact of race and other intersectionalities on professional training and practice in psychology, and contributing to broader transformations in professional education. The individual narratives presented here offer valuable insights into collective dimensions of experience.

Finally, employing narrative as a research method was essential for generating meaning in the data analysis. It also served as a sensitive and reflective data collection tool, sparking novel insights among the participants.

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