

Black women: resistance and resilience

In the face of the psycho-social effects of racism

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Black women in Brazil are still the class with least access to social goods and services and are deeply affected by widespread exploitation, discrimination and social exclusion. Their struggles for a politicised and healthy black identity continue

RACE RELATIONS IN BRAZIL AND THEIR PSYCHOSOCIAL EFFECTS

The issue of race relations, linked to the current development of Brazil, prompts reflection on how development would be if there were racial equality. Within the axiom of global targets of greater production and capital accumulation, priority is often given to economic development, at the cost of racism and sexism, among other inequalities and acts of violence. There is an important reflection in the collection of papers (Gomes et al., 2013) provided to support the discussions at the III National Conference for the Promotion of Racial Equality in November 2013, under the overall theme of “Democracy and development without racism: for an affirmative Brazil”. In both the collection of papers and this article, therefore, the question is: to what extent is Brazil really developing, to what extent is it growing? In order to assess this, it is necessary to analyse whether economic development has been accompanied by similar growth in the fields of education, health, and culture, among others, and also by changes in social relations and values implying social justice.

The history and current context of the black population in Brazil, especially of black women, provide a setting in which it is impossible to talk about broad and equitable development. Since the arrival of a huge contingent of enslaved Africans (men and women), the progress of economic growth and of political domination has been sustained by the social damage inflicted on the class with least access to social goods and services and affected by exploitation, discrimination and social exclusion. Since the onset of colonisation, Brazil has over the centuries become the country it is today, with a majority black population, the largest black population in the countries of the Diaspora, and, when compared to the countries of the African continent, second only to Nigeria in terms of the size of its black population (DAVIS, 2000; THEODORO, 2008).

These black people came as hostages, they were enslaved, forced into drudgery by deprivation and violence, without the right to sustain their families, traditions, cultures, names and religions, and were dispossessed of land, material goods and even of their own bodies. This situation lasted almost four centuries, followed by just over a century of abolition of slavery, during which hardly any efforts were made towards decent social integration, equity, access to rights and citizenship, reparations or racial equality. From abolition without social justice, and without any change to the dominant mentality imbued with racist ideology, the inequalities remained with glaring social differences.

Research such as that by Jaccoud (2009), Lopes (2005), Lopes, Goulart e Tannús (2007), Santos (2012), Santos et al. (2010), Venturi (2012) and Werneck (2006) presents data which confirm this assertion and point to the following picture. From the emotional standpoint, they find heightened social violence with marginalisation, prejudice and discrimination leading to damage ranging from low self-esteem to psychological disorders; from the economic standpoint, severe impoverishment with little possibility of reversing the situation; from the cultural standpoint, the annihilation of an amazingly rich legacy; from the standpoint of health in general, severe social determinants of disease and mortality; from the institutional standpoint, practices of racism, in other words the permeation of public and private institutions by failure to uphold rights, omissions and discrimination; from the standpoint of education, hegemony of Eurocentric epistemologies and differential access, attendance and levels of learning; from the standpoint of work and income, inequalities in accessible opportunities for employment, professional qualification, promotion and remuneration; from the standpoint of citizenship, exposure to individual, social and institutional vulnerability, lack of autonomy and access to rights.

From a gender perspective, it is found that the Brazilian context makes black women vulnerable from the conjugation of sexism and racism. Giacomini (1988) tells how inequities date from the time of slavery, from recurring sexual violence to the loss of the right to choose their partners, owing either to the imposition of slavery or to lower social worth in the face of aesthetic norms favouring white women. The stereotypes which prevail even now, of super-eroticised and sexually-objectified women, jeopardise professional recognition, caring relationships and positive self-esteem.

Data demonstrates that racial inequality is added to gender inequality. Schumacher and Vital Brasil (2007) show that, in the power hierarchy in Brazilian society, black women remain in the worst position, the most damaged; below black men who, in turn, are lower than white women, while white men are in the most privileged position. Werneck (2010) adds that the same sequence is repeated in relation to payment for the same type of work. Moreover, according to Carneiro (2011), the working conditions of black women are permeated by greater vulnerability and instability and the extent of subordination suffered reflects the combination of racism and sexism, which the author describes as patriarchal racism.

In relation to health, according to Lopes (2005), black women suffer more often from adolescent pregnancy and maternal mortality than white women.

Martins (2006) explains that maternal mortality in black women is linked to the types of oppression mentioned above, making it a public health issue, and the risk of death in childbirth and post-partum is 7.4 times greater for black women than for white women.

The difference in treatment in access to health services, itself an expression of institutional racism, is one of the causes of the greater incidence of cases of STD/AIDS among black women, subjecting them to early and avoidable death. In addition to this information, Oliveira and Brito (2011) expose other health issues for black women, recognized by the World Health Organization as public health problems, from cardiac, gastric and muscular diseases, headaches, lack of family planning, difficulties in childbirth, and sexually transmitted and psychosomatic diseases.

The social and historical context outlined and the damage described make up the scenario of racism in Brazilian society and its impact on black men and women. The psychosocial effects of racism are understood as effects related to the broad context of inter- and intra-personal, social and institutional issues. In this way, it can be asserted that racism interferes with individual psychological dynamics, with interpersonal relationships in the family and in emotional, social and professional life, as well in interactions with institutions and their services. The type of potential damage caused by racism at these various levels makes up a picture of individual, social and institutional vulnerability, as conceptualized by Ayres, Paiva e França Jr. (2012) and complemented by Santos (2012) and Lopes (2005).

From the analysis by Costa (1986), Souza (1990) and Fanon (2008), it is possible to think of the psychosocial effects of racism being materialised in harmful consequences for the body, mind and identity. Affected by racism, the ideal of becoming white begins to figure in the social imagination, disturbing the formation of identity of blacks and whites. Racial conscience and the revaluing of negritude are ways of reversing the distortion of identity.

The place reserved for the black woman in Brazilian society involves the rejection of her character and may lead to intense difficulties for healthy psychological well-being and even in an extreme form to non-acceptance of herself, low self-esteem, damage to forming her identity, depression and psychiatric disorders (SANTOS, 2004).

Another author who speaks of the psychosocial effects of racism is Hooks (2006), in pondering on the difficulty which black women may have in experiencing and expressing love, undermining her emotional and family relationships and jeopardising her capacity to love. Wounded to the heart by racism, black women need to exercise resistance in order to love.

BLACK WOMEN: RESISTANCE AND RESILIENCE

Despite the racism which has ruled for centuries, damaging the black population, and the sexism which has caused even greater damage to black women, Brazil has witnessed various forms of resistance through, for example, organised groups who have preserved their culture and religion, bought the freedom of other men and women, and striven to overcome the enormous adversities they have faced. According to Nascimento (2008), black women can be associated with roles of taking care of the family, maintaining groups, guardians of religion and organising in groups for the liberation of their people.

Werneck (2006) confirms this characteristic of resistance which accompanies black women throughout history, with reports of experiences of coping, resilience and resistance.

“The black woman will structure herself as a person who takes on the responsibility for maintaining family unity and group cohesion, and for preserving the cultural and religious traditions of her group, in the face of the new reality which post-abolition economic oppression and racial discrimination created within Brazilian society.” (LOPES, 2008, p. 104)

The black feminist movement rallies black women and organised groups with the objective of activism for racial and gender equality, taking responsibility for resistance in the face of imposed suffering and compromise. In the quest for autonomy and equality in society, even though they are afflicted by violent and intolerant acts and exposed to inequality and vulnerability, they take up positions of resistance in the demand for better conditions so that they may face up to and overcome sexism and racism (OLIVEIRA E BRITO, 2011).

At the same time as actions of resistance performed by black Brazilian women, and in the face of the psychosocial effects of racism described above, one of the forms of reaction and overcoming in this scenario is the progression through processes of resilience.

Before discussing the specific nature of resilience in black women, it is worth including a general definition of resilience, to clarify the conception of this phenomenon which is used as the basis for reflection.

“Resilience is a process of reorganisation, reframing, overcoming and transcendence in the face of living in a potentially destructive context. It gives access to personal and collective resources, such as self-confidence, optimism, good humour, self-control, flexibility, perseverance, good family- and social relationships, good analysis of situations, creativity, affiliation, social and institutional support, autonomy and a meaning for life.” (PRESTES, 2013, p. 63).

This conception was presented by the author in her research on resilience in black women.

Considering transcendence and autonomy in the face of the oppression of racism and sexism as expressions of resilience in black women, the affirmation of Fanon (2008) is useful. He advocates that it is necessary to go through a process of consciousness-raising and overcoming, of not only the wounds but also the attachment to a painful past, reaching freedom in order to tune into the present, the social reality and the commitment to yourself and those close to you, taking action for yourself towards equality and the end of oppression. From this formulation, it is possible to think of resilience in a broader way, linked not only to individual health but to social commitment.

In her publications, Ungar (2006; 2008) deals with processes of resilience, always emphasising the mediation of culture. Omar and her collaborators (2010) support Utsey's studies on resilience, and also give emphasis to the collective, the cultural context and earlier successful experiences, all converging towards greater probability of new resilient processes. These authors stress the importance of racial belonging, positive self-esteem and self-confidence for the empowerment of resilience.

Baldwin et al. (2011), Brown (2011) and Teti et al. (2012), researchers on black resilience, claim that this empowerment has significant relevance, arising from optimism, racial socialisation, self-confidence and racial rootedness. The reflections of Efraime Júnior (2013) are also useful in this respect, through his experience with overcoming the traumas of war in Mozambique. He addresses the contributions of psychotherapeutic and psychosocial work for the explanation of psychic trauma, emphasising how essential it is to re-establish family and community ties, as well as to administer traditional therapies and other strategies to restore the ability to love and to establish relationships.

In the Brazilian arena, two studies can be referred to, neither specifically in the field of psychology (one in education and the other in social work), but addressing the subject of resilience among black women.

Martins (2013) seeks to identify elements which might have enhanced resilience in educationally-successful women. She measures skills such as contextual analysis, self-confidence, self-control, gaining and retaining sympathy, empathy, understanding body language, optimism and a sense of life.

The research developed by Carvalho (2008) links resilience and empowerment, suggesting an aggregate term: autonomy to overcome and emancipate. She claims that the 'overcoming' achieved by black women depends on the important support of family members and other significant people.

As well as the abovementioned research, there is the theoretical contribution of Guimarães and Podkameni co-authors (in this order in 2008, the reverse in 2007) who address psychology and race relations, discussing the effects of racism on mental and psychosocial development, both individual and in the family. They suggest paths of reaction to the effects of discrimination suffered, from reframing negritude to repairing the psychological consequences of racism, in a strategy called collective support network, which extends from individual resources (built up during psycho-affective development, within the family and by psychic transmission) to social resources (support, acceptance, security, among others) and institutional resources (education, health and culture, for example). As a result, black men and women have the possibility of recovering trust and of driving processes of resilience in reaction to the psychosocial effects of racism.

"To know oneself as a black women is to live through the experience of having been massacred in your identity, confused in your views, submitted to demands and forced to adopt alien expectations. But it is also, and above all, the experience of committing yourself to reclaiming your history and recreating yourself in your potential." (SOUZA, 1990, p. 17).

To finish in the company of Souza, it can be concluded that rootedness and knowledge of their own history are the necessary elements in order for black Brazilian women to achieve racial conscience, made up of a politicised and healthy black identity, positive self-esteem and other ingredients which, in the face of the psychosocial effects of racism, empower processes of resistance and resilience.

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